

## ***Critical Education and Digital Cultures***

*Jeremy Knox*

*University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK*

### ***Community Cultures***

The growing social dimensions of virtual worlds were aligned with a broader increase in the capacity for communication and interaction on the web. It is this trajectory that ushers in the phase of *community cultures*. Following seminal works such as Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (2000), inspired by experiences of the WELL, work in Internet Studies has strived to make the case for rich and complex social phenomena enacted through the web. Countering more established views of the paucity of online interaction, and a lack of the intensity and depth assumed in so-called 'face-to-face' communication, this research tended to emphasise the dialogue, sharing, exchange, and kinship practices taking place between members of online discussion groups and gatherings. Rather than otherworldly or strange, here the online is warm, friendly and communal. However, importantly, this stance nudged web technology into the role of instrument; a passive device that serves the aims of its users, and simply facilitates the enhancement of an exclusively human drive for social interaction.

The idea of technical capacity was captured in the notion of 'web 2.0', a term often used to refer to an increasing emphasis on user-generated content and interactivity found on the web. Thus, in this phase of more mainstream use of the internet, the technologies of the web tended to be framed in more productive and beneficial terms, as services which acted to support and enhance conventional social life, as opposed to the narratives of alternative 'other worldliness'. Here the concept of the 'network' comes to the fore, replacing the spatial inflections of 'virtuality' with a much more functional idea of web technology: the invisible means to connect people. Social networks such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter were identified as intense sites of contemporary community culture, and became of the focus of dedicated research, primarily on the grounds of the propensity for public interaction rather than the features of the technology itself.

This privileging of participation over consumption neatly reflected the long-standing educational grounding in dialogue, as well as more recent trends that shifted emphasis away from teachers and towards students, and which sought to understand learning as the social construction of knowledge, rather than individual internalisation. Mirroring the mainstreaming of the web, educational institutions were also adopting more digital and networked technologies, which began to move from the fringes of educational provision to more typical institutional offerings. The idea that technology simply provided resource artefacts for teaching and learning began to be replaced by the idea that technology provided the means for dialogue and communication.

The field of education and technology is often recast around these changing perspectives, perhaps most strikingly in 'networked learning', signalling both the instrumentalism of technology and the reorganisation of education around the learning of the individual. In these ways, the communicative potentials of the network are frequently positioned as the solution to the hierarchies, inequalities and inaccessibilities of the institution. Thus, rather than 'virtual' or 'otherworldly space', technology becomes anti-institutional and emancipatory in its capacity to *facilitate* and *enhance* those traits already present in society.

However, bound up in this shift has been a naturalisation of 'social learning' and a concealment of technology itself, such that learning through communicative networks is often positioned as synonymous with our innate being. The notion of networked learning reaches its zenith in the

proposed learning theory of connectivism, which frames the processes of learning as quite literally those of the network. The value of a digital cultures perspective is to reveal the broader influences, assumptions and trajectories bound up in the drive for participative and networked e-learning communities. Such perspectives can account for how the ideas of 'socially networked learning' have been constructed, rather than assuming them to be the unquestionable facts of our contemporary educational project.

Ultimately, the centring of community in education problematically positions web technology as the passive instrument of our predetermined educational aims. This overlooks the powerful economic and ideological forces that underpin and shape the technology industry. The drive for technologies that facilitate our 'community learning' have simultaneously embroiled education in a Silicon Valley culture, motivated by data acquisition and profit. In this sense, 'community learning' can be understood, not simply as the baseline of our natural educational disposition, but rather as a particular construction of the educational project that has been significantly influenced by both cultural and industrial facets of the web.