Engagement, Not Enhancement: Building Bridges in the 20th Century Classroom

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MiT6 Conference April 24-26, 2009

The final project of my music appreciation and world music courses, an Ethnography, invites students to explore a music culture firsthand through interviews, field research, reports on their findings. Students explore musical subcultures they participate in, or perhaps local music communities such as marching bands, church choirs, and heavy metal clubs. Recently, a student chose to investigate the music performance culture of Second Life, an online community where users virtually congregate and interact using digital avatars, and explore digital landscapes by land and air. Second Life citizens also own virtual property, acquire virtual wealth, and even attend live music concerts. The student shared that while some Second Life musicians are "first-life" artists performing live concerts for the Second Life online community, other artists perform exclusively as Second Life entities. The Second Life virtual community provides an alternative opportunity for artists to reach new listeners, transcending geographic and spatial constraints.

On the surface, a Second Life coffeehouse performance appears to be simply a digital version of an actual coffee shop performance. The performer/audience relationship, however, is quite different. Performers in Second Life receive real-time feedback from individual attendees, as well as the standard applause (or jeers) from the collective audience. Able to speak directly to the artist through public or private text messages, audience members may provide constructive criticism, praise certain lyrics, or

request songs, all without interrupting the performance. The simultaneous individual and collective audience interaction in the Second Life music concert cannot be duplicated in a real, "first life" performance. It is unique to this performance environment, enabled by the Second Life online community. Conceptually, real-life and Second Life music concerts depict the same event: a musical performance. The difference in media, however, creates a different type of interaction between performer and audience.

Shift now to my undergraduate Jazz Improvisation course. The instructor cautions that in a live performance "nothing should be automatic." Countless rehearsals, technical drills, and "woodshedding" of jazz standards inspire the musical choices made onstage, but an effective live performance synthesizes the immediate moment with the past preparation. Musicians may fake or "jive" their way through a selection, particularly when the same song has been performed on countless nights at the same time in the same setting. The quality of the live performance experience, for audience and performers, gains depth and meaning when an ensemble chooses to listen to each other and respond to what happens in the moment. Rather than simply following the road map of the music, good ensemble playing involves sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of every member of the ensemble, and the trust and willingness to adapt, in the moment, to unexpected turns. Like a live jazz ensemble, collaborative education involves a small group which works toward a goal by means of collaboration, rather than direction. A successful collaborative learning environment engages all learners, and succeeds through a group effort rather than an individually directed one.

The traditional, baby boomer classroom built learning around lecture, note-taking, memorization, and recollection while multiple choice and fill-in-the blank exams with

some short-answer and essay were traditional forms of assessment. Karl Kapp, in advocating the use of technology—specifically games—for training and education of Generation X and Y learners, passed on an anecdote by a college professor in Kentucky who "noted that in 1913, it took 31 days to build an automobile and 16 weeks to teach Freshman English 101," yet "with advances in technology and process improvements, it now takes only a day and a half to build an automobile, but it still takes 16 weeks to teach Freshman English 101."[1] This stagnation in the modes of teaching could be partially attributed to the relatively few forms of communication technology to emerge in that time, compared to the last twenty-five years.

The digital/information age has brought rapid changes in the way people communicate, most notably by expanding the number of available means. Email, live text chat, instant messaging, cellular phones, text messaging, and video conferencing represent only a sample of these tools. The emergence of the collaborative web in the last ten years has expanded these options even further. The now much more convenient access to information brought new considerations of how research is performed and how the information is taken in. Tim Berners-Lee conceptualized the internet as a collaborative medium, and this has only recently come to fruition in the form of "Web 2.0."[2] Tools such as blogs, wikis, social networking, and RSS promote a web experience built upon individual contribution and collaboration.

The latest generation of students entering higher education has been raised with these tools. Rather than adapting to the information age, they were raised in the

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[1] Karl M Kapp, *Gadgets, Games, and Gizmos for Learning: Tools and Techniques for Transferring Know-How from Boomers to Gamers* (San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2007), 226.

[2] Will Richardson, *Blogs, Wikis, Podcasts, and Other Powerful Web Tools for Classrooms* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2009), 1.

information age. They have not known a world without interactive video games, rapid communication, internet search engines, and dozens, if not hundreds of channels on television. Not uncommon is the image of the student at his laptop, listening to music, in front of a television, while text messaging with one hand. Multitasking is a way of life, and students today do it much more efficiently than previous generations. That is because for these students, these are not "new ways of communication," but rather *how you communicate*.

Higher education has been relatively slow in adapting to this new generation of learners. Keeping pace has been especially difficult for instructors today who also taught twenty years ago when classrooms (not to mention the students) were comparatively much more "analog." Educational manuals and articles acknowledge the variety of multimedia "tools" that can be incorporated into the classroom to enhance the learning experience. These "tools" run the gamut from twitter, social networking sites, and blogging, all the way to relics such as the overhead projector, slide projectors, and chalkboards. While the incorporation of new technology into the classroom is certainly a step forward, the philosophy behind these changes has stubbornly held its ground. Instructors play sound clips in the middle of a fifty-minute lecture, and read text written on PowerPoint slides. Educational values and methodologies must change and adapt along with the tools. Modern technology with antiquated ideology simply enhances the classroom but not the education.

Engagement, rather than enhancement must serve as the driving force behind educational technology. The incorporation of new educational tools does not magically improve learning any more than cellular phones, text messaging, and make everyday

conversations more interesting. Consider the different ways one may communicate with friends, associates, and family.

- A friend who is always on the go with little time to talk prefers text messages.
- A significant other may prefer a face-to-face, real time video chat.
- Older, more traditional family members over the telephone.
- Tech-savvy younger family and friends opt for internet chat.
- A group of old friends from college monitor myspace or facebook to stay up-to-date.
- A blog or ePortfolio used to make professional contacts.

Each means of communication reflects a consideration of lifestyle, personality, age, and purpose. Likewise, the use of technology in the classroom should reflect those same considerations. Rather than merely tools, educational technology more accurately represents a "bridge," which enables engagement, exchange, and empathy between communities of learners.

Author Daniel Pink depicts the shift from linear to abstract thinking as the dawning of the *conceptual age*, which Pink attributes to three factors, abundance, automation, and Asia. An abundance of products, the automation of linear, white-collar work, and the outsourcing of jobs overseas contributes to this trend.[3] The collaborative learning model of learner engagement is a necessity for students to develop the skills to thrive in an age where the mere possession of or open access to information is no longer sufficient. Students today must not only know how to navigate this sea of information, but evaluate quality and determine meaning.

No development in education brings the considerations of conceptual age teaching into the center stage more than the online classroom, where abundance and automation

[3] Daniel Pink, *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 30.

complicate traditional models of assessment. Any student with internet access can retrieve information almost as fast as instructors can recall it, and in some cases faster. Consider the multiple-choice quiz on an online exam. Not only does a student have access to the textbook, but any online resource they wish. Seated campuses offering online classes may provide classrooms from which students may take exams to ensure academic honesty, course portals can lock down quizzes when students click away, and instructors in seated classrooms require students to turn off all laptops and cellular phones during quizzes. In the end, however, instructors and institutions are not necessarily fighting academic dishonesty as much as forcing information-age assessment into a box it conceptually does not fit into.

The discussion board, akin the Second Life music experience creates a collaborative, conceptual age learning environment by enabling simultaneous individual and collective collaboration. Where in a large, sit-down classroom, students may opt to stay quiet, all students in the online discussion board may be given a span of time where they must post a message, reply to another message, and be graded on the quality of their specific contribution. The temporal and spatial experience of the class discussion is broken down, and faceless students engage each other in a threaded message board format. Rather than scrambling to be the first to get their idea into the forum, students now sit back and evaluate the posted argument before taking the time to type a well-thought out (ideally) and well-written reply.

Engaged, collaborative learning addresses both the issues of abundant information and automated learning. For learners, the abundance of easy-to-access information shifts the emphasis from *what* the information is to *why* the information is important.

Collaborative learning encourages learners to not only seek the information as data, but to validate the greater meaning of this information both to themselves and to the greater society as a whole. This is mirrored by Pink's explanation of meaning in the conceptual age:

> But abundance has produced an ironic result: the very triumph of [Left Brain]-Directed Thinking has lessened its significance. The prosperity it has unleashed has placed a premium on less rational, more [Right Brain]-Directed sensibilities—beauty, spirituality, emotion.[4]

This online classroom welcomes this departure from linear thinking by turning critical seeking—looking up the answers in the book—into critical thinking.

Presenting new collaborative opportunities to faculty and staff—particularly in the form of technology—shares the same challenges as teaching music history to non-music major underclassmen. Both audiences are more than familiar with one aspect (college students know music, teachers know education), but express slight aversion to the second (history and technology). Building on the synthesis model, pairing technology sessions with a related non-technology concept allows for learning by application rather than introduction. For example, a technology session introduces blogging by demonstrating the flexibility of electronic portfolios. An upcoming technology session entitled "*I'll take 'Classroom Engagement' for $200, Alex"* introduces advanced PowerPoint techniques by demonstrating their use in re-creating games like *Jeopardy!* and *Family Feud*, which may be employed as classroom assessment tools. These sessions provide a forum for attendees to explore new technology by examining the results first. Attendees may then opt to explore the means to that end if they so desire. By presenting the ends out front, the means become less threatening.

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[4] Pink, 33.

While new modes of interaction emerge continuously, these new developments model new approaches to existing tools. Lecture has not been rendered obsolete by technology, but rather clarified its context—and limitations—within the classroom. Just as incorporating technology may not necessarily mean engagement, a lack of technology does not necessarily imply a static learning environment. Donald A. Bligh, who quite literally wrote the book on lecture, cautions early on to "use lectures to teach information" and to "not rely on them to promote thought, change attitudes, or develop behavioral skills if you can help it."[5] Bligh then demonstrates ways in which lecture may be used in a manner modeled on other technological means. Multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank quizzes may still be used in the online or sit-down classroom, but constructed in a manner that guides students toward making connections rather than simply recalling information.

New methods of handling, sharing, and interpreting information are constantly being developed, and existing ones are being refined. Rather than something that must be kept pace with, educational technology should rather be defined as an ever-evolving conduit for collaboration. Students of Wendy Drexler at Shorecrest Elementary school provide an excellent example of the "networked student" in the 21st century classroom, one who utilizes online resources to access current, relevant information and contribute to a growing body of knowledge. [6] By connecting learners with an ever-changing body of

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[5] Donald Bligh, *What's the use of lectures?*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), 20.

[6] *Networked Student*, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XwM4ieFOotA (Accessed 15 April 2009).

information, learners develop an understanding of not only the subject matter, but also themselves within society as a whole.

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