

TEACHING WITH SOCIAL SOFTWARE: PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS

Introduction

Nowadays adolescents learn how to type in High School; it's called "keyboarding". Many of them, especially girls, spend hours every day typing on the computer. But little of what they type appears in homework assignments. Instead, the long hours spent rattling the keys are focussed on communicating with friends through the medium of social software. Whether it be using Instant Messenger (online chat), Livejournal (journal for friends), Friendster (a variation on Livejournal), Flickr (share photo albums) or all these in combination, teenagers develop a habit of writing which inevitably spills over into their writing efforts for class assignments or other areas such as the School Newspaper [personal observation of teenage daughter]. Unsurprisingly this writing tends to be informal; sentences are often hideously malformed featuring sloppy spelling and abbreviations ; happily oblivious to the rules of grammar the writing is generally unreflective, emotional, and immediate in character. So it's not surprising that students entering a Liberal Arts college such as Earlham bring with them a culture of writing that is at variance with the higher goals of a liberal arts education.

The project

The proposed project consists of analysis and assessment of a course entitled "Social Impact of Computer Technology" that I am slated to teach in the fall of 2005. The project would also encompass outreach to teaching faculty at Earlham and other MITC schools, detailed below.

The course

This project is an attempt to address that Cartesian-like dualism. What could happen if students were to use the same sort of social software to write reflective, thoughtful, articulate, well formed pieces that were visible to the teacher, their peers and outside observers? Or alternatively, if peers made thoughtful, considerate and empowering comments? How would a teacher inspire, persuade, cajole, or coerce students into this kind of writing? I seek to address these questions in a course entitled Social Impact of Computer Technology (CS182) to be held in the Fall of 2005. Here's the course description :

Digital technology has never been more pervasive in western society and yet the general public is often ignorant of the extent of the issues and the

technology involved; for example, legislation to address a politically 'hot' issue can have widespread and unforeseen ramifications. This course addresses some of the most pressing and pertinent issues in this realm from social, moral, ethical, legal & technical standpoints. We explore such topics as digital music (has the ipod killed the CD or is the future digital?), social software (new community building or addictive menace?), and internet information (is the internet a goldmine of useful knowledge or is free information just a dangerous delusion?) to name just a few. This course has an accent on writing and students make use of social software tools such as blogs (aka weblogs) to write research and opinion pieces and to comment on each other's work. Alumni and other guests are invited to play a part by commenting on student's work and making other contributions to the course.

The Blog

Students will be in a unique writing situation; immersed in a blogging environment they will be writing in part about the social impact of the very technology they are using. Hopefully this will give a sense of immediacy to their prose.

Why use the blog and not the more familiar discussion group to facilitate this enterprise? Writing to a blog tends to encourage more reflective thinking (see Barbara Ganley's blog at Middlebury¹ for an array of examples and her profound insights) whereas responses in a discussion forum can easily slip into the 'me too' variety; by their very nature blog entries demand a more voluble input. Moreover, the commentary that is required will be deposited into the student's own blog with a 'trackback' link to the original. This means that all the student's writing: class notes, annotated web references, overview & opinion piece, revised opinion piece, commentary on peer blogs; all this will be situated in a single locus which will enable reflective review from not only the teacher but also other reviewers .

The course itself (3 credits, suitable for first years) would include a semi-weekly lab session covering technical issues (adding web URLs to blog entry, uploading graphic images, commenting on other blog entries via trackback, using markup to format text, configuring and personalising their blog environment etc) to ensure that students were conversant with the social software involved so that it doesn't impede their writing but enhances their creativity. There would be one lecture a week about the underpinnings of the current technology issue and one in class discussion session to get the creative juices flowing.

The Wiki ²

Ten years ago, who would have predicted that the WorldWideWeb or 'the web' would have gained such overwhelming prominence? What can students say about the direction current technology trends might be leading us, what to beware of and what to welcome? How can we structure an environment where students can address this more expansive question in a truly collaborative way? The approach I plan to use is a Wiki which would be open to the whole class. Whereas the blog offers a closed writing space — "I am the author, and this is my piece of creative work" — the wiki is a truly open writing arena where participants can add, edit, modify, and erase whatever writing is there. In this space students will be able to, and indeed will be encouraged to 'refactor' or precis other's writing to improve upon it. Having expressed their individual views on some of the major issues encompassed by the course students will form into small groups which will focus on one particular aspect. These deliberations will result in the creation of communal wiki pages for that particular domain and foster a collaborative environs for cooperative writing. The main page will seek to weave together all these strands into a coherent whole and here the whole class will be challenged to create a synopsis of which they can all feel proud.

Scaffolding the technology

I am not a stranger to using blogs as a teaching tool having employed the Moveable Type weblog system for my Information Technology and Society class³ in 2003; I reported on this experience in a roundtable at the 2004 AECT { Association for Educational Communications and Technology } conference entitled Weblogs & Websites : a symbiotic relationship⁴ . However this year (fall 2004) I used the Moodle course management system for this course and I have been in contact with a developer who is creating a new blog module for the next Moodle release. Similarly, Earlham has a stand alone wiki implementation (Twiki) which I have already used with students and there is a wiki system built into Moodle. Thus I have a choice of Moodle or stand-alone systems both of which are equally viable. I will make my choice when I have tested the blog module in the new release of Moodle.

Analysis and Assessment

A unique feature of this course will be the presence in the background of outside commentators:

- A faculty from the English department will be invited to view the student's blog entries at intervals to assess writing standards & proficiency together with intelligibility of content.
- CS alumni will be invited to give their feedback and opinions about the content of student's reviews.

The project analysis will take place in the spring and will include the following material:

- Feedback from students about the course. Students will complete an online survey asking about their experiences with blogging and wiki.
- Reflective comments by students on the blogging process as it occurs.
- Openness of discourse:
 - reaction of students to outside readership / commentary
 - reaction to comments made by peers
 - reaction to comments from instructor
- Reflection on process by teacher
- Comments and feedback from the outside commentators

The primary destination for these analyses will be my Course Management web site⁵ and I will plan for presentations about the project at AECT, Glitter and ITLAC meetings.

Outreach to Teaching Faculty

Earlham's faculty retreat in the fall of '04 was centered on writing across the curriculum but the role of writing online was not considered. With the current surge of enthusiasm for working with courses in Moodle there is a window of opportunity to engage faculty's interest in the pedagogical advantages of online journaling in the blog format. This project would provide a pioneering course which would pave the way for faculty to use a similar approaches in their courses.

References

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