Chapter VIII

Finding Good Stuff

First, what’s there is stuff: partly information, partly pure nonsense—and it’s not always easy to distinguish the two. Second, it’s not a superhighway, it’s a swamp, albeit a swamp with many remarkable hillocks of well-organized, first-rate data and information. (Crawford, 1999)

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the issue raised in Chapter VII: finding good and appropriate learning resources on the Internet and the issues of control that arise. In the process, there will be discussion of the kinds of criteria that might be used to identify useful and appropriate learning resources and the barriers to such discoveries. In the context of transactional control, the ability to choose will be seen as a complex amalgam of sufficient and targeted information about the content, combined with knowledge of context and the pedagogical process. To illustrate potential approaches to enabling learners to choose to choose in this context, some examples will be given of the ways that recommender systems and adaptive hypermedia may affect learner control.

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Resource-Based Learning

Resource-based learning (RBL) has a long history as an educational technique. It provides a means of achieving both subject literacy and information literacy (the ability to use literature to discover new knowledge) at the same time. Learners are provided with or told to seek a wide range of resources and materials, typically with a teacher-specified goal in mind or within a specified subject area. The teacher in a traditional resource-based learning scenario becomes a facilitator, helping learners to achieve their goals, but not directing their activities unless asked to do so. The emphasis is usually on diversity: learners are encouraged to seek information by any means possible, whether by asking people, using tools, reading books, watching videos, or the like. However, traditional approaches still involve a significant degree of control. The teacher acts as a filter, an editor mediating between the tangled complexity of the real world and the (by definition) simpler understanding of the learner. This is really little more than a variation on the traditional lecture format, of which McKenzie (1997) writes:

*Good lecturers do tons of extra reading and research into the topic before us. They save us the trouble of doing our own exploration, having “turned down the corners” on the best pages. They synthesize, summarize and report the “best parts.” Knowing their audience, they are able to translate what might otherwise seem foreign, confusing, boring, or overly abstract into a half hour of explanation and illumination. They act somewhat as tour guides.*

The need to understand, not only the topic but also the needs of learners, is what makes a teacher a seemingly vital part of this method of learning. The huge wealth and diversity of learning resources that is available on the Internet makes an RBL approach appear very attractive as a means of providing guided learning.

WebQuests and Related Approaches

A very popular teacher-controlled means of using the mass of resources on the Internet is the WebQuest, a term and process invented by Bernie Dodge and Tom March in around 1995. The principle of the WebQuest is simple: teachers seek useful resources and provide annotated links to Web resources and a set of associated tasks related to them. Various systems have been developed to simplify this process, notably Walden’s Paths (Furuta, 2000) and the adaptation of weblogs to the purpose (Downes, 2004). In themselves, these provide little that is radically new from a learner perspective and are little more than extensions of the traditional classroom and reading list, albeit ones that are far more flexible, cheap, and controllable from
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