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Transformative Learning: Suggestive Assumptions and Practices

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Transformative Learning: Suggestive Assumptions and Practices

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Abstract

This essay argues that most proposed forms for schooling learning are founded on assumptions associated with Normal Science. While most of these forms of school learning are inherently conservative, even the most well know approaches to transformative learning, such as critical pedagogy, are also beholden to the dictates of Normal Science. The limitations of Normal Science suggest a need for learning approaches that push against the limits of this paradigm. Such a push is suggested by looking at the assumptive framework and practices associated with a newly developed technology platform -UnEarth. UnEarth moves between Normal Science and Experimental Art is an attempt to create communities of difference, share knowledge across those differences, store knowledge in personal and community libraries that show gaps and strengths in learning as well as interests that can be used for curriculum planning and future job recruitment and do so within an “open text” that creates possibilities as opposed to directing participants to do this or that. By doing so communication patterns, the nature of schoolwork and the stop-go-stop nature of education were transformed. These findings suggest that technology can stand side by side with transformative ambitions, a stance not possible with platforms like UnEarth.

Keywords: technology, transformative learning, UnEarth

Aprendizaje Transformador: Prácticas y Supuestos Sugerentes

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Resumen

Este ensayo argumenta que la mayoría de las formas de aprendizaje escolar que se proponen están basadas en supuestos relacionadas con la ciencia normal. Mientras que la mayoría de estas formas de aprendizaje escolar son inherentemente conservadoras, incluso las perspectivas transformadoras de aprendizaje más conocidas, como la pedagogía crítica, están así mismo en deuda con los dictados de la ciencia normal. Las limitaciones de la ciencia normal sugieren una necesidad de perspectivas de aprendizaje que vayan más allá de los límites de este paradigma. Los supuestos marco y prácticas asociadas a una plataforma tecnológica recientemente desarrollada –UnEarth- sugieren este reto de ir más allá. UnEarth, que se mueve entre la ciencia normal y el arte experimental, es un intento de crear comunidades de diferencia, compartir conocimiento a través de esas diferencias, almacenar conocimiento en bibliotecas personales y comunitarias que muestran vacíos y fortalezas en el aprendizaje, así como intereses que pueden utilizarse para la planificación del currículum y para la futura contratación laboral, y esto a través de un “texto abierto” que crea posibilidades, lo que contrapone a mandar a los participantes a hacer esto o aquello. A través de estos patrones de comunicación se transformaron la naturaleza del trabajo escolar y del parar-empezar-parar de la educación. Estos hallazgos sugieren que la tecnología puede estar junto a las ambiciones transformadoras, una perspectiva imposible con plataformas como UnEarth.

Palabras clave: tecnología, aprendizaje transformador, UnEarth



The Construction of Learning

The foundational assumptions tied to many, if not most, current forms of school learning lead over and over to the pull and influence of what is sometimes referred to as Normal Science (Kuhn, 1962). In contrast to science, that has a very broad and diverse set of assumptions, Normal science (NS), is a dominant view of what many assume to be the basis for decisions and actions within a science paradigm. NS is a truncated and limited view, but nevertheless a generally accepted view which is based primarily on three main assumptions: a) the past is a predictor of the future, b) one can introduce change without broadening actors perceptions or altering the context for the change and c) control in terms of directing actors to do this or that and/or the reinforcement of what is already in place in a more specified and accountable ways is the ambition of this epistemological approach.

In an educational context, best practices (Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde, 2009), accountability approaches (Fox & Brown, 1998), and federal interventions such as The Race to the Top (DOE, 2009) are exemplars of the main assumptions of NS. Let me explain these assumptions in a little more detail by looking at The Race to the Top.

NS as a foundation for learning begins with looking at schooling and identifying a problem or issue. The Race to the Top program, for example, looks at data on test scores and other measures of achievement and found that the U.S. lagged behind other G8 countries on these measures. This data was collected over years and based on this data a plan was put into place that rewards schools that raise their scores and penalizes those that fail in this regard (DOE, 2009, p.4). It is assumed that the past is a predictor of the future with no consideration given to educational actors perception of testing or any other educational matter. Further, the notion of learning and the ambitions and desires for what it means to be educated are left in place. The influence of the space (the classroom assumptions and practices and architectural design of the school buildings, etc.) on what educational actors think and do as well as the relationships developed is also not considered. The carrot and stick motivational tool (Pink, 2011) is simply assumed to work for all educational actors in all spaces over all future times (DOE,

2009, p.5). This ignores a very important finding that shows successful businesses in the near future will depend ever more strongly on constant adaptation to an ever faster changing landscape (Nunes & Breene, 2011). Put simply, the most successful companies and institutions will be those that reinvent themselves consistently. The historical use of a multi-year mission statement is not going to carry the day given the rapidity of change. Rather, quick and nimble adaptation including the consistent rethinking of desires and goals that opens spaces for previously unknown factors, a creative moment, is needed (Martin, 2007; Rowe, 1987). This finding suggests that the NS as a foundation for learning is not beyond reproach and yet it is almost universally accepted. Ironically, it is not only traditional forms of learning (in this case learning that solely gains value base on the core of a standardized test) that are based on NS, but also one of the boldest transformational learning approaches in the last five decades, that being critical pedagogy (Freire, 1993).

Critical pedagogy suggests that schooling has in subtle and not so subtle ways reproduced relations of domination and marginalization because in part pedagogical relations found in school, and educational contexts more broadly defined, frame the student as an object to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1993, p. 52-67). Further, what is seen as learning is actually the ideological manipulation of the dominant culture to get their values and knowledge viewed as legitimate and helps them achieve expert status by endorsing their cultural value as universal –as the values that all need to be seen and paid as an authority (p. 25-51). In contrast, critical pedagogues implore us to be aware of the biased nature of learning. They ask us to work with marginalized cultures to “name the world” thereby breaking the way dominant culture is able to reproduce its own dominance (p.69).

Critical pedagogy also views the future as a reflection of the past and argues we can do our planning in advance, altering pedagogy from a banking approach to a critical pedagogy as opposed to consistently adapting to unknown circumstances. As is true of best practices, which try to say we know this or that about schooling –end of discussion, critical pedagogues say we know this or that about pedagogy and this alteration from banking to critical pedagogy will make the difference now and in the future, in all contexts, for all marginalized cultures, in all times. There is no rethinking of

the assumptions of critical pedagogy or learning or domination as time goes on. These concepts are bounded leaving few opportunities to expand or alter their influences given new spaces and environments (possibilities) within the educational context. It is assumed that current conceptual assumptions can be imported into the future without alteration. And yet, the most significant societal changes have been the Twitter/Facebook uprisings in the Middle East (Beaumont, 2011). These events were unknown to critical pedagogues at the time of their conceptual and practical work with pedagogy. There is little or no space within the articulation of a critical pedagogy for these technological innovations. For the most part their view of learning is about using the past to determine the future without regard for the way the future is always changing in ever faster and unknown ways (Liddle, 2006). And critical pedagogy becomes the new “best practice” for progressive educators without consideration of their evolving perception of pedagogy and related educational views. Again, the learning approach embedded within critical pedagogy is not about making more space to adapt to the unknown, including new opportunities and limits in the everyday school environment, but rather to switch from this to that.

The examples of the Race to the Top and critical pedagogy are not meant as a critique per se. Rather, I am saying that they are both based, as are almost all educational learning foundations, on some form of a NS approach. Given the limited impact of most school reforms, considering another assumptive approach, not as alternative to, but to be used in relation with NS is worth considering. An approach is needed that addresses some of the limits of NS and provides a broader set of possibilities by expanding the assumptive foundation for learning. Experimental Art holds promise in achieving this sort of twin mission.

Experimental Art

Experimental Art, (EA) is based on Cage’s (1961) notion that music, and art in general, needs to be more than a refinement, or boundary reinforcement of what is considered to be good music or art. Put differently, solely looking for ways to produce music that is seen as good, beautiful and of course is counted as music, is not enough. Instead, music is in part an experiment

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with and on the boundaries of what is considered to be music and the most desirable music. For Cage it is essential to understand the intimate relation between inclusion and exclusion (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000) in a genre such as music. (The same case is being made for educational change). This is because art experiments have the unique ability to broaden our perception of what counts as desirable and legitimate within a genre. And this type of consideration is key to altering our constructed categories of exclusion that are reinforced by habit and tradition (Dewey, 1934). Cage, for example, suggested that the sounds of nature could be and should be seen as music. Initially, this view was met with derision. It wasn't long, however, before people started to think about sounds, natural sounds, and their relation to music. Regardless of the conclusions people come to, perception was not locked into traditions and habits that bounded legitimate music as sounds emerging from only a particular set of instruments. If in the future sounds are coming forward that don't fit a constructed category of music there is a pause in judgment, a pause that allows this new "music" to be considered and included as opposed to being rejected out of hand. In the EA approach, perception is considered and specifically linked to the creative impulse of dealing with the unknown future in terms of space, relationships, structures, etc.

From this brief overview a claim can be made that the EA approach is based on the following assumptions: a) the future is decoupled from the past/present by embracing the unknown and uncertainty thereby linking creativity to change b) perception and the relation of space/context to actor or art product is of primary importance, and c) as opposed to control and boundary reinforcement there is faith put in the broadening of perceptual categories and boundaries (e.g., the boundaries of what is schooling, what it means to be educated, and even what it means to teach and learn) as change practices are put in place. This reconsideration allows school change to continually reform itself and keep at the forefront the desires for change and reform as opposed to efficiency solely being the calling card of moving forward (i.e., solely improving test scores as opposed to improving test scores and improving, expanding, what counts as learning and achievement).

It is important to reiterate that this notion of EA is not being proposed as an alternative to NS nor is EA seen as an approach added to NS. Instead,

EA is in relation to NS such that both approaches evolve, and push against their genre boundaries on a consistent basis. The idea is to work the borderlands between the two such that one doesn't get stuck *solely* in a nihilist quest for boundary reinforcement (Duchamps, in Demos, 2007) where once the correct values and practices are agreed upon all that is needed is replication. At this "end of history" creativity is reduced, eliminated, or simply of no use for change and development. The foundations for learning within this replication frenzy is reduced to an efficiency question on how to make further the replication process. But is this likely to work with the inevitable unknown future factors being introduced into societal and schooling environments? Not really.

In contrast with working within a bounded approach for change that literally keeps future change out, working the borderlands between NS and EA allows for the borderland space to change as new unknowns are added to the mix (Gitlin, 2009). This is not to say that the approaches themselves are oppositional –they do have aspects that are complimentary. NS, as mentioned, starts with the past and assumes continuity between past and future. Experimental art, in contrast, ignores the past at least as a guide to the future at the same time it enables us to deal with the future unknown by posing a consistent rethinking of what is best and legitimate within a genre. By doing so, EA can avoid unnecessary exclusionary tendencies based on the premise that this is the way we do things here. EA is also complimentary to normal science in that it is quite poor at prediction. No matter how realist, art is always an illusion and therefore can't be seen as a way to make conclusions on the future (Danto, 1981). This lack of prediction, however, frees the EA approach to be more flexible in terms of solely reinforcing boundaries and as noted works hard to link pragmatic change installations with foundational perceptual reconsiderations that can question issues of best –what counts as and is considered desirable within the learning, teaching and schooling process and practice. With this relation between NS and EA in mind, a consideration of how the conceptual apparatus of working the borderlands between NS and EA can be put into practice. This consideration turns the discussion to my work with UnEarth.

Before doing so, it is essential to talk through the methodology utilized. This is a case study method, meaning this essay uses the UnEarth platform

as it relates to an undergraduate course on issues of diversity. In particular, all students were given a chance to use the platform but none were required to do so. In total 82 out of 90 students over three courses used the platform. Further, because I developed UnEarth and taught the class, little can be assured in terms of generalizability, nor is this my intention. Rather, the section that follows is meant to be a suggestive text that raises questions about moving beyond a strict NS approach. Nevertheless, it is a subjective account of possibilities, events and experiences that the students and myself produced outside of any direct instruction. My hope is that others will take these findings and try to produce their own results that go beyond those presented here in platforms like UnEarth to see the relation between technology and learning where the technology is wired as an open text.

UnEarth

UnEarth (Gitlin, 2014) is a project I started seven years ago that views difference as a benefit to be enhanced not a problem to be solved. My intention in developing UnEarth is to produce a software platform based primarily on four assumptions: a) alternative learning requires the construction of alternative relationships and in particular communities of difference (COD), b) knowledge sharing in the form of enhanced communication patterns is essential for learners that come from less individualistic cultures and have unique experiences different from those embedded in dominant constructions of school learning, c) to make learning equitable for all students, teachers need to understand their students as evolving learners and personalize the curriculum with that knowledge, and finally while there is a certain satisfaction in standardizing learning reform, the mechanism for learning reform needs to be an “open” text.

Communities of Difference and Knowledge Sharing

Sharing of some sort is surely not new nor of particular importance in itself. However, when sharing is part of a community building process and the communities attempt to span differences that typical keep groups and individuals apart, learning within the community has a chance to

consistently rethink the habits and traditions that may be holding educational actors back from seeing and acting on unknown possibilities (Dewey, 1938). One such difference that keeps individuals and groups apart is the difference between knowledge users and producers. Currently, the roles between knowledge users and knowledge producers are quite defined within the school context (Gitlin, 2009). This is not to say that in practice all roles are precisely bounded in these ways. Rather, it is to say that certain roles are supported and conceptualized to be user or producer. It is expected, for example, that a professor produce new knowledge, attend conferences, and participate in any number of research activities. A professor's salary is dependent, in large measure, on how well they achieve within this aspect of their job. In contrast, teachers are not expected to produce new knowledge nor attend research conferences and do related research activities. Surely, teachers participate in these activities in spite of these limits but it is not part of their job description nor are they usually given pay increases for doing so. This is why within the school context, teachers, students, and parents are seen as knowledge users, while professors are seen as knowledge producers. It is true that PhD students do a bit of each, but still the knowledge production part is under the supervision of professors, where this supervision does not occur for professors themselves. And teachers do action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986) on a fairly regular basis but again this is in addition to their everyday roles and also often in collaboration with professors or academics of some ilk.

UnEarth enters into this construction as an interloper, as suggesting a new set of relational and contextual possibilities. In particular, the values underlying the knowledge sharing assumption found in UnEarth are two fold: that at times the sharing can be and should be between all combinations of professor, teacher, student, and parent and in other cases among groups of professors, teachers, parents, and students who typically only share inquiry activities within a discipline, department, program, class level, subject, or other structure that isolates one group from another. By exploding the traditional notion of knowledge users and producers, such that all can enter into these sorts of activities, communities of difference facilitates a type of collaboration that avoids the push pull scenario of simply putting parents and teachers together and instead puts equally committed *and valued* participants

together who take co-responsibility with students for their learning. And when differences are within a group, such as teachers between differing levels of schooling, the continuous focus on differences enables at least a glance at the greater good –that being there a coordinated effort to enable students to navigate the uncertain waters of future worlds. If teachers share knowledge and solve problems with others, not only in their school but also between schools and educational levels globally this enhances the common good as opposed to teachers only focusing on their grade or subject.

UnEarth is “wired” to facilitate these activities by providing equal access and opportunities for knowledge production, use and sharing regardless of role expectations and reinforcing structural boundaries. In this way, UnEarth has the potential to alter relations and contexts thereby experimenting with forms of learning rooted in more democratic and egalitarian relationships. UnEarth also softens contextual divides between knowledge users and producers by forming virtual communities centered on collaborative attempts to problem solve (Martin, 2007). This type of community lets educational actors move outside their silos, even if only for a particular time period by a single keyboard stroke. These moves to challenge normative divides, and build communities of difference also go hand in hand with challenges to the boundaries of what counts as legitimate knowledge (Apple, 1986).

Open Text & Curriculum

The notion of an open text is one that is well known in literature circles (Hejinian, 2000) and within art theory generally (Bandanella, 2005). It stands as a significant point of departure, however, when considered in relation to change proposals for student learning. One seemingly reasonable assumption in school learning policy is the need for specific direction on what practitioners should do and how they should approach their relationships with students. In fact, it is often assumed that the most practical and effective forms of learning change do exactly that –they fill out the directional field as completely as possible. The so-called teacher proof curriculum is but one exemplar (Darling-Hammond, 1993). While doing so is not necessarily a problem it does have its drawbacks. One significant

drawback is made clear in Heidegger's (in Mitchell, 2010) writing on sculpture. In his account of the sculpture done in the time of Nazi Germany, Heidegger talks about the Nazi's abhorrence for ambiguity and the need to define the human figure as an unusually detailed articulation of musculature such that it reflects the utter infusion of will and discipline (in Mitchell, 2010, p. 82). According to Heidegger, this need for detail and the abhorrence for ambiguity resulted from their desire to control the ideal and boundaries of what it meant to be a good German, the German identity, at that time. The limitation of course, is that while control was enhanced, human growth and development was stunted. In contrast to this overly defined idealized form, Heidegger argues that unfinished and "open" aspects of a body found within sculptural forms allows for the body to grow into the unknown new spaces of the future as the spaces radiate into and change the body. A central issue of the influence of the sculpture on society and the issue of learning change is the means through which change occurs –control and/or growth. UnEarth takes the middle ground position by suggesting both. There is, however, a significant caveat. Control only works in the long run for school change proposals that can anticipate correctly changes in the context for schooling. And without this sort of futuristic wisdom, control is likely, by itself, to lead more to push back than long lasting innovation. Given the limitations of our wisdom, directional encouragement should be given some currency. UnEarth, for example, provides directional encouragement in terms of the building of communities of difference and yet still leaves lots of open spaces for participants to make many alternative choices, thereby continuing the creative process of working with the unknown, allowing participants to adapt to future school contexts, and going beyond the wired aspects of UnEarth itself. There is almost no direct control (you must do this or that) built into UnEarth and if successful this network will change and evolve as schooling and its context do as well. This is what is intended by saying that UnEarth is an open text platform.

And this open text allows for learning development in some profound ways. One of the issues found in the progressive literature in education is the problem of cultural capital. Put simply, the relations, perspectives and experiences of the home, or better put, group of homes does or does not match the relations, perspectives and experiences of the school. Where there

is a match between home culture and school culture those groups have significant advantages over other groups where the relation is quite divergent. Addressing this problem seems almost impossible because asking the teacher to make the match between school and home stronger for all students is simply too much work. However, with UnEarth this sort of personalized curriculum is easy. First, by forming a community of difference parents, teachers, students and administrators as well as local community members are not only able to communicate on an on-going basis but importantly can take co-responsibility for learning success. In fact, when this community works together the chances of student success increase dramatically because home education is coordinated and interactive with school education. And for those students who have parents that most spend the majority of their waking hours working at jobs which require them to have latch key kids, the community is there as a back-up to provide insight and support for school work done at home. Further, because each student keeps a record of learning experiences, accomplishments and interests in a portfolio and profile, teachers for the first time have more than grades, test scores and word of mouth to link the home and school cultures so each builds on the other.

A New Key

What follows provides some practice trends. Given that UnEarth has only been tested in two undergraduate *Issues of Diversity* classes with the author of this essay as the instructor the identified trends are only intended to suggest practical results that clearly need more empirical assessment with a much greater number of participants an independent instructor and a diversity of roles and cultural participants.

Communication Patterns

Before using UnEarth, my undergraduate classes, such as the Issues of Diversity class used in the Beta-testing of the network, were dominated by a single communication pattern (approximately 75% of the time). I did most of the talking and when I wasn't talking I tried to direct the conversation in a

certain direction. Typically within a 2 and ½ hour class with 30 students, no more than 15 of those students spoke for any length of time. There was also almost no discussion between students that was more than another response to a question or comment posed by an instructor (in this case myself). Now, I am not suggesting that it is necessary for the teacher to play a lesser role in the classroom (Shor, 1987), nor to include all students in a discussion, nor to make it possible for students to discuss any topic under the sun. Rather, I want to suggest that by only having a singular dominant communication pattern where knowledge primarily emerges from the teacher and is delivered to student, all students were passive for the majority of the class session and a view of educational success emerges that rewards sitting quietly, taking notes, listening, absorbing, and repeating in a slightly different form (at best) the insights of the teacher when called upon. While this view of educational success and passive role may suit some students, many others will fade in and out (and out) of the class discourse, develop a limited array of schooling skills and dispositions (for example, as mentioned previously the adaptation and reinvention of directions, ideas and products is not furthered by this communication pattern) and the student passivity clearly works against the possibilities of a democratic citizenry (Goodman, 1992).

With UnEarth two other communication patterns developed, the most central being that students worked as teams or mini-communities to try to rethink diversity and its implications for schooling and life in general. These mini-communities differed from other forms of within class groups in that the communities included others outside the classroom (expanding the potential range of skills, expertise, knowledge, within a particular community) and the individual mini-communities benefited from all other communities involved in the knowledge project, because the findings of each group was stored and made accessible to other groups. This relation between individual mini-communities including “students” within and outside the school changed the role of student from mostly passive to active for most students, for a majority of the time. Students were now acting in diverse ways; both finding directions and being directed. They were also seeing knowledge as more than an individual possession (Apple, 1999), as a cultural resource that moves dialectically between home and school (Moll,

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1992; Dewey, 1927). At times, I didn't say a word for over an hour as students were fully engaged with sharing knowledge about diversity and personal insights that emerged through communication. For example, listen to this communication that took place between classes:

Carolyne (a professor in a different institution who was part of UnEarth) emailed me back! I think it is really fascinating that she responded so quickly. I am glad you gave us this opportunity (Hillary, student in class).

In 31 years of being a professor this sort of passionate engagement, independent of any direct influence from me, had never occurred. While the dominant pattern continued, there is no question that certain students, additional students were drawn into the excitement of being constructed as having something valuable to say as opposed to depending only on the instructor as the sole legitimate source of knowledge (Olson & Craig, 2005). As Innis (1951) points out knowledge is typically seen as written, “space based”, UnEarth has wired in the possibilities to include visual, “time based” orientations and the written and oral as legitimate knowledge representations (Innis, 1951).

This communication pattern led to a second new pattern of development. After class, I would often review the student/student/outside conversations as well as the materials they had collected. I could see most of the issues identified, blind spots and the students' identification of what they see as valuable and less than valuable knowledge resources. I could see, for example, how often students viewed an article or video. This allowed me to consider what had caught the students' eye in terms of interest. As opposed to viewing student interest solely as an issue of quality control, the stable texts (White, 1980) produced by students and those outside the class, with an assist from UnEarth, became an opportunity for in depth individualized conversations that allowed me to push students (as they pushed me) and get to know them as inquirers, thinkers, and students of diversity.

This additional communication pattern was tied to another change, in particular engagement within the class time. Typically about 5 minutes before class ends I can see that the students are getting ready to leave –they have one foot in the door and the other out. In direct contrast, another

influence mentioned above was that the class time period expanded to include the entire week between classes. As is true of TV, the most interesting aspects of talk/conversation often occur when the lights go off. So too in my classroom, students were very authentic about their values and this allowed me to do the same, when the classroom lights went off and we were just talking. For example, I found that several students thought of religion and specifically missionary work as a way to show that they were caring of others thereby furthering diversity. In the classroom, I didn't bring this issue up. However, in a private message I asked them if that caring might get distorted if the goal of the missionary work was how many individuals converted to a particular religion. They also felt comfortable telling me in what ways they disagreed and other extenuating circumstances about their view. These conversations, if nothing else, helped those involved to see the others point of view and in a few instances a position changed significantly. In time, some students and myself became intellectual companions on a quest to understand our selves and the questions raised as part of studying diversity. Note I said some students. About half of the students rarely if ever entered the "out of class time" discussions. Yet, it should also be noted that those that did enter these discussions were often those students who were extremely quiet and did not talk in class unless they were cajoled to do so by the instructor. I was able to get to know students and greater numbers of students in ways that never occurred in my years of teaching at the university. Further, I was able to adapt the curriculum to the strengths and blind spots of students in very specific ways, happening in real time (not at the end of a semester or during a break within the semester), and was able to know students who were less comfortable communicating through the dominant communication pattern thereby setting the stage for a more inclusive approach of educational success as well as broadening the notion of what it means to be educated.

Schoolwork

Over the last decade I have noticed a pattern among my students in the Issues of Diversity Class. On the one hand, the students appear to be better prepared, in terms of their writing and thinking skills, on the other hand they

seem to enjoy reading less and less by the day. I have often thought, without any supporting evidence, that reading could in short order be a thing of the past. And given my love of reading and my age, it wouldn't be a big stretch to think of this as the demise of society. Yet, as of late an alarm has gone off in my head. My perspective on reading is quite similar to the logic and reasoning that has cast dispersions on the baby boomers (my generation) for their liberalism and Net Generation for their obsession with technology. In fact, students today do read but they "read" as they look at video's, as they text, and Tweet, communicate on Facebook, etc. But reading an academic article, chapter or text is a type of work, schoolwork (Oakeshott, 1995). In contrast, most students today can spend hours upon hours "reading" their way and clearly it is fun and engaging. I am not prepared to get into an in depth argument on the legitimacy of these activities or their educational worth. Instead, I want to make an overly facile point –the Net Generation are different from previous generations in that they have embraced and helped develop new modes of communication. These media and communicative patterns seem odd to those socialized to use more traditional forms. Yet, as Innis tells us no form of communication is beyond reproach and all are connected to forms of power (Innis, 2007). As such these new and different forms of communication need to be seen for their possibilities and limits and consistently pushed forward beyond their genre boundaries. The reflex move, in contrast, is simply to say different is leading to the end of the world. Clearly this is not the case –progress and problems are going hand in hand in our current global society. And even if you disagree with my optimism, remember that there are now 1 billion Facebook users and 140,000,000 on Twitter (a site only 6 years old) and who knows how many phone texts are produced everyday. Anyhow, the point is that this type of "reading" is not going away. I am not bringing this up to suggest we stop assigning traditional reading materials but rather to expand reading to include and go beyond the traditional such that educational activities don't have to be solely work, but actually a vital part of everyday life. UnEarth enables such an expansion by allowing students, professors, teachers and parents to store and share visual as well as written texts. The knowledge flows from teacher/professor to student as well as student to student and student to teacher/professor and is expanded to include multiple forms of

representation (Eisner, 1982) including the visual, written, and the performed. Knowledge expansion and sharing as an inherent part of UnEarth has made a dramatic difference in students desire to “read”. In two class sessions (two weeks) the 30 students had collected, read, and reviewed 78 videos and 143 texts on diversity. Clearly, something had happened to the students’ notion of what counts as schoolwork. This process was interesting and the motivation appeared to be intrinsic, based on freedom more so than control (Pink, 2011). For example, a video entitled Welfare in America had after two weeks 129 views and a video entitled The Examined Life submitted by a graduate student invited by a student in the Issues of Diversity class had 488 views. Now we can agree to disagree on the vitality of these video’s but there is no denying that students not only viewed this video several times but asked other friends and fellow students outside the class to look at them. In addition, I was able to provide my take on the videos and point out what might be viewed as limits and possibilities of their content, as other students did the same. Even though I disagreed strongly with the welfare video, I know my voice carried more weight than if I simply didn’t encourage students to bring this point of view to the table. The engagement with reading was enhanced, as was the ability of the conversation to begin with their biases, fears, and socialization. If I just hand picked the texts, the separation between the students “real” life and school life would have been quite far apart. In contrast, by allowing them open access to the starting point of the learning process, I had the opportunity to confront my own biases and connect with students on their biases. Finally, seeing the conversation go beyond the time of the class (not assigned work) suggests that class education could be a starting point for a self initiated learning process not limited by classroom bounds.

Class Histories

Typically, when the new semester approaches and I am scheduled to teach the Issues of Diversity class, the first question that comes to mind is should the same text or texts be used, as was the case previously. About half the time I make a change. Regardless, if I do or don’t, each class stands as a separate entity, a new beginning. It is as if when the class ends, it disappears

as a particular learning community with its own priorities insights and relationships. This new beginning has advantages not the least of which is challenging the assumption that the future will be a replica of the past –that the same texts, pedagogical approaches, and educational ambitions can be imported from one time to another. In spite of this advantage in denying the tradition of simply bringing out the past class orientation for the next class, there is a hidden cost of starting a new, the notion of building from one class to another is denied. This building, what I refer to as developing a class history, allows for some possibilities currently not availability when each class is totally a new beginning. That possibility has nothing to do with what text is chosen but rather how previous class learning projects, texts, and assessments can provide a foundation and starting point for the new class. Let's compare the texts produced as part of the first assignment in class one and two of the classes that were a part of Beta-testing. In the first class on the first day I asked students to write down their view of diversity. After doing so, they shared this with other classmates and revised their definitions. Of course these definitions varied but the dominant definition focused on diversity as differences associated with race, class and gender. As the class progressed students continued to revise and develop their views and by the end of the class semester diversity became a more nuanced concept with the consideration of all sorts of divides as well as similarities. Now the second class followed the same process except they had the advantage of looking at and debating the diversity statements written by the first group at the end of the semester. By doing so, the second group of students were voicing a much more sophisticated notion of diversity that included issues of dominance, the construction of normal, language and problems with sameness as fairness. While nothing definitively can be said about the cause of this difference, it is likely that seeing the development of a previous group of peers encouraged some forward movement.

In the traditional classroom and e-learning classroom this sort of influence where one groups builds on a previous group is impossible because there is no way to link the past with the present in terms of knowledge conversations, communities formed, texts produced, etc. With UnEarth, on the other hand, all this knowledge is stored in the Learning History of each individual student and emergent community. In practice, this

means that my new students get an opportunity to see the texts the previous classes downloaded on diversity. They can also see comments about those texts by myself and other students, and this ending point becomes the starting point that is added to by the new class. Additionally, the new group can see the conversations, doubts and changes the previous class went through only weeks before. For example, in my second class the students gravitated to the way the previous class was initially hesitant to see their role in reinforcing stereotypes and hierarchies between cultural groups. This hesitancy started an important conversation with the more current class about the role of those in a dominant societal position. There were many disagreements but given that this position was not primarily coming from me, rather peers from the previous class, the new group owned the conversation without the feeling that the conversation was initiated and desired solely by the professor. The internal motivation to engage in this conversation led to the production of papers that started from the place the other class left off and went much further in terms of depth, reflectivity, and insights. Please don't see my words as suggesting a linear form of progress that assumes agreement and a straight path toward better. Instead, what was different was the identification that something could be gained from other students, peers who had produced some insights by struggling with issues of diversity over a period of time. Further, the texts upon which those struggles were formed meant that the new texts added increased the breath of the knowledge base. Without viewing the previous group's work and conversations, this would not have been possible in 15 short weeks meeting once a week. Clearly, a link had been formed between the previous class and the new one such that more depth on issues of diversity occurred in a much shorter time. And this only involved two classes. As classes have their own histories they can bring this knowledge to other classes of their own choosing and have a record of past papers, conversations, readings etc. and link previous classes with those in the present and future. The class does not disappear, nor is it replicated for a new group, rather there is a new space created such that there isn't solely a new beginning. Rather, there is also a building process lost in most if not all classrooms globally.

Possibilities

By moving between and beyond NS and EA, UnEarth appears to take an initial stance toward providing opportunities to form new relations and expanded contexts that can lead to forms of transformative learning. Even at this initial stage of development, with a limited introduction to only two university classrooms, UnEarth facilitated expanded communication patterns, enabled students to “read” and enjoy reading a much larger number of texts than is typically the case, and allowed insights and readings of past classes to be used as a starting point for a learning process that was typically more in depth and based on a wider array of readings. It is true that UnEarth has some features typical to other sites. At the same time, UnEarth has some very significant differences not the least of which are the formation of within class communities, expanding beyond the class to include others in the “classroom” community, and connecting past, present, and future classes as linked learning communities. Besides community building, UnEarth has the unique ability to create Learning Histories for individuals and communities. These histories keep a record of readings, tests, learning accomplishments, etc., which allows for knowledge sharing, continuity and building within and between classes as well as the ability to get to know students in a way currently not possible both before class starts as well as during the term for the class (Howard, 2006).

The possibilities of UnEarth suggests it is time for those interested in education to take a long look at our fears about youth and their learning proclivities and join them while not abandoning more traditional forms of learning. If we do, technologies such as UnEarth can lead the way to broaden and alter long standing aspects of schooling such that more students have the opportunity for success in schools as the notion of what it means to be educated is also made more inclusive-transformative learning.

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