Editorial

Networking online: Re-thinking collaboration and community in the age of information.

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The potential of cyberspace, the virtual world, the web, to map out new spaces for dwelling in communities is well developed, reflecting just one of the perceived benefits of the Internet for online education generally and, in particular, for teacher education. Teacher education programmes can provide, through the enhanced opportunities for synchronous and asynchronous connections between students from diverse backgrounds and contexts, an invigorated sense of critical community. Such potential for community can underpin a philosophy of difference in a paradigm of multicultural teacher education. The development of collaborative learning networks aligns closely with the notions of quality teaching, and the professional teacher, underpinned by themes of constructivism and reflective practice.

It is important to consider, in addition, that the terrains of cyberspace have also contributed to certain educational tensions for notions of collaborative and networked learning. New media have variously been stigmatised as stripping education of a context for natural human social interaction, and, in contrast, as providing meaningful opportunities for learning in the community free from a tradition of schooling.

For the critical educator then "each educational innovation comes to represent a new arena for the contestation of education goals and purposes" (Goodson et al, 2002, p. 6). For instance, authority to transmit knowledge has fundamentally altered with the innovations of online education. Such innovations also require that we interrogate our assumptions of the past. Why is it, to continue, that critics of education believe traditionally schools have been monolithic factories producing docile subjects. One might argue that schools have long been "spaces in which contradictory purposes, organizational tensions, conflicting wills, opposing agendas, and more-or-less spontaneous and unintended events and processes play out" (ibid, p. 8).

The very possibility that schooling in a classroom might be more or less collaborative and democratic than schooling online gives pause to consider the relationships developed between schooling and the Internet as sites of educational collaboration. Such pauses illuminate spaces in which it is possible to both investigate, and alter what it means to be a teacher and a learner.

The last two decades have seen increasing activity from governments seeking to manage and exploit such spaces, and the relationships that fluctuate in them. For instance the British 'Grid for Learning' invests in the theme of networking to demand schools keep pace with social, political and economic demands by dedicating scarce resources to the development of new media (Goodson et al, 2002). Similarly, universities are seeking to keep pace with the age of educational cyber-networks, re-branding their products and restructuring their packages to ensure a sense of interconnectedness, flexibility and dynamism (Hedge & Hayward, 2004), to evidence the once inaccessible Ivory Tower is 'living in the now of the future'.

However Roberts (1998) in tracing the recent history of university pioneering and prospecting in new online terrains has revealed that such pioneering has very much reflected a colonisation of new media, with the Internet a vehicle for reproduction rather than innovation of courses and administration. He suggests:

> It is not difficult to imagine a more radical scenario evolving over the next few decades. We might speculate that in the future a host of organisations (not just universities but a while range of other groups and individuals as well) will offer on-line degrees, diplomas and other programmes of study within particular subject domains (Roberts, 1998, p. 114).

What is more difficult to imagine, and perhaps positively so, are the potential scenarios and manifestations of cyberspace learning phenomena. Inconceivable spaces of human relationships and interactions will be found – we simply cannot hope to know the full extent of the learning relationships that will (and already have) emerge through the networks of the virtual world. Could this could be a science fiction fantasy, or a science fiction tragedy?

The world of science fiction often provides thoughtful visions of technological (pre)determinations. Peter F. Hamilton (1997), in 'The Neutronium Alchemist', maps out the future of access to information in terms of didactic downloads, learning communities as such are reliant upon purchasing the right software and, more importantly, investing in a neural processor that allows the shunting of information – an individual's access to knowledge communities is contingent upon their choice, and ability, to purchase the right software and hardware. Dan Simmons (1989), in the 'Hyperion' trilogy, leads us to ask, what resides in the space of the Internet, what communities are out there in the nowhere that has become somewhere? Douglas Adams (1993), in 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy' trilogy (of which there were five volumes), revolves his networks around an encyclopaedia that, in its last version (and in parodying the incessant 'versionisation' of information and information processing) becomes an artificial intelligence that threatens the great meaninglessness of human life.

Philip K. Dick (1968), in 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?', wonders how a community or society might be held together through its will to log on, to be together on line, to feel empathy through the very process of using the technology. Aldous Huxley (1958), in 'Brave New World', portrays an information society where learning ceases once the child's construction as a certain type of citizen is complete, adult networks are consumed by a will to play in a leisure society.

These fantasies, consistent with good science fiction are not mere fantasies; they are critical explorations of the changing nature of human relationships. Teacher educators and students can benefit from engaging with these metaphors in order to explore what it means to be in a community or network, not to break from tradition in the will to progress, or to resist change in the will to conserve, but to engage in the complex human activity of keeping conservation and progress in the same basket (Arendt, 1961).

Such activity in relation to online learning and learning communities has a strong recent history. For proponents of progress, deinstitutionalised learning provides networks and communities that engage through the Internet are an opportunity to challenge privileged relationships to knowledge and to construct strong communities around dynamically negotiated,

meaningful, and democratic learning (Illich, 1976). In this educational configuration the commodification of knowledge, and the monopoly of state in the economy of education, is undermined by the potential for communication provided by online technologies.

More recent evaluations of the potentials of cyberspace for learning networks reinforce these possibilities, yet with perhaps a clearer understanding of the perils – and the importance of conserving certain educational ideals. Firstly, questions concerning culture are important within the context of online learning. Assumptions of cultural neutrality and cultural specificity were promoted in the editorial of Issue One as important assumptions to critically deconstruct. The contribution of online technologies to learning communities must be seen to include the possibility of providing diverse cultural interactions and relationships. While the Internet might in one sense limit cultural transmissions through the cultural specificity of available media, it might in another sense provide the terrain through which differences in cultural understandings of learning relationships and information transmission can be explored. New understandings of culture, education and community may emanate through reflections upon the experience of collaboration online. How for instance do different cultural groups engage in the terrains of 'youtube' and 'myspace'? How many cultural variations of these terrains exist in cyberspace?

Secondly, the devolution of authority to transmit information made possible by the web has led to questions regarding qualities of knowledge production and consumption. The terrains of Internet learning are argued to reinforce a consumer-oriented educational paradigm. And thirdly:

> Newcomers to cyberspace don't have the experiences, history and resources available to them that insiders have, so they cannot understand the space in the ways that insiders do (Goodson et al, 2002, p. 62).

Whether confident and cyber-literate, or confused and cyber-ignorant, new identities, new senses of self, new understandings of individuality, will reconfigure relationships between individual and community (Peters & Roberts, 1998). Emerging research on the development of online learning communities reinforces a positive sense of new relationships.

> Perhaps the most critical aspect of the online courses was the sense of being part of a learning community. The students emphatically stated, with few exceptions, that the online discussions were the most enjoyable and valuable part of the course. In addition to being classmates, the students felt that they established connections within their professional community. Often isolated in their work environment, they perceived great benefits to maintaining those connections (Donohue et al, 2004, p. 77).

The Internet is then not just a medium (or matrix of media) to enhance community, networking and collaboration in different ways; it is a scope through which the nature of social relationships, and aspirations and underpinning assumptions regarding relationships, can be interrogated. Burbules and Callister Jr. (2000) warn that "… the introduction of new technologies into complex social practices and institutions is not a matter of specific choices, but a constellation of changes, some active, some passive, some intentional, some only evident in hindsight." Within this context it is important to ask: how do educators perceive learning networks, how do such

perceptions impact on the learner and the learning, and what relationships are developed through new technological possibilities that build upon and/or transform existing assumptions regarding learning communities? Without such interrogation we, perhaps, engage in networks and collaborations without much attention to what such engagement means. We may also collaborate in ways that we are not required to notice, ignorant of power/knowledge relationships (Foucault, 1994) that contribute to our collaborative learning.

This issue of He Kupu explores the complexity of learning online from a range of perspectives.

Satomi Izumi-Taylor, Dorothy Sluss, and Sandra Brown Turner narrate a learning experience through which early childhood postgraduate students collaborate with academics from around the United States. Students were supported in developing a critical and personal appreciation of the meaning of constructivism, an appreciation that can then be applied to teaching practices in early childhood centres. Brown Turner notes:

> This is what I came to appreciate the most about this videoconferencing course: that I got to be a human being within the context of other human beings as we shared our ideas fluidly across the miles that separated us physically but not intellectually or emotionally or perhaps, spiritually.

Julie Whittaker engages with contemporary guidelines regarding quality in online learning drawing upon international frameworks and in particular investigating implications of the Aotearoa/New Zealand Tertiary E-Learning Reference Group's e-learning guidelines. Whittaker draws out a common thread of quality collaboration and networking which regarded as essential to the development, the delivery, and the underpinning philosophy of effective online programmes.

Begoña Gros Salvat and Juan Silva Quiroz explore what it means to be an effective moderator and educator online through analysis of desired characteristics and practices. They reinforce the role of a facilitator as ensuring that online learning contributes to constructive learning opportunities, and emphasise the importance of an educator's confidence in managing online learning groups.

This issue's teacher and student voices turn to the question of culture in online and distance learning. Melanie Wong identifies the role of the educator in understanding and supporting the needs of Chinese students working in both face-to-face, and distance and online environments. Wong suggests that comfort with the technology is often not an issue for Chinese students, who are generally accustomed to hi-tech learning. Ayumi Kuno reflects upon the benefits of the Internet as a Japanese student of an early childhood teacher education programme in Aotearoa/New Zealand. She reflects upon the relative benefits of communicating online, and observes that Japanese websites are often more up to date than those in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Finally, an interview with Nicoletta Rata explores the development of online learning and online networks within the context of engaging and empowering Pacific cultures. Nicoletta draws upon her experiences to consider how educators ensure that e-learning is able to cater for culturally diverse communities, and communities of cultural diversity.

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