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SI 532 - Assignment 2
March 12, 2007

OCW Communication Sandbox

Abstract

OpenCourseWare (OCW) sites provide a wealth of knowledge by offering free, searchable access to course materials from educational institutions like MIT. These sites present a one-way information flow that can be useful for faculty, students and self-learners from around the world. One critique of OCW sites lies in this unidirectional information highway, where learners see universities as the “factory” from which educational materials flow and are subsequently “consumed”. John Seely Brown envisions a shift in the educational framework—he suggests that universities are moving away from building stocks of knowledge towards encouraging participation in flows on knowledge.¹ It is in support of this movement that we propose to add a communicative functionality to OCW sites. We will call these functionalities the “virtual seminar” and the “virtual office hours”. We see this tool as a way for OCW users to discuss, suggest, critique, incorporate, question, debate, connect, review, and share various ideas about the respective OCW course content. We envision this tool to provide users a forum to critically analyze ideas and thoughts in an open setting. In this way, we aim to increase the usefulness and democratic ideals of an open educational framework—we can make OCW more interactive, and not just a knowledge dump. We can begin to create meaningful connections between interested parties.

Theory analysis

Education plays a critical role in the sustainability of democratic governance; without an educated and informed public, democratic discourse becomes untenable. With the opportunities the Internet affords, it is now conceivable to make education resources freely available globally, advancing education and empowering people in the process.

The interactivity of the virtual seminar would allow for a greater global distribution in the discussion of ideas and interests. People who would not ordinarily come into contact would have a space to share their own ideas on educational material. This in turn could potentially facilitate the spread of a more widely shared appreciation for the empowerment that open discussion of

¹ "Learning Reconceived for the Networked Age," presentation at the iSchools iConference, October 15, 2006.

ideas can bring to people more generally, enhancing the features that characterize democratic practice. We can use various theorists to analyze how this tool might support a more interactive, democratic practice of furthering education through the use of OCW.

Before examining in greater detail the theoretical implications behind these tools, we would like to address an important concern raised by Schudson. Schudson would argue that for this tool to be effective, social actors need to possess the cultural capability to engage the material (i.e. computer access). For the purposes of this paper, we will assume that users do have computer access, although in reality we are aware that this condition does not exist universally.

A distinct advantage of online communications systems is the ability to rally around a specific issue or event. Bimber refers to these as “issue-based technologies”. Bimber also notes that a main aspect of information intensiveness is the capacities of new technology to provide for citizens to communicate directly with one another.²

Another key aspect of pluralism (as raised by Bimber), and one that directly relates to the ideas behind the communications tool on an OCW site is the idea that “citizens must recognize mutual interest in one another” (i.e. specific courses).³ With the evolution of the Internet and the information it provides, citizens have more opportunities to discover those with similar interests. Once these interests are recognized, communication tools must make it possible for interested parties to connect with each other. The OCW communications tool would help facilitate these connections in an information-rich setting.

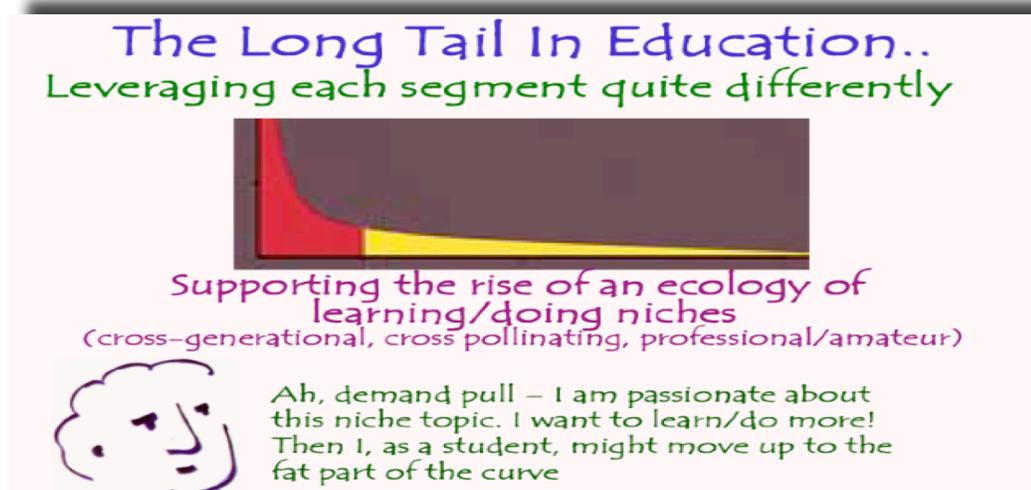
The granularity inherent in these issue-based groupings sparks a public into being. Following along the lines of Dewey, online OCW material allows for the creation of publics

² Bimber, Bruce. *Information and American Democracy*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003. Page 91.

³ Bimber, at 92.

around specific educational material. Such a wide range of people uses OCW across the world that it can be seen as a place of congregation and a point of entry for issue/idea-based interests.

Lippman would argue that the global public, although they could congregate around these ideas in an OCW environment, would not know enough to be able to participate effectively in discussion of the material. These OCW sites are born out of educational institutions; the expertise required to access the knowledge and material on any significant level is far beyond the reach of the public. Current theorists argue this is not necessarily the case. John Seely Brown envisions OCW systems as a long tail for education. People have the ability to work their way up the educational ladder. Starting with a niche interest, people can gradually develop a level of expertise that would allow for more informed interaction among people, ideas, and discourse, creating a cross-pollination effect among both professionals and interested amateurs.



One concern does arise out of this new model. With all ideas, there will be disagreement. With disagreement, the temptation arises to suppress conflicting or unflattering ideas. Chantal Mouffe cautions, “modern democracy’s specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order.”⁴ The institutions that

⁴ Mouffe, Chantal. “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66:3, 1999: 745-758

create this new tool must ensure that agonistic discourse be allowed to flourish. Mouffe views this agonistic conception of deliberation as a much more realistic approach to democratic governance, and wisely notes that any institution (including the online interactive educational repositories that we propose) must avoid humanity's natural tendency to censor ideas that do not align well with our own.

What will it look like?

We've identified a two-fold objective in creating a communication tool that can aid in the understanding of knowledge presented in OCW sites. First, we can create an open forum for discussion among interested users. We'll call this tool the "virtual seminar." Second, we can create a tool that links interested users with the producers of knowledge. We'll call this tool the "virtual office hours." These tools, taken together, might be called an "OCW communication sandbox."

We envision this space to be a website that is separate from the OCW course site itself. However, OCW users will be able to enter the space by clicking on a link within the respective course page (fig. 1). This link could be displayed at the bottom of the left navigation toolbar. Each course page will have a corresponding "sandbox" page. When users are redirected to the sandbox page, they can choose to enter "virtual seminar" or "virtual office hours" (fig. 2).

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Readings

This section contains documents that could not be made accessible to screen reader software. A "#" symbol is used to denote such documents.

This section contains the reading assignments for the course. Study questions are also presented. Students are encouraged to think about these questions as, and after, they read.

Textbooks

Friedman, Milton. *Capitalism and Freedom*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002. ISBN: 0226264211.
 Nozick, Robert. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006. ISBN: 0465051006.
 Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. ISBN: 0674000781.

Readings by Session

LEC #	TOPICS	READINGS
1	Problems of Justice in a Democratic Society	
I. Utilitarianism		
		Bentham, Jeremy. <i>Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> . New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996, chapters 1, 4, 13, and 17 (sec. 1). ISBN: 0198205163. <i>Study Questions</i> - What is Bentham's "principle of utility" or "greatest happiness principle"?

Fig. 1

Communication Sandbox for Justice, Spring 2006 Virtual seminar
Virtual office hours

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Photograph of scales casting a shadow. (Image courtesy of Daniel Bernini.)

Highlights of this Course
This course features all of its lecture notes and detailed descriptions of its assignments. A reading list and study questions are also available in the [readings](#) section.

Course Description

Staff
Instructor:
Prof. Joshua Cohen

Course Meeting Times
Saturdays
Two sessions / week
1.5 hour / session

Recitations:
One session / week
1.5 hour / session

Level
Undergraduate

Feedback
Send feedback about OCW or this course.

Enter Virtual Seminar

Enter Virtual Office Hours

Return to MIT

Fig. 2

The “virtual seminar” space makes an obvious analogy to the real world classroom seminar, where students often engage in conversation with each other as much as or more than they engage in direct conversation with the instructor. Within this “virtual seminar,” individuals

can discuss ideas related to the OCW course, pose questions to other learners, provide critiques of arguments, suggest other sources of learning, and comment on presentation style (fig. 3). Users can post about new developments or discoveries in the area of study. Individuals who wish to leave specific comments, critiques or suggestions concerning a particular class would be able to link their comments to that class by choosing it from a list within a pull-down menu. In this way other users would be able to immediately refer to the area of analysis.



Fig. 3

Just as in a real-life seminar, sandbox participants would be able to promote related events, lectures, or activities. We already see event-creation and announcement tools like this built into social networking systems like Facebook and Upcoming.org and within content-management systems like Drupal and course-management systems like CTools.

The “virtual seminar” might even be able to further mirror real-life seminar format by providing a tool for live discussion. If there is a particularly hot topic or issue, users might be

given the option of checking a tick-box next to it, which might say something like “schedule a live discussion.” When enough users have checked the box, a live chat event may be automatically generated, providing a few times when the site would host a live session between interested members. With proper permission, these live chat sessions might be recorded for later documentation on the site.

We see that the ease of access to other interested learners helps break down barriers to learning and boosts democratic ideals in the educational system. To further promote an informed public, we propose that the sandbox tools incorporate a means to communicate with the producers of OCW sites. This type of “virtual office hours” would allow learners with a limited but useful connection to the OCW course instruction team (fig. 4). As a general rule, we want to limit the levels of direct contact that outside learners have with OCW educators. It has been clearly articulated that OCW programs are not distance learning initiatives and that use of OCW course materials does not assume any right to interaction with the faculty who originally taught the course. However, as we push for changes in the educational framework—moving away from the knowledge dump and adopting an interactive, participatory pedagogy, we need to begin to incorporate reciprocal communication.

Virtual office hours**Virtual Office Hours**

**Ask the instruction
team a question**

Who's moderating?

Fig. 4

This reciprocal communication with interested learners need not be overly burdensome on the university faculty. We envision that within the “virtual office hours” webpage, users would be able to send questions that would go to a member of the instruction team. The norms of other forum-like sites would be enforced here—users would be encouraged to fully explore the “virtual seminar” page in order to try to find the answer there first. The contact person responsible for providing answers to incoming questions need not be the original creator and could be handled in a distributed manner—it might rotate between various graduate students or GSIs who have experience with the course material.

We realize that there are numerous concerns with running a system like the course communication sandbox: Should users be expected to create an account in order to communicate with other users? What are the implications with online credibility if an anonymous system is used? Will there be a moderator for the sites, or will users patrol them? What are the levels of

commitment and expectations of the creators of the course materials? What are the benefits and drawbacks to moving the sandbox off of the actual OCW site? Will users view this as a “real” avenue of engagement between and among ideas?

In any case, we feel it is important to further develop this two-fold communication objective—we should provide users access to each other and provide users some form of access to knowledge creators. This type of system will help promote the sharing of information and work towards a more informed public. In turn, an informed public can best sustain democratic discourse.