

Chapter 1.24

Living, Working, Teaching and Learning by Social Software

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores emergent behaviours in the use of social software across multiple online communities of practice where informal learning occurs beyond traditional higher education (HE) institutional boundaries. Employing a combination of research literature, personal experience and direct observation, the authors investigate the blurring of boundaries between work/home/play as a result of increased connectivity and hyper availability in the “information age”. Exploring the potentially disruptive nature of new media, social software and social networking practices, the authors ask what coping strategies are employed by the individual as their online social networks and learning communities increase in number and density? What are the implications for the identity and role of the tutor in online HE learning environments characterised by multiple platforms and fora? The authors conclude by posing a series of challenges for the HE sector and its participants in engaging with social software and social networking technologies.

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Wholly new forms of encyclopaedias will appear, ready-made with a mesh of associative trails running through them... there is a new profession of trailblazers, those who find delight in the task of establishing useful trails through the enormous mass of the common record. The inheritance from the master becomes, not only his additions to the world record, but for his disciples the entire scaffolding by which they were erected....

–Vannevar Bush (1945)

INTRODUCTION

Online social networking is to some extent a cultural phenomenon. As emerging social web-based technologies are being explored and adopted by educators and learners, we are beginning to witness the emergence of new forms of cooperation and collaboration across boundaries of time and space. Much learning takes place beyond institutional boundaries, instead through social interaction across

multiple online ‘communities of practice’ which Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 4) define as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’. The speed with which information is produced and accessed in an increasingly networked society, and the ease with which communications can take place across multiple platforms and fora, give rise to what Barnett (2000) refers to as ‘supercomplexity’ where the professional judgement of HE teachers involves using multiple data sources, and often conflictual decision-making choices. The vast amount of information available online, and the ease and speed with which learners and tutors can communicate in the co-construction of knowledge, both require productive boundary making processes in order to lessen the risk of information and communication overload. Alongside the inherent tensions of informal learning taking place across online social platforms which stand apart from the formalised structures of traditional institutions, questions are often raised regarding the authority of knowledge and the legitimacy of participants. These challenges require learners and tutors to demonstrate ongoing reflexivity in terms of the practice of educational interaction in dynamically changing environments and constantly changing information sources.

The use of social software in higher education, such as blogs, wikis and social networking services, has seen a surge in the number of active online learning communities and networks for both staff and students, where members are easily connected and engaging in the social construction of knowledge. Much learning is decentralised (the individual being the locus of control as opposed to the HE institution) and often informal in the sense that it is not prescribed or assessed. There is a resulting tension between the informal or ‘feral’ nature of social software-enabled learning webs, and the formal teaching accountability of

HE institutions in terms of ‘what is learned’ and the respective assessment practices.

Within the context of his ‘communities of practice’ analytical tool, Wenger (1998: 267) describes such a tension as the ‘interaction of the planned and the emergent - that is, the ability of teaching and learning to interact so as to become structuring resources for each other’. The authors have adopted Wenger’s concept of a community of practice to characterise social networking processes as informal and organic ‘constellations of inter-related communities of practice’ (Wenger, 2000: 229) whereby communities of practice emerge across multiple online social platforms via the ways their participants use the virtual spaces on offer. Within such environments ‘members have different interests, make diverse contributions to activity, and hold varied viewpoints... participation at multiple levels is entailed in membership in a community of practice. Nor does the term community imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities’ Lave and Wenger, (1991: 98). Community membership is a matter of mutual engagement which does not necessarily entail homogeneity but diversity. Furthermore, ‘since the life of a community of practice as it unfolds is, in essence, produced by its members through mutual engagement, it evolves in organic ways that tend to escape formal descriptions and control’ (Wenger, 1998: 118).

These communities of practice can have different levels of expertise that can be simultaneously present, fluid peripheral to centre movement that symbolises the progression from being a novice to an expert and authentic tasks and communication (Johnson, 2001: 45). In effect, these online communities of practice can be conceptualised as ‘shared histories of learning’ (Wenger, 1998: 86) where both staff and students can participate

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