

# A Nomad's Guide to Learning and Social Software

## Abstract

Innovations in educational technology are often seen as opportunities to transform learning, and social software (blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, etc.) is no exception. But are the tensions between pedagogies and social software the result of attempts to make the latter conform to traditional teaching practices, or are they signs of real opportunities for rethinking learning processes? In this article, I explore the role that social software can play in new models of learning and participating in society. While social software can connect learners to new resources and to each other in new ways, I argue that its true potential lies in helping us figure out how to integrate our online and offline social experiences. Thus, social software must live up to its name by relating to the individual's everyday social practices, which include interacting with people online as well as people without access to these technologies. I conclude that social software can positively impact pedagogy by inculcating a desire to reconnect to the world as a whole, not just the social parts that exist online.

## Introduction

Information technology is often said to be revolutionary... but the actual practice of computing is anything but. Indeed the purpose of computing in actual organizational practices is often to conserve and even to rigidify existing institutional patterns (Agre 2004:para. 22).

In seeking to do things in new ways with a computer, it is useful to clarify how we do them now and how we came to do them that way and not otherwise (Mahoney 2004:para 53).

Each new wave of technological innovation promises to revolutionize education, as we know it. In the past couple of decades, we've heard about the potential of multimedia and e-learning to transform the way we learn. Despite isolated achievements, the success record is on the whole not very encouraging, and there is no reason to assume that the outcome will be any different in the case of the latest craze in educational technology: social software (software that allows people to interact and collaborate online or that aggregates the actions of networked users). The reason for this has little to do with the technologies themselves. It is relatively easy to incorporate new technologies into the learning process if the goal is to merely replicate the traditional ways of doing things without significantly disturbing institutional values. But what is more difficult, and for this very reason perhaps a more worthy exercise, is to introduce new technologies while we step back and question the pedagogical principles that inform our educational models.

It is in this sense that I think an exploration of the tensions between pedagogy and technology should be undertaken: not so much from the traditional perspective of how technology can or cannot support certain pedagogical principles, but rather from the perspective of a re-evaluation of teaching practices in light of the possibilities that new technologies may introduce. In other words, if pedagogy is concerned with the purposeful application of learning strategies, and educational technology is concerned with the creation of new tools and systems for learning, the traditional way of framing the tensions in the convergence of pedagogy and technology has been to see how we can make a new technology 'fit' the established pedagogical principles endorsed by our institutions. What is required at the moment, however, is that we examine the tensions created when new

technologies question and even subvert traditional pedagogical principles. This is, admittedly, dangerous ground because ultimately it means questioning the goals of our educational institutions, facing the choice of whether to evolve or become obsolete in the process.

But the framing of the tensions between pedagogy and technology cannot be approached exclusively from a pedagogical-technological perspective. These tensions are ultimately tensions within the social, frictions between society's view of how to form ideal citizens and the values that inform the design and distribution of technologies. These complex tensions include, among other things, issues of access and knowledge diffusion: what factors determine who has access to the technology, and what mechanisms are in place to facilitate or obstruct the diffusion of knowledge from technologized to non-technologized realms of social life.

Because societies are in a constant state of flux, there is no permanent resolution to these tensions. Thus, the present article is a *guide* not in the sense of contributing step-by-step instructions for applying social software to learning, but in the sense of providing one possible framework for understanding these tensions. The framework is partly influenced by the work of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). Although my engagement of his work here is extremely superficial, I do borrow from him the concepts of *becoming* (in opposition to a static definition of *being*), *nomad thought* (as the constant re-orientation of knowledge that facilitates becoming), and the *virtual* (not as a separate form of reality, but as the Whole behind the actualization of all things). My use of these concepts will become clear in the course of this article.

## The latest 'social turn'

What is really going on is a major shift in the way that we are able to communicate, collaborate and share things with each other using online technologies. The key to this is not the technology itself—there is remarkably little that we can do now that wasn't possible 5 years ago—but rather the critical mass of connectivity between people that we are finally reaching... The real story is about ease of use, availability, culture change and most importantly network effects... (Bryant 2005:para. 4).

... if you look at the kinds of problems we are trying to solve now ... it seems pretty clear that the key issues relate to people and the way they communicate and organize themselves... (Pincus 2005:para. 1).

To some, recent developments on the Internet signify an important social turn, a new concern with the social lives of users (or at least with what software developers think the social lives of users should look like). To others, the Internet has always been a social space, and what we are currently seeing is simply an increased awareness of the possibilities that this entails. In this sense, Internet software has always been 'social software' of sorts.

As with all labels, there is some ambiguity and controversy over what kinds of things are supposed to be included under the '[social software](#)' label, or how it differs from previous labels such as 'collaborative software,' 'groupware,' etc. Without necessarily wanting to enter into that debate, I will only say that to me the label has come to define both a

particular wave of applications and a historical moment in which these applications have gained mass popularity. After all, in order for a network to function, its number of members needs to reach a critical mass. While the percentage of people in the world with access to the Internet is still relatively small (15%, according to the 2005 [Internet World Stats](#)), it is large enough to be said to constitute a critical mass.

While by no means conclusive or definitive, this is a list of the kinds of applications that I associate with social software:

- multiplayer gaming environments: Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), Massively-Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), etc.
- discourse facilitation systems: synchronous: instant messaging (IM), chat; or asynchronous: e-mail, bulletin boards, discussion boards, moderated commenting systems (e.g. Slashdot, Plastic, K5)
- content management systems: blogs, wikis, document management (e.g. Plone), web annotation utilities
- product development systems: especially for Open Source software, e.g. Sourceforge
- peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing systems: e.g. Napster, Gnutella, BitTorrent
- selling/purchasing management systems: e.g. eBay
- learning management systems (LMSs): e.g. Blackboard, WebCT, Moodle
- relationship management systems: e.g. Friendster, Orkut
- syndication systems: list-servs, RSS aggregators
- distributed classification systems: e.g. Flickr, del.icio.us.

Each one of these categories is constantly evolving, introducing new features in existing products or introducing new products altogether. The difference, for instance, between a discourse facilitation system such as a bulletin board and a moderated system like Slashdot is enormous, and the management of social transactions much more sophisticated. The above general classification also does not do justice to the nuances between technologies, as is evident by the fact that things like blogs and wikis are listed under the same category. But the intention is to arrange technologies according to the kind of social function they seek to manage (learning, selling, classifying, defining communities, etc.). In practice, of course, most social software products incorporate functions from more than one category, depending on the needs of a particular audience.

Improvements in social software are usually motivated by one of two things: the challenges of handling larger networks of users in ways that allow the individual to still derive some meaningful social value from the experience or, on the other hand, the challenges of providing more 'intimate' or 'authentic' (closer to everyday life) social experiences. The former goal requires, as I explore in an upcoming paper, that users relegate more of their social agency to the code. The latter requires that users are given tools for enacting social agency in new ways (ways which simulate or enhance older forms of social agency).

With respect to social software for learning, it is interesting to note that learning management systems have been slow to incorporate many of the improvements made in other types of social software (recall earlier point about institutional resistance to questioning pedagogical principles). However, we should not make the assumption that learning management systems are the *only* type of social software capable of facilitating

learning. Other types of social software are providing more interesting innovations. It is the possibilities for learning that we have glimpsed somewhere in the convergence of these other kinds of social software (e.g. gaming + relationship management; classification + file sharing + discourse management, etc.) that are potentially more pedagogically subversive.

## Learning as (endless) becoming

Do the challenges posed by social software to traditional educational models go further than the challenges posed by previous forms of e-learning? I believe that, potentially, they do. Satisfying the supposed requirement for learning anytime and anywhere has meant a prioritization of the individual over the social; it is the individual's time, goals and interests that are catered to. While this is liberating in many accounts, it sometimes comes as a detriment to the social aspects of learning. The benefits of a socialized learning experience can outweigh the benefits of an individualized learning experience, because it forces the learner to apply knowledge through interaction with the world. What social software can do is to reintroduce the social back into the learning equation, while preserving some of the advantages in personalization that e-learning and flexible learning have introduced.

At a more fundamental level, models of learning based on social software can facilitate the shift from what Brown and Duguid (2000) call *learning about* to *learning to be*, or to give a more Deleuzian connotation, to *learning as becoming*. *Learning about* implies a passive consumption of knowledge in the form of facts. *Learning to be* implies the application of knowledge in the development of skills that allows us to fulfill a particular (professional or non-professional) role in society. But to highlight the fact that being is not static, I'm using *learning as becoming* to signify an ongoing process. Learning, as constant becoming, is the work of nomads, to use another Deleuzian image explained below by Semetsky (2004):

Nomads must continuously readapt themselves to the open-ended world in which even the line of horizon may be affected by the changing conditions of wind, shifting sands or storms so that no single rule of *knowing that* [*learning about*] would ever assist nomads in their navigations, perhaps only *knowing how* [*learning to be, or learning as becoming*] would (Semetsky 2004:447, italics in original; my additions in brackets).

Semetsky continues by quoting Casey. 'The local operations of relay must be oriented by the discovery (and often continual rediscovery) of direction (Casey 1997:306)'. Becoming, as this continual rediscovery of direction, takes place in relation to the world and to others. What social software can do is to help us re-situate learning in an open-ended social context, providing opportunities for moving beyond the mere accessing of content (*learning about*) to the social application of knowledge in a constant process of re-orientation (*learning as becoming*). Of course, non-technologically enhanced forms of social learning (i.e., the traditional classroom) can, and should, achieve this as well. After all, it is the people who make learning happen, not the technology. But the difference between online and offline social learning lies in the types of networks that social software grants access to; networks which provide social opportunities beyond the local. At the same time, this does not mean that social software 'virtualizes' the application of knowledge (makes it somewhat less real) by situating it in cyberspace, beyond the local. In fact, it is the opportunities that social software affords for transferring knowledge between online and

offline realms of reality, between the local and the global, that make *learning as becoming* possible.

## The tensions between social software and everyday social practices

Let's step back and build technology that will make sense in the everyday lives of those who use it, that will empower them to use their evolved brain in a meaningful way (boyd 2004;para. 38).

Eventually, living in a world of continuous computing will be like wearing eyeglasses: the rims are always visible, but the wearer forgets she has them on—even though they're the only things making the world clear (Roush, 2005:para.36).

We spoke to 6,000 people and found that young males are embracing new technologies much faster than women and the over-45s...(BBC News, 2005:para.7).

These quotes subtly tell the story of the tensions between new technologies (such as social software) and their application. As the first quote suggests, we want these technologies to relate to our everyday practices, to make sense in terms of our daily needs, and easily integrate into our lives. However, as the second quote predicts, it is clear that as these technologies evolve, they will increasingly provide an altered—supposedly 'enhanced'—view of our social lives, to the extent that discontinuing their use will be like removing a pair of badly needed glasses. The question then arises of the widening gap between the everyday social practices of those with access to social software and those without, the ones who can afford glasses (or are more adept at using them) and the ones who cannot. To speak of access is in many ways to speak of privilege, resource availability and—as the last quote reminds us—of the social biases (in this case, gender and age) that come into play in the development of a technology.

The traditional way to approach the intrinsic disparities in the distribution of technology has been to establish the goal of guaranteeing *universal* access to technology, so that one day everyone will be able to benefit from it in the same way. I'm generally an optimist, but I believe that this is not going to happen anytime soon, for reasons that are well beyond the scope of this article to examine. Faced with this reality, the challenge is then to frame the problem not in terms of future possibilities, but present responsibilities. In that light, I would like to suggest that the issue is not universal access, but rather the way in which those who benefit from access to the technology are able to transform those benefits into benefits for the greater society, extending the value of social software beyond the privileged social spheres that have access to it.

In other words, it is not necessary to universalize access to social software in order to make its benefits available to society as a whole. It is social software's potential for fomenting dialogue, forming solidarities, coordinating action, distributing information and increasing understanding that make it an important tool for those invested in social equality. But this doesn't mean that users of social software constitute some sort of elite group supposed to act on behalf of humanity. Looking at the world through glasses is only one of many ways to perceive the world, and even the blind can contribute new insights into reality. Thus, the challenge for social software users is to contribute to a social cause

in a way that enhances and aligns with—not disrupts or fragmentizes—other forms of activism.

Ensuring that the benefits of social software reach all circles of society will require that we focus not on the virtuality of social interactions, but on their reality. For a long time we have lived with the misconception that what we do online is virtual, and that since virtuality is a lesser form of reality (or a higher form, depending on who you ask), the consequences of our actions there have little to do with the 'real' world. But by adopting a Deleuzian view of virtuality as a Whole from which everything is actualized, we are able to interpret all phenomena, whether online or offline, as actual rather than virtual (c.f. Horwitz, 2003). This is a process I explore in my ongoing work on the *pedagogy of nearness* (c.f. Meijas 2004, 2005), a philosophy of learning that seeks to simultaneously reduce the irrelevancy of the Near (the devaluation of our immediate surroundings) and the transcendence of the Far (the view that 'virtual' space and time is unreal). In other words, *Nearness*, in the sense I am using it, does not refer to spatial and temporal distance, but to immanence: the desire for connection and understanding, the nomad's *learning as becoming*.

### **Social software and new pedagogies: An (upcoming) case study**

I am interested in exploring how the desire for Nearness can be actualized through social software. Thus, I have put together a course that I am teaching this Fall (2005) on Social Software Affordances (See Useful Links for course syllabus). I will end this article by briefly discussing the structural aspects of the course in relation to some of the issues raised so far.

The goal of the course is to explore, through hands-on experimentation, how various social software tools can be used in conjunction with one another to facilitate learning. The class basically functions as a dynamic research community, iteratively collecting information, sharing it with peers, organizing it, and analyzing it individually and collectively. A distributed classification system is used to collect and organize information, RSS feeds are used to share that information with one another, blogs are used to analyze and comment on research, and the class as a whole edits a wiki that synthesizes all the work. Together, the class is addressing questions such as: What is 'social' about social software? How is the notion of community being redefined by social software? How is social agency shared between humans and code in social software? What are the social repercussions of unequal access to social software?

Additionally, the class is also tackling the question of whether social software can be an effective tool for individual and social change. Each learner is undertaking an 'issue entrepreneurship' assignment (c.f. Agre, 2004) which involves identifying a social cause they are interested in and using social software tools to attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the cause at three different levels: personal, local, and global. Learners use their individual blogs to post updates on their progress, inviting comments from their peers. They are not graded on whether they succeed or fail in making a meaningful contribution, as long as they document their experience and can discuss how social software contributed to their success or failure. My hope is that through this assignment and the rest of the class, we inculcate in each other a responsibility for converting the benefits of social software into benefits for a larger part of society.

I don't see how we can call it 'social' software otherwise.

## Useful Links

Social Software Affordances course [syllabus](http://ssa05.blogspot.com/2005/08/course-syllabus.html)  
<http://ssa05.blogspot.com/2005/08/course-syllabus.html>

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