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Social Contact in Virtual Learning Environments

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A question addressed in the present issue of EAIE-Forum magazine is whether technology will replace social contact. In this article it is argued that it will not, provided that we learn to use the characteristics of new media constructively in designing for learning. The term “social”, in this context is taken to mean “purposeful communication” and not “recreational socializing” (even if socializing may indeed facilitate learning).

A recent study by the Pew Research Center predicts that by 2020 in higher education, hybrid classes combining online-learning with (less frequent) physical class meetings will be widespread, and that learning activities will become more individualized, relying on just-in-time approaches (http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Future_of_Higher_Ed.pdf). This projected development is facilitated by technology, but it is by no means an inevitable outcome of using information technology. Nor is the possible effect of decreasing social contacts. Indeed, the principal value of scenarios, like the one offered by Pew, is to create an awareness of the challenges that have to be met if we ourselves are to shape a desirable future.

At one end of the present-day e-learning spectrum, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), in their most extreme form threaten to leave thousands of students in the role of uniform consumers struggling in near-isolation. At the other end of the spectrum, radically individualized “e-learning 2.0” may lead to a complete balkanization of the formal learning environment, and hence to social impoverishment. The problem, however, is not that “hybrid” learning is catching on, or that individualism triumphs, but rather that we have to rethink pedagogy and didactic design so as to realize the potential benefits of the new media.

The internet is an interactive and multi-semiotic medium for differentiated communication and archiving, allowing for anything from local to transnational communication. Learning designs should make the most of these characteristics, and in doing so they will empower the students. Below, we will outline some ideas for designing courses for blended/hybrid learning. They are being practiced at the author’s institution, Roskilde University, which is distinguished by requiring students actively to take part in the learning processes, mainly by means of carrying out projects involving collaborative work done in groups. However, given the transnational potential of net based learning, the ideas discussed below may also be utilized in designing for education to be offered across institutions and borders.

The foundation of the Roskilde University ICT-support of teaching and learning is a learning management system (Moodle) that is being used as a platform for construction and collaboration rather than just as an archive and a content delivery system. The platform in a very real sense provides “common ground” for learning activities, establishing a minimum of mutual visibility and social coherence. Course plans, presentations and lecture notes may of course be uploaded by the teacher. But more importantly, the system makes it possible for the students to contribute actively to developing a shared learning environment. Ideally, this environment should evolve into a community of practice; that is a community characterized by a shared repertoire, joint enterprise, and mutual engagement. Technology, as we shall see, contributes to making these concepts tangible.

Shared repertoire (i.e. methods, concepts, actions, tools, and more) include the learning platform and its tools and plug-ins for knowledge production and collaboration (e.g. database, forum, wiki, word processing, presentation tool). Importantly, students and teachers are using the *same* tools – and not just any application from the vast range of options available on the net. It may seem old-fashioned, or even trivial, but the platform helps create identity, without precluding an individual approach to learning – as we shall see below. Also, by using them over time, the tools help develop and document a shared history as well as an ever richer and hence more valuable repertoire.

Joint enterprise (i.e. common purpose providing goals and coherence) is implicit in taking part in a course. But it is brought out more forcefully by the virtual environment where purpose, given the lack of conventional time/space coordination, has to be spelt out for all to see; where progress through the curriculum is immediately readable; and where mutual accountability is essential for making the environment function. Inviting the students to share the active responsibility for the course is an effective means of operationalizing the joint enterprise. Letting students (preferably working in groups) present textbook materials and cases that would otherwise be the subject of lectures stimulates learning and engagement among those involved. They have to plan and produce presentations, and to understand how these will contribute to the course framework. Using not just text, but also screencasts, audio/video of discussions, field observations, role playing games, etc. they can make the subjects more engaging; and comments on and evaluation of presentations, of course, have to be made by their peers, providing for social interaction in class or in the virtual environment. An additional advantage in a blended learning environment is that “flipping” (i.e. replacing) parts of the lecture leaves more time for in-class discussions and assignments. Other joint enterprise features that have proven effective include for example building a shared course dictionary of concepts, or helping produce a shared repository of supplementary readings.

Mutual obligation (in terms of extent and nature of interaction) is not always much in evidence in the physical class, but it is essential in the virtual learning environment where lurking equals

social exclusion, and where failure to meet obligations immediately affect one's fellow students. Mutual obligation builds on the accountability of joint enterprise. By turning knowledge building into a collaborative project, all participants become obliged to share knowledge, and to contribute constructively to the common effort. Instead of designing for the dissemination of information, the course should be designed for negotiating concepts and ideas that each participant may translate into knowledge through a sense-making process. This process offers the element of individualized learning, which is important for motivating the student, but obviously cannot be unrestrained in a formal education setting. Simple practical means include initially creating a dialogue through which the students help define questions to be asked and problems to be explored. Next, having them collaborate in finding the answers, and finally letting the student groups comment on the work of other groups.

In the final analysis, social contact depends on the participants' motivation for sharing. Systems and syllabi can be planned so as to provide a scaffold. But the students have to be attuned to new ways of learning. On a personal note, having recently completed a MOOC course where the final assignment required writing a paper collaboratively, it may be added that writing and editing a document with a few others simultaneously and in the urgency of an approaching deadline, while discussing concepts and challenges in chat, can be an intensely social experience, completely transcending the distance and unfamiliarity of participants from (half) a world apart.