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Reflecting on Strategies for a New Learning Culture: Can we do it?

Dianne Conrad

Daniel Pink's 2005 publication, *A whole new mind: Moving from the information age to the conceptual age,* identified abundance, Asia, and automation as the three factors driving a societal evolution from an information base to a conceptual base. Within the realm of education, our brave new Web 2.0 world is characterized by technological advancement and the blurring of boundaries between formalized learning and the informality of popular culture. Students are as likely to learn from blogs and wikis as they are from their assigned textbooks, as likely to use their "clicker" to indicate understanding as they are to raise their hands. This reflection takes as its inspiration the nature of the digitally-savvy 21st century learners who await us. Building on Pink's presentation of six aptitudes deemed essential for future commercial success, the writer contemplates here strategies for a new learning culture that will be a hallmark of educational success.

The arrival of Web 2.0 has been well heralded (Szucs & Bo, 2007). The recognition of Web 2.0 as a "changed" e-learning society marks an insightful measure of the distance our field has traveled. From Peters' (1993) industrial model and Moore's (1989) transactional distance model, the emergence of sophisticated ICT cultures prevailed upon distance education practitioners and scholars to embrace notions of community and communities of practice (Swan & Shih, 2005; Wenger, 1998). With their model that demonstrated the inter-relationship of social, cognitive, and instructional presences, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999) captured a new sense of complexity that diminished prior emphases on technology and didacticism and gave rise to the importance of constructivism as an underpinning online pedagogical approach.

Our 21st century's e-learning conversation now involves issues of social networking, reflection, socialization, knowledge transfer, and simulation (Calvani, Bonaiuti, Fini, Raniera, 2007). Our new tools for working in these types of learning environments include blogs, wikis, podcasts, and PLEs (personal learning environments). Outside learning's purview, social networking sites such as YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook extend learners' ability to communicate electronically and visually by distance (Nilsson & Svensson, 2007). The linearity suggested by Moore's (1989) typology outlining three types of interaction and even

the expansion of those initial three categories of interaction into 16 categories by Anderson and Garrison (2002) may already appear quite naïve to many of today's online learners.

New Paradigms, New Cultures: "A whole new mind"

Many of today's most intriguing visions of education's future are created for us by techno-visionary-futurists who make their living in business, technology, or communications. We invite them to keynote our conferences because they fluently capture—without the benefit of experiencing e-learning as teachers—what we as educators are either thinking about or experiencing (Arina, 2007). In this vein, Marc Prensky, consultant, game designer and classical musician, recently put forth in a short but crystal-clear column three key concepts that should define e-learning's response to Pink's vision of our evolving society: community, passion, and creativity (2007). Prensky throws out, as did Freire (1972), the "banking" concept of education, which he describes as "stuffing the textbook into their heads" (p. 64). In doing so, he calls for a new learning culture whose characteristics will permit the expression of community, passion, and creativity through new forms of self-presentation and identity. The remainder of this piece will relate the evolving issue of self-presentation and identity to Prensky's vision of a new learning culture, using Pink's prescient notion of a "whole new mind" (2005).

Identity and self-presentation online. E-learning has long been connected to issues of identity (Merchant, 2006). Using conceptual rudiments from Vygotsky (1978) and Goffman (1959), theorists have determined that online learners care about how they present themselves to others; that they respond to social and external stimuli in creating a sense of self; and that they can and will construct multiple selves, according to circumstance. But as Merchant points out, "new tools for communication provide a context for new kinds of identity performance, or as some commentators argue, have helped to create a new kind of person" (2006, p. 235). It is clear that the "new kind of person" uses Web 2.0-style communication and social networking tools more comfortably and fluidly than previous generations of users (Lenhart & Madden, 2007); in educational environments, the new kind of person demands the opportunity for self-presentation (Bean, 2007). In other words, learners who are fluent residents of YouTube and Second Life are seeking opportunities to be heard. They seek not only to integrate their sense of self into their learning but also to demonstrate themselves to their co-learners. "To them, facts, explanations, tools, and reasoning are worth learning only insofar as they support [their] own, personal goals" (Prensky, 2007, p. 64).

Defining the new mind. Pink outlines six essential aptitudes that will be essential for success in Prensky's future—a future that he labels conceptual as opposed to informational and that he perceives as more artistic and holistic—more right-brained than left-brained. The description of each item in his typology, below, outlines e-learning strategies and approaches that would spark Prensky's sense of community, passion, and creativity in learning.

Design *(not just function).* The instructivist model of education encouraged a functional design whose primary purpose was the transmission of information from source to recipient. Logic, reasoning, sequence, and pattern figured into ensuring that information was clearly articulated in its journey to learners. From needs analysis through to review and revision, design steps highlighted rational, orderly flow - usually focused on projected behavioral outcomes (Dick & Carey, 2001). Pink stipulates an elaborated sense of design that both complements constructivist approaches to learning and opens the door for Prensky's vision of more creative and passionate learning environments.

Story *(not just argument).* The type of digital story-telling that has become possible using hypertext and new media transcends, in quality and opportunity, the expression of facts strung together to make an argument or relate incidents. Modern access to digital software enables anyone to feature himself or herself as the central figure in self-published multi-media ventures. Not only teenagers and youth but also increasing numbers of adults are now accessing sites such as MySpace and Facebook to tell their "stories." The art of story-telling, evolving into newly personalized forms, can host the opportunity for self-demonstration sought by Web 2.0 learners.

Symphony *(not just focus).* "Symphony," or synthesis, one of Bloom's original higher level thinking skills, is especially valued in a knowledge economy. More so than ever, knowledge is power and the amount of knowledge available to us now is vast. Fittingly, Krathwol (2002), in sliding Bloom's concept of synthesis into "creativity" in his revision of the famous taxonomy, highlighted that the presentation of facts is much less useful than harmonizing those facts into a dynamic new whole. Self-presentation both provides a stage for, and demands the presence of, exciting new entities. Symbiotically, the push for e-learners to establish strong online identities benefits from corresponding new appreciations of design and story.

Empathy *(not just logic).* The practice of constructivism opens the door for individuals' learning histories to enter the fabric of class discussion. In so doing, learners feel justified in infusing their contributions with empathy as well as other emotions. The affective domain, accepted as one of three learning domains into which we classify learners' actions and

responses, provides an especially powerful place from which online learners can not only draw experientially but also "nest" emotionally, forming a building block for the sense of community that Prensky envisions.

Play *(not just seriousness).* "Wellness in the workplace" initiatives reflect society's growing awareness of the importance of holistic health. More and more top-rated businesses offer activities and resources to foster play and happiness among employees. While a sense of play could erupt in a traditional classroom over a remark or a gesture, its presence in e-learning classrooms must be more deliberately initiated. Pink makes the point that a sense of play is essential for creatively responding to modern society; Prensky, in advocating for instilling passion into learning, sees play as a part of a challenging, personalizing dynamic that encourages sharing, community, and working in groups.

Meaning *(not just accumulation).* As we accumulated information through the Information Age, so we make meaning with that information in the Conceptual Age. The identity that learners put forth to their e-learning colleagues represents, to some degree, their attempts to create meaning from their own perceptions of self (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Meaning-making is also fundamental to learners' explorations in the affective domain as they take risks to connect on more personal levels with learning colleagues. While Pink sees the search for meaning as a hallmark of conceptual thinking, Prensky sees the need for meaning as a foundation of a changing paradigm.

Conclusion

Have we seen the educational future? Futurist thinkers such as Pink and Prensky would conclude, together with corporate movers and shakers such as Microsoft's Martin Bean, that this is indeed so. Moreover, they would agree that for e-learning to maintain a meaningful presence among the next generation of digital learners, a holistic embrace of passion, creativity, and community must guide our use and appreciation of technology. Are we poised for an era of "serendipitous interaction" (Nilsson & Svensson, 2007)? Let's hope so.

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Dianne Conrad is the Director, Centre for Learning Accreditation, Athabasca University. E-mail: diannec@athabascau.ca

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