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 environ-
ments, 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.
From e Learning to m Learning: Architectures to Support University Teaching
www.igi-global.com/chapter/learning-learning-architectures-support-university/5229?camid=4v1a