Chapter 24
'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).

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