

The impact of social software on education and learning

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From exclusivity to abundance

Education used to be about granting select individuals access to privileged information. Now there is an abundance of readily available information to learn from. The issue switches from one of gaining access to one of navigating this sea of information, filtering out the good from bad. More than ever, what is required from education is the teaching of critical thinking – how to know which of the 1m Wikipedia entries are sound and which are speculation?

Students writing the book

Social software brings the ability to contribute and share rather than just passively receive. And this takes place many to many rather than one to one. Group participation can give rise to emergent experiences, where knowledge is created rather than simply being out there to be found or learned by rote. Alternate Reality Games (ARG's) are an example of systems where participants co-create the experience – rather than being a foregone conclusion the plot is constantly being re-written.

Tools for thought

The onus on educators therefore is to design systems for participation, rather than focusing on producing the educational content itself. By providing the infrastructure, raw materials and tools, as well as some guiding (but not proscriptive) parameters you are giving license to “Go explore, tell us what you come up with” rather than simply marking a text book page and saying, “Learn this.”

Remember where you are

Although it seems that knowledge and interactions in virtual space are becoming ever more contested, it must be remembered that young people are the most adept at negotiating this digital frontier. From Club Penguin to Habbo to Facebook, young people are creating their own language and social norms. What seems impenetrable to adults is acutely perceived by those who ‘grew up digital’. Consequently any activity must be sensitive to these environments and sensibilities.

Amplifying the possibilities

For all the talk and billion dollar valuations, activity within these digital spaces follows well-worn grooves of human social interaction. Young people are still making friends, trying to belong and work out who they are. Technology just means that now you can try on several different identities, maintain various sets of friends and generally expand your learning possibilities as far as you wish.

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