Chapter XX

Hard Fun: A Case Study on a Community Problem Solving Learning Resource

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Abstract

Current pedagogical theory promotes deep learning environments in online instruction as well as authenticity. This chapter discusses the pedagogical framework, academic issues and logistics of a deep learning resource that is “hard fun,” to use a phrase of Seymour Papert, because it challenges and immerses students in real life learning environments through community problem solving. Success of the learning resource is largely due to the intrinsic motivation and cognitive engagement afforded through civic engagement, allowing students to pursue personally relevant knowledge in familiar milieus, their residential communities. Technology plays a role in increasing intellectual self-esteem and digital literacy by allowing students the opportunity to become bloggers and Web publishers.
{Hard fun} is expressed in many different ways, all of which boil down to the conclusion that everyone likes hard challenging things to do. But they have to be the right things matched to the individual and to the culture of the times. These rapidly changing times challenge educators to find areas of work that are hard in the right way: they must connect with the {students} and also with the areas of knowledge, skills and (don’t let us forget) ethics adults will need for the future world.

Seymour Papert, Founder, MIT Media Lab

Introduction

Current theory in online instructional design promotes the benefits of inclusive and constructivist pedagogy that centers on students, benefits a broad range of learning styles, and focuses on critical thinking and knowledge assembly, including digital literacy, cross cultural literacy, and fluency in multiple media (Carr & Ledwith, 2000; Dede, 2005; Lemke, 1998; McLoughlin, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Tierney & Damarin, 1998; UDI Fact Sheet, 2005; Weigel, 2001). Accordingly, e-learning environments must be more than information repositories; instead they need to be reconfigured as electronic “teaching theaters” that provide depth education through use of the semantic Web, multimedia, and real world applications (Berners-Lee, Hendler, & Lassila, 2001; Billinghurst, Kato, & Poupyrev, 2001; Chandler, 1995; Knez, 2005; Lee & Owens, 2000; Web-based Education Commission, 2000; Weigel, 2001). Some theorists go so far as to say online instructional units should be works of art in terms of the intricacy of design and the transforming educational experience afforded to learners (Ceraulo, 2003). This position may seem far-fetched; however, the concept of learning resources (LR) and learning objects (LOs) as works of art is currently realized through academic ventures such as Project Merlot (http://www.merlot.org/Home.po), one of several repositories where instructors can find material to enrich online learning. For one example of an intricate, artistic, and pedagogically rich LR, see Andreja Kuluncic’s Distributive Justice Interactive Web Site (http://www.distributive-justice.com/).

To this list of pedagogical do’s, I also add one more, the variable of “fun,” which should not be taken to mean catering to novelty or taking the substance out of learning but creating for students passionate engagement—“flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), with online learning (Ceraulo, 2003; Papert, 2002). Seymour Papert, founder and professor emeritus, MIT’s Media Lab, has written extensively about fun as a necessary component of learning (Papert, 2002; Papert, 1952-2002).

It is within the theoretical contexts of constructivism, inclusivism, digital-multimedia fluency, and fun discussed previously that, I designed an online community problem solving LR for two introductory level semester length English classes at Inver Hills Community College, Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota, United States. (Access the learning resource online at http://loproblemsolving.blogspot.com/) The two classes, “Writing and Research Skills” and “Research Writing in the Disciplines,” are foundational courses for the Associate of Arts degree, including paraprofessional degrees on campus, such as Emergency Health Services (paramedic training). Competency areas for the classes include critical thinking, research, and college level writing with focus on essay writing. As the LR designer and instructor, I
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