Chapter 15

Going Viral in the Classroom: Using Emerging CMC Technologies for Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter demonstrates the potential for social change in computer-mediated communication (CMC) education. A foundational discussion of emerging online technologies in terms of potentials for students and responsibilities of educators is followed with a description of a “best practices” classroom project and incorporation of case-study observations in terms of CMC benefits and challenges. The goal of this chapter is to highlight potential societal outcomes inherent in CMC education for students and educators as agents of social change.

INTRODUCTION

Classrooms can be an arena in which to endeavor for transformation of self and society. Recognizing this possibility, many teachers strive for such an ideal. Education as a practice that maximizes freedom – for students, educators, and society at large (e.g., hooks, 1994) – is exciting, particularly in a world in which new technologies are constantly emerging. The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate the feasibility of maximizing that educational freedom (and responsibility) through knowledge acquisition and distribution, using computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology in the classroom. To accomplish this goal, a foundation is derived from research on the potentials of CMC in education. Next, experiences with online teaching and a particular project case study are presented to emphasize accountability for students and teachers trying to effect social change.

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change. The chapter concludes with a call for inspiration and challenge.

THE POTENTIALS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

As noted by Willson (2010), the potential for social change via CMC is not without controversy. On the one hand, initial speculations of Internet networks’ massive societal impacts were perhaps overstated, at least in their time- and influence-expectations. On the other hand, limiting one’s focus to social communities and their online communication illustrates that CMC technologies have affected society (macro) at interpersonal (micro) levels. In this sense, speculating as to the possibilities for using the Internet or CMC for individual-level social change is not idealistic, but, as this chapter demonstrates, is evidenced in day-to-day work with CMC and students.

With each new technology that surfaces, teachers and researchers are able to harness and assess the potentials of these tools for educational purposes. As Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) discuss, CMC allows universities, philanthropic organizations, and individuals to further their respective social goals. Contrary to, and perhaps not mutually exclusive with, the perception that online education is solely a tool sought by universities seeking profit (Feenberg, 1999), this chapter takes the position that the use of CMC in education is instead a method with the radical potential to challenge and re-envision, if not to uproot, dominant systems and cultural misunderstandings or stereotypes. In essence, activists and advocates of social justice can utilize technology (and have done so) to advance diverse politics and encourage participation in social movements (Castells, 2007; Denning, 2002).

Thus, the potential of educating students to use CMC effectively is significant, documented, and twofold, involving (a) students’ ability to operate locally and globally for social change and (b) teachers’ social responsibility to conscientiously educate their student-agents-of-change.

Potential for Students and Society: Social Outcomes

Courses that implement a variety of CMC instructional materials are believed to be more effective for student learning outcomes than those using only one form of CMC or none at all (Miller & Redman, 2010). Videos, in particular, can actively involve viewers by inviting them to personally interpret the meanings of the message content, and how it applies in their own lives (Friedman, 2006). Indeed, Internet videos are a method of course content delivery preferred by students (Dey, Burn, & Gerdes, 2009; Young, 2008). Miller and Redman (2010) found that students viewing course content via online videos performed worse than face-to-face students only on the exam content that was not covered by the web videos; when tested on content that was covered in Internet videos, the online-video-viewing students performed significantly better than their face-to-face-instruction peers. But the benefits of CMC instructional technology (and web-based videos, in particular) are not limited to students’ mastering of course content.

Students also can participate as active, influential societal members. Ever on the cutting edge of emerging technologies, students are particularly well-suited to advance alternative practices and social perspectives, learned in the classroom, into mainstream society. Eighty-five percent of eight- to 18-year olds in U.S. households own and utilize personal computers (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005) and form and maintain social relationships online (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). Ninety to 97% of college students report using the Internet at least once a day (Fortson, Scotti, Chen, Malone, & Del Ben, 2007; Cotten & Jelenewicz, 2006), and these students use online media as much or more than face-to-face communication to maintain personal relationships (Heiberger &
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