Chapter 7

'De–Coupling Groups in Space and Time':
Evaluating New Forms of Social Dialogue for Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prior to the Web, we had hundreds of years of experience with broadcast media, from printing presses to radio and TV. Prior to email, we had hundreds of years experience with personal media – the telegraph, the telephone. But outside the Internet, we had almost nothing that supported conversation among many people at once. The radical change was de-coupling groups in space and time. To get a conversation going around a conference table or campfire, you need to gather everyone in the same place at the same moment. By undoing those restrictions, the Internet has ushered in a host of new social patterns, from the mailing list to the chat room to the weblog. (Shirky, 2003)

INTRODUCTION

Removing the barriers of space and time, whilst still enabling individuals to converse in groups, promises to transform our practices and understanding of social dialogue. Technologies have evolved sufficiently to make these aspirations a reality, and educational technologists and researchers alike are actively seeking to identify the implications of such changes for society. Both are interested in identifying the unique feature sets and characteristics of

particular technologies to identify what added value they represent for the learning experience. Nowhere is this more apparent, at the present time, than in respect to Web 2.0 technologies (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Mejias, 2005).

There is a need to explore further the processes of identifying and measuring the added value that might be represented by the technological opportunities or affordances of specific technologies. The intention of this chapter is to explore, through the examination of a specific Web 2.0 application (VoiceThread), the opportunities for evaluating systematically the

pedagogical affordances of emerging technologies, and to illustrate the possibilities of applying the Digital Artifacts for Learner Engagement framework (DiAL-e) to that task. The DiAL-e framework was developed as part of a project sponsored by the Joint Information Services Committee (JISC) in the UK to identify a range of opportunities for the development of activities with which to engage students in meaningful and challenging tasks using digital resources, rather than focus on content or the transmission of the information contained in those resources alone (Burden & Atkinson 2008). Although initially designed as a tool to facilitate and support the design of learning activities, the authors have also begun to recognize the framework's potential as an evaluative tool in a number of different contexts. This potential of the framework to act as an evaluative tool in discriminating between the various affordances of a single Web 2.0 technology, a conversation-sharing tool called VoiceThread (http://voicethread.com/), is described here.

Theoretical Context

In examining a particular technological tool, one is exploring a changing landscape, but through a single lens. The potential for technologies to change the social practices, behaviors and socio-cultural expectations of their users is not the primary focus of this chapter, but it is necessary to outline the contextual factors and socio-cultural perspectives of the authors in order to understand the main thrust of the argument.

Research indicates there is a paucity of 'digital literacy' amongst teaching staff across the educational sectors that has a significant impact on learners (Jones, 2004). The varying levels of e-literacy have had a real impact on technology adoption, on learner performance, expectations and behavior, but they are poorly understood. As a result, it remains unusual to see genuinely interdisciplinary research teams undertaking a critical analysis of the phenomena that make up

the 'Internet'. Interdisciplinarity is essential if the true value of specialist social science traditions, investigative models and theoretical approaches are to shed useful light on these emerging questions. The theoretical context for the DiAl-e framework's use as a 'lens' for assessing the potential of any given communication technology is one that spans the range of communications theories, as applied to mass communications and interpersonal communication.

In other work, the authors have suggested the need to evaluate emerging technologies from the broadest possible theoretical perspectives. They posit that, to understand the impact of new communications technologies, one does well to recognize the insights afforded from sociology, social anthropology, semiotics, and communications studies (Atkinson & Burden, 2007). A holistic and socio-culturally aware approach to technology is advised. Cole and Derry argue for a reconceptualisation of technology and intelligence, contending that the two are indivisible, and also that the definition of technology needs to be broadened, to include not only 'tools' commonly defined as technology, but also the nature of deployment, or the action of the tool use itself, in a given social context (Cole & Derry, 2005). This rich vein of research theory in the tradition of the Cultural-Historical Activity Theorists (Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999) suggests that any consideration of technology should regard technology as 'social milieu' as well as 'tools'. This is a step beyond the territory of the 'Social construction of technology', with its roots in the work of Bruno Latour, which argues that technology is not so much a determinate of human action, but that, rather, human actions serve to shape technology. Cole suggests that technologies should be envisaged as forms of tool-mediated social practice developing Piaget's notion that intelligence is the process of adaptation to the conditions of life.

In addition to these 'social cultural-historical' assertions it is also possible to draw significance from 'critical theorists' and refer to early com-

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