

Moodle and Social Constructionism: Looking for the Individual in the Community

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Last month I went to San Francisco to attend a Moodlemoot, a conference for people who use Moodle. Moodle is a virtual learning environment (VLE) used by many high schools, colleges and universities for teaching classes online. It is open source software created, managed, and licensed much like its famous cousin Linux. Moodle is led by Martin Dougiamas who launched the project as part of his doctoral dissertation at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia. Dougiamas kicked off the conference with a keynote address a bit more erudite than one might expect for a technically-oriented group. As Dougiamas explained, Moodle is a VLE that is meant to facilitate “social constructionist” teaching and learning within internet-based communities of reflective inquiry.

Like many instructors who cut their teaching teeth in the classroom without the benefit of formal learning theory, I was skeptical of this enterprise. I wasn't sure I wanted a philosophy of education built into the software I used in my class. After all, what if I subscribed to some other teaching philosophy? Wouldn't a more agnostic technology be more consonant with a professor's need for ideological freedom? Mine are common sentiments, and they explain why some harbor reservations about the Moodle software. But Dougiamas' keynote, and a later keynote by John Seely Brown, addressed many of those concerns. Brown, the self-labeled “chief of confusion,” has been promoting the virtues of so-called participatory learning on the lecture circuit and in his writings for a number of years now,

so he was a good fit for the Moodle moot.[\[1\]](#) ([#1](#))

Brown's address began with the observation that there are many more people who should be going to college than there are universities to attend, and while we might want to create more universities, the demand for learning will exceed supply for years--if not decades--to come. Given this gap, Brown suggests that we rethink learning so that it is more democratic and more open. In so doing we increase opportunities for learning and the number of people who partake in it. But how to accomplish this? Brown asks us to re-imagine learning and to consider whether we can cater to the way people actually learn rather than the way learning is popularly conceived. In the process we should re-examine the traditional student/professor relationship.

To lead us in this direction, Brown shows the audience a slide caricaturing a Cartesian view of learning, featuring a lonely philosopher, chin in hand, muttering "I think therefore I am." Although Brown is careful to present the image as a caricature, he claims it is a popular representation of how we think knowledge is created--either it is poured into our heads by a teacher, or thought up on our own through deductive ruminations. In Brown's view it is time to promote a counter-ideal, captured in a subsequent slide where, instead of a lonely philosopher, he shows a couple of people talking to each other with a caption that reads "We participate, therefore we are."

In making this contrast, Brown suggests that modern learners and digital learners learn through conversation with others. Instead of thinking and developing an intellectual identity in isolation, Brown believes that "through participation with others in the world we come into being." In short, knowledge is gained through social settings. For Brown, this is corroborated by the finding that students are much more likely to succeed in college when they join study groups.

In promoting this “modern” way of learning, Brown also suggests that we should re-conceive how we learn a profession. In Brown’s view, it is less “learning about” a body of knowledge and much more a process of “learning to be” a doctor or a lawyer or whatever else a student is trying to become. Learning conceived in this way becomes an activity which is facilitated by means other than didactic lecture. Brown’s views resonate with those who suggest that we put away the “sage on the stage” and embrace “the guide on the side.” But given that Brown’s keynote takes place on a stage, in reality he’s envisioning something a bit more nuanced, embodied in the idea of learning through apprenticeship. In language that resonates very strongly with constructionism, Brown suggests that we learn especially well not only when we do it in collaboration with others (as apprentices do), but when we think of learning as an opportunity to produce and share knowledge rather than to merely consume.

Brown’s vision has particular relevance for Moodle because it isn’t just a piece of software used for teaching and learning, it’s also a community of educators and software developers who have incorporated the culture of the guild and apprenticeship into their work processes. Like other open source communities, Moodle developers learn by tinkering with the software, asking technical questions in discussion groups, and at the more advanced stages, by producing and sharing code with the community. Although software developers may seem like reclusive types who shirk from social spaces, in reality one needs to spend time participating in listserv discussions and (as Dougiamas put it during the opening address) asking questions of others to be a good developer and to have good standing in an open source community.

Faculty members usually think of Moodle merely as a VLE. But for people who are actively involved in the Moodle community, it is seen in a more noble light and the keynotes served to confirm these feelings in the

audience. These sentiments are echoed by Moodle users at large. For example, UCLA, perhaps the biggest American school to partner with Moodle, has gone so far as to rename their deployment a CCLE (Common Collaborative Learning Environment). In one recent Educause publication, UCLA administrators involved in the initiative defined it as follows: "What is the CCLE? The name is carefully chosen, and its words tell you exactly what it is, from two sides (a) an online system, and (b) as a way of working....[it is] tempting to look at it as an LMS, but it is meant to be much more. [It's a] platform to facilitate collaboration of any kind, in an institution of learning....[and it's a] a way of working that requires both collaboration and learning from all who join in." [\[2\]](#) (#2)

Conceived this way, it is both the Moodle technology and the Moodle community, with all their associated beliefs and practices, that foster the constructionist and highly collaborative learning Dougiamas explores in his doctoral work and that Brown celebrates on stage. At the San Francisco Moodle moot, the convergence of technologies, communities and keynote addresses stopped just short of epiphany. In the wake of the Moodle moot, I left feeling evangelized. After listening to Brown, one gets the feeling that we are experiencing--or have already gone through--some epistemic change where traditions of scholarship based on discipline and lonely hard work in isolated garrets have given way to a more playful, fun, and collaborative form of learning and work. Listening to Brown one might be inclined to think that the singularity has arrived, that the new technologies have allowed us to transcend the human condition, and that a new triumphal communitarian beehive has arrived where we can Twitter and chat and upload each other into an era of unprecedented human clarity and enlightenment.

Given my own communitarian leanings, I'm sympathetic to the message. But I think it does need to be qualified for two reasons.

First, as Dougiamas noted, he is not yet satisfied with what he has accomplished. If Moodle encourages social constructionist learning, it by no means guarantees it. For example, I'm teaching in Moodle this semester and have been able to foster a good deal of social interaction among the class. But it certainly doesn't approach the levels of collaborative activity I've seen in the Moodle development communities. This is probably due in part to my own limitations as a teacher.^[3] (#3) But what is clear is that the collaborative learning ecology that surrounds the development of Moodle is only partially embedded in the software itself. As a faculty member at a conference recently said to me, open-source software communities may create software that is as good or better than software developed in more hierarchical and closed development ecologies, but that doesn't mean these open and collaborative learning cultures necessarily induce similar practices in the teachers and students who use it.^[4] (#5) To be sure, many elements of social constructionism can be found in the Moodle software, but we still have a ways to go before it becomes pervasive.

My second reservation concerns the need to temper communitarian sympathies with individualism. I'm a little surprised that I'm saying this because my politics tend more leftward than most, but I wonder whether in the rush to celebrate the virtues of openness and the fun of group learning, we're forgetting the virtues inherent in learning in private, in reclusive Walden-like settings far removed from the daily give and take of the idea market.

Brown is hardly the first to note a change in learning habits (although he's certainly a central figure in this conversation). Indeed, his observations resonate with the late Walter Ong, who suggested that the technologies of modern oral communication like television and radio resurrected forms of group thinking that had been displaced by text-based cultures. For Ong, text-based or literate cultures are characterized by individuated and more

quiescent thinking. But Brown goes one step further in celebrating the transformation from text-based cultures to post-literary cultures. Like Brown, I understand that things are changing, but I see these transformations as having a more ambiguous significance. If there is much to hope for in constructionist learning and in growing up digital, one shouldn't forget that much learning and discovery has been come from working alone.

I write this piece in the middle of the afternoon on July 4th in a quiet university office that isn't anywhere near the bustle of a barbecue, a pool, or a parade. I learned a lot at the Moodlemoot and I need the community and the technology to connect and learn and share with others. But to clarify what I've learned and to give it order and coherence, I also need time alone in a dark, cool and, above all, quiet office. Nor am I the only person at the university who subscribes to this view.

For many scholars, learning is a more dialectical process that shifts from highly individual activities to group activities and back again. In "Growing Up Digital," Brown suggests that this isn't true for most doctoral students.^[5] (#4) But if Brown may accurately describe the social character of some disciplines, he's missing large groups of scholars. In "learning to be" a social or behavioral scientist or a humanist, one needs to learn to like spending a couple of years (if not a couple of decades) holed up alone in a library carrel or in the midst of musty archives. Digital learners might want to dismiss these solitary and reflective traditions, but they are the way a lot of important scholarship has been produced and will continue to be produced for years to come. If Moodle serves to forward social constructionist pedagogical practices, I hope that a good deployment can also make some accommodations for the more solitary type of learning. It's fine to coordinate and connect autonomous scholars on campus and to celebrate collaboration and communitarianism. But one shouldn't lose sight of the virtues inherent in individualism and more solitary forms of scholarship. Nor

should these more individualistic ideals necessarily be displaced. As Dougiamas says, we still have a ways to go in embedding social constructivist ends within Moodle. So Moodle still has some things to do. But as it moves forward in its quest to build participatory learning communities I hope it also attends to the values inherent in individualism.

NOTES

[1] See Brown's writings at (<http://www.johnseelybrown.com/speeches.html#digitalage>)
<http://www.johnseelybrown.com/speeches.html#digitalage>
(<http://www.johnseelybrown.com/speeches.html#digitalage>).

[2] S. Kumar, Annelie Rugg, and Jim Williamson, "Discovering a New Way of Working: Implementing a Collaborative Online System at UCLA (presentation, March 31, 2008), <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/WRC08053.pdf> (<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/WRC08053.pdf>).

[3] Moodle has build in survey tools that can help instructors gauge the level of interactivity in their course. For a peek at the survey and the results of my course visit http://docs.google.com/Doc?id=dd7wwk3b_123cfhs9gds
(http://docs.google.com/Doc?id=dd7wwk3b_123cfhs9gds).

[4] See (<http://ttix.org/blog/open-source-lms-advocacy-2/>) <http://ttix.org/blog/open-source-lms-advocacy-2/> (<http://ttix.org/blog/open-source-lms-advocacy-2/>).

[5] John Seely Brown, "Growing Up Digital: How the Web Changes Work, Education and the Ways People Learn," *Change* May/June 2000: 15,
http://www.johnseelybrown.com/Growing_up_digital.pdf
(http://www.johnseelybrown.com/Growing_up_digital.pdf).
