Chapter XII

Social Software and E-Learning

And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star:

From Abt Vogler, Robert Browning

Introduction

This chapter is about ways that technologies that underpin what some have (misleadingly) called “Web 2.0” can be used in e-learning. It describes an approach to the design of e-learning environments that takes, as its basis, the concept of transactional control and extrapolates cost-effective and useful ways of achieving a balance of choice and constraint that favours the learner.

The chapter delves a little into the principles that underpin social software, providing some examples from the periphery and outside the educational field. Social software moves beyond notions of individuals working together as a group, instead treating the group as a distinct entity with an active part to play in the overall dynamics of the system. A significant contribution that this chapter makes is that current thinking in learning technology theory fails to consider this aspect, ignoring important
modes of interaction between the many and the one, the many and the content of e-learning, the many and the many, and the many and the any. The chapter ends with suggestions for useful broad approaches to the design of e-learning environments, concluding that there are two main avenues that might fruitfully be taken: to generate dialogue through structure, or structure through dialogue. Each of these routes has the potential to allow learners to choose to choose at any point along their educational trajectories.

The central thesis can be expressed easily. Moore’s (1997) theory of transactional distance shows that there is a continuum between structure and dialogue, and that learners need varying amounts of each. Consequently, to cater to as many needs as possible, e-learning environments should generate structure through dialogue. If it were possible to build such a system, it might simultaneously provide both high and low transactional distance within the same environment, though not (it should be emphasised) simultaneously for the same learner.

Because of the mapping between transactional distance and transactional control, this can be expressed even more simply and perhaps more powerfully: learning environments should both control and be controlled by their inhabitants. This is a very literal spin on Churchill’s (1943) recursive claim that “we shape our dwellings and afterwards our dwellings shape our lives.”

The Current Generation

The detailed dynamics of several types of educational transaction, in terms of transactional control, have been found to be complex and elusive phenomena. The rich complexity and range of human interactions in an educational system can both liberate and constrain, sometimes both at the same time. The exercise of choice or constraint at inappropriate points in a learning trajectory can have a deleterious effect on learning and it often arises without apparent awareness on the part of the participants. To take advantage of the potential benefits of appropriate control in the service of learning, there are perhaps two main paths available to teachers and facilitators of learning:

1. Through reflective and theoretically well-informed action, to shape educational processes to fit the needs of each learner, guessing or negotiating when and where they will need control. This is hard, expensive and prone to error.

2. To provide a mechanism to make both choice and constraint available to the learner at any significant point where control may be exercised. This too is hard, but offers many benefits to both the learner and the teacher.
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