Chapter XV

Problems with Social Software for E-Learning

Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the blind watchmaker. (Dawkins, 1986)

Introduction

While many have made use of social software within a traditional course structure, and many social software sites might be seen as educational (or at least of value to learners), the potential benefits of self-organisation in social software are yet to be achieved.

This chapter is concerned with identifying the main outstanding research questions and potential pitfalls for those seeking to develop software that is based on the self-organising principles outlined in the previous chapters. Although the example
systems described in Chapter XIV begin to show how choice and constraint can co-exist in an e-learning environment, there are several big issues that need to be addressed before they can achieve their promise.

**Sequence**

The fundamental meaning of “structure” for Moore (1983, 1996) seems to imply that it provides (perhaps among other things) the sequencing of a learning trajectory. Sequencing is a fundamental aspect of the teacher role in education. If a learner is relinquishing control, it is over the choices that determine his or her learning trajectory. The view of the role of a teacher as a purveyor of sequence is echoed by many. Collins et al.’s (1989) theory of cognitive apprenticeship makes great use of the concept of “scaffolding” as a means of abstracting problems and providing a stepped approach to a problem. Elaboration theory is almost entirely based on the structuring and sequencing of learning, based on conceptual, procedural, or theoretical grounds (Wilson & Cole, 1992). Gagné (1985) requires that the teacher identifies objectives and guides learning. Two of Bruner’s (1966) four stipulations for a theory of instruction are: it should specify ways a body of instruction should be structured for easy assimilation by the learner and specify the most effective sequences to present materials to be learned. Even Malcolm Knowles (1975), whose theory of andragogy requires explicitly self-directed enquiry with teachers, fellow students and materials available but not imposed, suggests that the teacher is there to manage the process, guide the interactions, and design sequential activities (Carlson, 1989). Similarly, Saba (1999) identifies teacher roles as including “informing the learner of the objectives required by the course” and “developing study plans for achieving objectives agreed upon between the learner and instructor in the learning contract.”

Unfortunately, an effective and coherent sequence is very hard to generate as an emergent feature of a learning environment, although various options have been proposed and tried.

**Surfing the Emergent Wave**

Although several of the systems described in the previous chapter carve out a kind of sequence through the combined behaviours of their users, effectively allowing them to surf an emergent wave, it is far from clear that the sequence is optimal, useful, or even whether it makes sense, pedagogically or semantically. In most of the systems described, it is more a question of being dragged along with the crowd, riding a wave, rather than there being a visible path with a history and (above all) a