Chapter XIV

Social Software in E-Learning: Beyond Blogs and Wikis

The Borg is the ultimate user. They’re unlike any threat your Federation has ever faced.

Q to the U.S.S. Enterprise-D crew (Startrek.com, 2006)

Introduction

This chapter describes a number of e-learning environments, including two that are written by the author, that employ principles of the sort found in Chapter XIII. None of these are perfect: although most are used by real groups of learners, they are research environments, more tools to think with than production systems. Some of their flaws present wicked problems that must be solved before they can be genuinely useful, but all point towards interesting futures.

The learning environments presented here are all forms of social software. All exhibit some characteristics that are designed to allow structure to develop through the interactions of learners with the systems and each other. As a result, they have the potential to allow different learners to exercise both greater and lesser transactional control within the same system and at the same time.
The chapter begins with some overviews of example environments, situating them in the context of the design principles presented in the previous chapter. The examples are not chosen arbitrarily, but many others might have been chosen instead: this is a growing genre. Two of the author’s own environments are then presented, in more detail, to give examples of ways that the principles may apply in practice, demonstrating strengths and weaknesses that are further explored in the following chapter.

**Examples of Self-Organising Learning Environments in the Context of the Eight Principles**

**Educo**

The Educo system uses social navigation to influence the behaviour of its users (Kurhila, Miettinen, Nokelainen, & Tirri, 2002). It combines a collaborative document navigation system with annotation and discussion tools, providing a document-centric environment shaped by dialogue. Users are represented as dots clustering around iconic representations of documents. The more dots there are, the more users are gathering around specific documents, a process which in turn attracts further users. Other signs provide indicators at a slower scale of the relative popularity of documents over time. Educo influences, but does not determine, behaviour. At any point, users are able to choose an unconventional or unpopular path through the docu-verse, but should they feel insecure or uncertain (as would be typical of a new or non-autonomous learner), there are clear routes that they might take through the material, using cues such as overall popularity, current visitors, and annotations. This combination of choice and constraint is potentially very powerful. The user may ride the crest of a wave, following other learners in real-time. The wave does not leave a trail that can be followed, nor is it possible to know which way the group may head from one moment to the next. There is no view of the future, only the present and the past.

**Educo and the Eight Principles**

- **Adaptability**: Educo can integrate with the Web at large, using a potentially open corpus of resources, and it incorporates traditional discussion systems. However, it is not open to other systems and uses no integration technologies.
Authorship Attribution and the Digital Humanities Curriculum
Patrick Juola (2010). Literary Education and Digital Learning: Methods and Technologies for Humanities Studies (pp. 1-21).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/authorship-attribution-digital-humanities-curriculum/44716?camid=4v1a