Working papers and essays

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Next publication, December, 2008: Setting up a roaming video conference studio

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The subject village as web community and professional resource

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One of the greatest advantages of using the internet to disseminate project information lies in identifying some of the different ways in which information can be meaningful to users. Information is no longer as fixed as it would be in a printed and published, paper-based document and it is possible to suggest that a text is something that never needs to be considered finished, or complete. In this context, text and information evolve, and their significance to users can adapt. The emphasis on continuous evolution and adaptation becomes integral to writing and communication processes and through it, social or professional response to text can be viewed as a means of editorial review.

The internet has provided opportunities for users to access resources, share resources and make decisions based on information exchange. The types of decisions can include, in this project, ways in which teachers and learners use video conferencing resources and how the design of the web-site enhances their understanding of information and their capacity to engage in practical activities. These actions can be referred to as “affordances” (Gibson, 1977, 1979); what a user is able to do as a result of choices made by the designer of the web-site.

Affordances can be divided into two broad categories (based on Norman, 1988, 2002):

1. Real affordances are based on the human actions that are facilitated by the properties of a web interface, e.g. accessing a forum or blog through web links (within the web medium).
1. Perceived affordances represent what a user identifies as being possible through the real affordances. Not only is a user able to access a forum or blog, which is the same real action for all users, but now an individual user may perceive this as being particularly important for specific social or professional reasons, which may be different to those of another user. It may also be related to learning processes advised by the web resources, but which are external to medium, e.g. learning how to operate video conferencing equipment through online instructions.

In a well defined user group in an educational or training context, it is relatively straightforward to conduct a needs analysis and identify a user profile that will inform the design of training materials. This works well in single user groups and it is where notions of "best practice" emerge as needs are defined in relation to fixed learning outcomes. As user groups are transferred to online environments however, a much wider range of needs emerge as different types of users—organisations, companies, primary schools, secondary schools, further and higher education institutions—begin to access resources that support their own needs, but which may have been designed for narrower user groups, e.g. how to use video conferencing in any one of the settings listed above.

To design a resource that will serve the needs of disparate user groups, it is necessary to identify policies and procedures that will work with the real affordances of being able to use video conferencing equipment and with the perceived affordances of what types of practice may be best for different users. One way of approaching this is to consider the notion of subject village (Glazier, 2002). Glazier was instrumental in setting up the Electronic Poetry Center at the University of Buffalo, NY and has argued (ibid: 3) that this type of web resource has been central to the proliferation of poetry on the internet. The subject village itself operates as a web-site and may include structured discussion areas and other areas for more formal educational development. He also argues for the limitations of the subject village, which does not necessarily offer a comprehensive account of the subject in question, nor does it control the actions and interests of the users in the way that a formal training programme might. The more important aspects of Glazier’s notion of subject village are listed below:

1. the collection of materials based on an editorial policy;
2. the dissemination of materials through agreed policies related to bibliographic maintenance and payment of royalties where appropriate;
3. the dissemination of materials that may not be possible in print-based publishing;
4. the provision of a focused collection of web pages and links to similar resources;
5. the creation of a community of practice based around the collection, dissemination and discussion of materials;
6. the possibility of developing educational resources either within the on-line community or as a result of the on-line community.
The main point that is not listed in Glazier’s description of a subject village, which is used in the Invite subject village, is a means of interactivity that can elevate the resource from something similar to an on-line catalogue of resources, into an actual web community. In terms of creating a social or professional dialogue on theories, practices and resources, it is necessary to provide a definition of interactivity that leads to critical subject development. Lippman (date not cited: in Brand, 1987 & Stone, 1995; in Ryder & Wilson, 1996: 6) has identified five useful criteria of interactivity:

1. interruptability, where either party may interrupt at any time;
2. graceful degradation, in which unanswerable questions are set aside without disrupting the discussion;
3. limited look-ahead, through which it may not be possible to determine a finite closure to a discussion;
4. no default, where the directions of a discussion may evolve according to mutual interests of the communicators;
5. the impression of an infinite database, through which many definitions and qualities may be the result of the ongoing discussion.

Interactivity will be further developed by using the subject village as a means to creating new resources, not initially linked to a specific project such as Invite. Further collaborations, exchanges of information and projects will emerge, independently of the original resource. The subject village provides a means of interacting through the materials collected and disseminated for given projects that can be made more sustainable by cooperating users groups in different communities. This affords a strong profile for a community of practice towards the development of training and educational resources that can be adaptable to any number of different contexts. Ryder and Wilson (1996: 6) neatly summarise the role of such affordances:

"There is nothing inherent in the Internet that guarantees learning. But in a specific context involving learning activities, such as research collaboration, self expression and reflection, the Internet offers multiple affordances, so numerous that it may be a mistake for us to treat it as a medium. It is really an infrastructure which brings together media, tools, people, places and information, expanding the range of human capabilities."

References


http://users.aber.ac.uk/jpm/invite/practice.htm


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