Chapter 15
Online Anxiety: Implications for Educational Design in a Web 2.0 World

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ABSTRACT
This chapter argues that as educators moving into a Web 2.0 world, we are likely to experience anxiety, which is an important part of the educational process (as it is for our learners). It is also a response to a perception of an older and worn out version of the internet. Anxiety has implications for the design of Web 2.0 educational materials. Web 2.0 is more than a tool for the beginnings of the future of education: it is also, in and of itself, the beginnings of the future of education. Web 2.0 is about learning from the learner, and this chapter asks: What role does the educator play in his/her own developmental learning of the tools of the trade? How does this inform his/her preparations for the learners’ experiences? The chapter also argues that in addition to online educational environments owning their own systems of localized logic and systems of internal rules, they are also sentient systems.

INTRODUCTION
In ‘Task and Sentient Systems and Their Boundary Controls’ (Trist and Murray 1990), Eric J. Miller and A.K. Rice define a sentient system or group as “one that demands and receives loyalty from its members.” Not only does the environment provide a milieu that is safe for learners who would ordinarily struggle with more orthodox academic vehicles, it might also be instrumental in the building of confidence and the honing of social abilities. These play important roles in the fashioning of personal identities and the shaping of social mores. The chapter also argues that every learner who becomes enabled and empowered by a contiguous existence in an online milieu,
there might evolve a learner who develops anti-social tendencies in the very same environment; furthermore, I propose that these ontological dichotomies are essential (if unpleasant to some), even if they involve bullying and learner anxiety. Brief examples of learners on an online learning programme at Master’s degree level are presented. Certain learners who came from geographical areas in the world in which values of prudence and propriety are traditionally present, became influenced by the pushing of boundaries while online. The proposition is that some learners use the online environment as a kind of psychic retreat (Steiner 1993) and regard it as the only non-threatening place available.

What are the implications for educators in a Web 2.0 existence? Unless we tack on a caveat that says something like ‘...in twenty years time’, a prediction of the future of online learning is likely to be weighted in a conservative, staid manner. We are realists. Despite the fact that our burgeoning field is more fruitful than ever; despite the fact that many of our occupations did not exist two decades ago – or even one decade ago – and despite the fact that occupations have been made redundant to create our posts, when contemplating the future of online learning we are apt to keep our feet on the ground. We do not lose our heads, with ambition being one thing, dreamy optimism quite another. But when we reflect on the achievements to date, if we have pause for thought, why do we not Think Big or Bigger? Quite possibly any sense of self-restraint (posing as pragmatism) is a conscious or unconscious acknowledgement of our current restrictions. For example, as yet we do not have infinite bandwidth; we do not have instantaneous synchronous facilities for groupwork for learners in every time zone; we do not have cranial receptor accessories; so we tend to predict based on a Web 1 mentality, and err somewhat on the side of caution – for fear of appearing foolish or naive. Furthermore, the unknown can seem scary; but what exactly is there to be scared of? And is anxiety the same as fear anyway?

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a condition experienced, to one extent or another, by every man, woman and child, and arguably even by some animals (separation anxiety in pet dogs and horses, for example); it is therefore of little surprise that a considerable amount of literature has formed around the subject. But what is it? For the purposes of this essay we will be clear to distinguish anxiety from stress: they are not the same. Nor is anxiety a synonym for fear, although the terms are often used interchangeably. FreeDictionary (2012) puts it thus: “Fear is a direct, focused response to a specific event or object, and the person is consciously aware of it. Most people will feel fear if someone points a loaded gun at them or if they see a tornado forming on the horizon. They also will recognize that they are afraid. Anxiety, on the other hand, is often unfocused, vague, and hard to pin down to a specific cause.”

In short, anxiety is a sensation of unease that is caused by a prediction (often made on an unconscious level) of something bad that is about to happen; and it is plain to see why it has been a subject much covered in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Freud (1926) gave us an early full-length explication of anxiety, which is often cited even to this day. “If a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child,” he writes (1926: 87), “it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension.” His theory of anxiety having a root in childhood experience has been influential. Klein (1948: 25) writes: “Freud put forward to begin with the hypothesis that anxiety arises out of a direct manifestation of libido”; and expands this opinion by stating that “in young children it is unsatisfied libidinal excitation which turns into anxiety” and that “the earliest content of anxiety is the infant’s feeling of danger lest his need should not be satisfied because the mother is ‘absent’” (ibid: 26). Klein (1946:1) had previously written: “In early infancy anxieties
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