Finding Voices: Authentic learning online in the field of public communication and citizenship

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A creative re-acculturation of teachers and students is occurring in virtual classrooms as traditional learning resources, pedagogy, and technology intersect in unexpected ways. This paper reports on a case of authentic, experiential, and constructivist learning developed for tertiary public relations students. A subject titled 'Public Communication and Citizenship' (PCC) at Deakin University in Australia asked students to examine the problematic and contentious areas of self-interest, persuasion, power, and ethics in contemporary contexts of mass media and globalisation. Feedback from those students suggests that, in this case, online teaching strategies successfully integrated with the total learning environment to achieve higher-order learning. PCC is one example of PR pedagogy combining theory and technology to move beyond 'skilling for jobs'.

Introduction

Development of a rich educational environment that fosters growth and extension of knowledge, and creates meaningful student learning, is a key teaching objective. Many teachers do this in conventional face-to-face learning situations. In a face-to-face classroom teachers may sense the group connectivity and energy that lead to spontaneous evaluations of shared meaning. This sensing may result a feeling of accomplishment in teaching. In the online classroom, teachers cannot see, hear, or sense students in familiar ways. An absence of these sensory elements can produce perceptions of sterility. Students and educators alike may express skeptical responses about the medium's inherent capacity to create meaningful learning. Educational theories like social constructivism, cognition, collaborative learning, and authentic learning have evolved within the context of traditional face-to-face teaching environments. But these theories can also help to make sense of online teaching and learning. They can provide the critical tools required to design learning environments that reflect the values and predilections of students and teachers.

This paper looks at divergent ways the online environment makes students think analytically and critically in experiential and group learning situations. Additionally, it examines how some unique attributes of the online environment can help different student groups, like international and off-campus students, achieve more active participation in the learning experience. In particular, it examines the redefined role of the teacher in facilitating an effective and egalitarian online classroom. The paper presents teaching strategies for professional communication educators to advance students' learning in ways that are both critical and analytical, as well develop applied skills relevant to graduates and transferable to the wider context.

The OTLF objectives

Deakin University's Online Teaching and Learning Fellowship (OTLF) is an initiative to support academics interested in advancing online teaching and learning strategies within a peer-based, cross-faculty programme. The OTLF encourages recipients to 'take a risk' and to do things differently online, with the view that, whether 'successful' or not, ultimately there is something to discover. In 2003, I was one of nine Fellows provided with resources to develop pedagogical approaches that explored conventional and novel online learning.

In 2001 I had played a key role in developing online material for 'Public Relations Writing and Tactics' (PRWT), a first-year course offered

by Deakin using WBT Systems' learning management software TopClass LMS Version 4.1. That software features a central catalogue where information is stored, and for PRWT it housed electronic print resources, quizzes, video, audio, and graphics. In 2003, the OTLF gave the opportunity to build on that experience and explore new software, Web CT Vista. In particular I wanted to look at ways teachers mediated between the electronic learning environment and students. The subject chosen to explore that role was Deakin's newest public relations unit, 'Public Communication and Citizenship' (PCC).

As a case study, PCC provides opportunity to assess online role-play for its affects on student learning and development of group leadership and coordination. It also offers some surprising results from informal online discussion, and an opportunity to track the discussion's effect on students' preparedness to engage in substantive theoretical discussion. The PCC experience also suggests that 'peer review' and publishing online have a discernable effect on students' use of academic protocols within their formal assignments.

Figure 1: The WebCT interface developed for Public Communication and Citizenship.
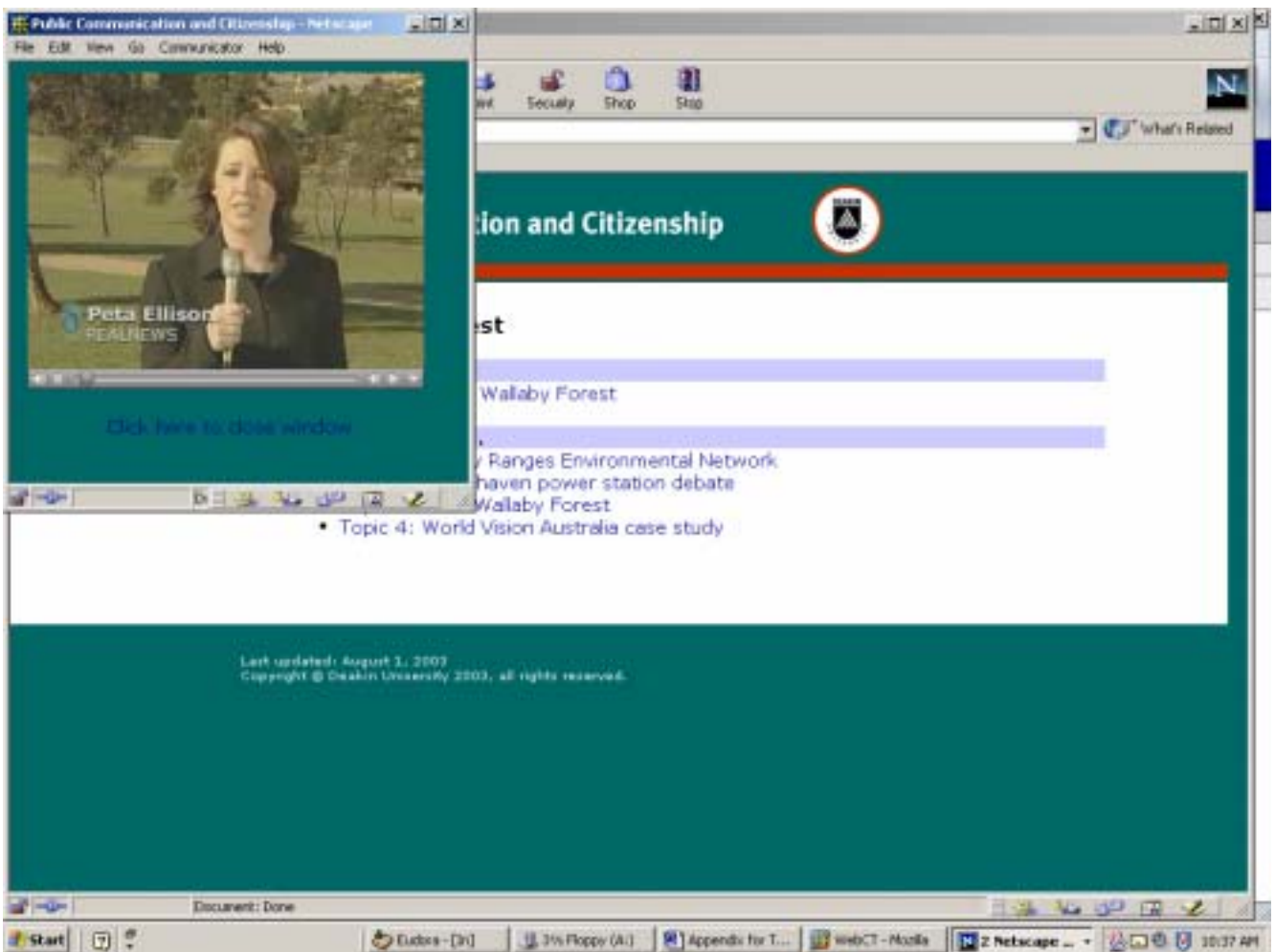
Contemporary learning environments

Traditional learning environments are widely understood by both teachers and students. Online learning environments are less known and understood. Variables like the extent of the students' online engagement or the capability of the software programme may impact on student learning in new ways. Moreover, divergent and individualistic applications of online teaching may produce and can lead to uneven understandings, interest, and expectations of online teaching. Seagrave and Holt (2003), discuss the use of technologies in contemporary teaching environments and the importance of a holistic and proactive approach to online educational design.

> Hence the design challenge for e-learning transcends the narrowly conceived online-only dimensions of units and courses, to a broader range of considerations relating to conceiving the rationale for, and determining the form and features of, the total learning environment. This contemporary view of 'environment' represents a blending of physical and virtual facilities, services and resources. (Seagrave & Holt, 2003, p. 9)

For Wilson and Stacey (2004) the development of e-learning for the total learning environment can take many modes and present learning resources, interaction and various teaching and learning strategies in distinct forms. At Deakin, public relations e-learning has had various forms. For example, in PRWT students were directed to learning resources and activities in a pre-defined linear or sequence. This method anticipates learners' educational needs and, in a pre-emptive style, proffers activities and resources like text, audio and video that complement and enhance a particular focus of study. The rationale is that stepping the learner through a sequence of tasks will enrich at the most appropriate time and create meaningful learning. Learning is situated in a rigid framework and perceived as non-negotiable. This approach assumes the teacher has done all the hard preparation work but may be used to justify a minimal and passive teacher role.

By comparison, in the teaching of PCC students were less directed and followed a more negotiated path. While the assessment and goals were fixed, students were given choices of how to get there. They could work alone or in groups using a 'resources based' approach that presents text, audio and video separately and asks the student to 'make sense' of the experience. This approach is goal oriented but also relies on active teacher mediation and signification to guide the student to the resources at the appropriate time to achieve successful teaching and learning. How this learning occurs may differ between student groups and require the teacher to monitor, adjust and 'top up'. For example, learning may be dependent on the particular student group's receptivity or the usual flow of study interrupted by social or political developments. The role of the active teacher is critical to mediate and help the learning experience 'make sense' for students.

PCC's online teaching and learning environment aimed to create an atmosphere of group respect and trust. To facilitate this, the unit planning design team created structural and cultural features to anchor students' use and perceptions of learning online. Structurally, the first assessment task was designed with two options, both linked to students' active participation in the online classroom. Culturally, the online classroom became embedded in study routines. This was achieved by weekly postings of e-readings and study prompts to encourage frequent student access. The aim was to enrich students' sense that this was an intrinsic learning element for the study unit.

Public Communication & Citizenship

PCC's aims have a strong relationship to new developments in communication and, in particular, to global information technology networks. The unit examines new approaches to public relations and journalism and their major

cultural, political, and ethical implications, specifically their links with citizenship, responsibility, and accountability. It concentrates on public communication activity in activism, including cyber-activism, NGOs and not-for-profit areas. Case studies of consultation with local and regional communities are used to analyse how organisations use formal and informal communication to achieve social, cultural, and political change in a climate of increasing globalisation, corporate responsibility, accountability, and changing notions of citizenship.

The unit content examines the core elements of community consultation and corporate citizenship, assesses diverse approaches to it, and examines how traditional and 'new' media 'frame' society and construct 'knowledge' about it. The unit sets key case studies in the context of some major theories of citizenship and communication, including 'the risk society' (e.g. Beck, 1992; 1997), 'the network society' (e.g. Castells, 1997) and 'the public sphere' (e.g. Habermas, 1989; 1990). The unit's assessment encourages students to use the case studies and their theoretical foundations to broaden and deepen their understandings of social, cultural, and political change, and to examine how those changes contribute to how we understand 'truth', citizenship, empowerment. and democracy.

In particular the unit works towards student development of the following skills:

- Clear and effective public communication strategies for different organisations, including those outside the traditional domain of public relations
- Recognition of the roles and responsibilities of organisations and their stakeholders
- Critical and analytical assessment of public communication and 'texts'
- Analysis of case studies within competing theoretical frameworks.

PCC's focus on 'third sector' or non-profit activity is unusual for the public relations programme area. Many other PR units are largely taught from a business or state perspective. Perhaps because of this, tertiary PR curricula are often geared towards preparing students for work rather than developing critical skills. PCC aims to develop higher order learning and understanding, beyond skilling for jobs. This serves two purposes. First, students have a greater critical capacity and depth of cultural understanding of the complex and rapidly changing world around them. Second, these higher order skills are especially valuable to organisations in government, corporate, and community sectors that are concerned about their activities' impact on local and regional communities and on society as a whole.

Learning delivery and resources

PCC's learning delivery approach uses a rich and varied combination of educational design and delivery approaches to achieve the unit's aims and to create a further dimension to group respect and trust online. This means incorporating the philosophy of empowering learners in a less directed and more negotiated relationship. But while in concept this relationship is shaped by a shift in power, in practice it meant resourcing learners' activities. The students learn through face-to-face tutorials and lectures, a print study guide, a reader, a unit guide, and a textbook. Deakin University's online learning environment, Deakin Studies Online (DSO), contributes communication facilities, specific areas for learning resources like lecture notes, study guides, and e readings, as well as assignment details, discussion, announcements, and 'chat'. Teachers are also able to 'build' learning activities from a range of tools.

In 2003 the PCC DSO site contained:

- Lecture outlines
- e readings and e databases
- Videos linked to key case studies, video introduction to the unit, video component for the online role-play, and audio material to enhance student learning

- Online discussion areas about the theory bases and case studies linked to student assessment task using collaborative and whole group discussion as a pedagogical approach
- Online role-play that invited students to adopt a particular ideological framework within a dynamic learning exercise linked to the student assessment task.

It was anticipated that, to make this functionally separated resource based approach work, an active teacher role would be necessary to monitor students' online activity. Functions such as Web CT's student tracking facilities assisted by adding greater understanding of how individual students use the e-learning and what parts they access.

Pedagogy

Constructivism has been applied to online teaching as a useful overarching pedagogy theory (e.g. Neo Tse-Kian, 2003). According to Shapiro (2003), social constructivism is an evolved subset of the major area of constructivist thought. Its main theme is that there is no such thing as a fact, even in science. There are only socially constructed facts:

> What these radical social constructivists are stating is that even the hard sciences are socially constructed and cannot claim objectivity. In other words, the structure and knowledge of the sciences and mathematics are determined by social forces, and therefore the vaunted objectivity our culture ascribes to science and mathematics is a delusion. (Shapiro, 2003, p. 333)

Shapiro described five constructivist principles that can be applied to teaching and learning:

- Student perspectives are valued and used in an organic process to feed new learning approaches appropriate for the individual students

- Lessons should be structured to challenge students' assumptions
- There is recognition that students must attach relevance to the curriculum. As students see relevance in their daily activities, their interest in learning grows.
- Lessons should be structured around big ideas, not small bits information
- Student learning should be assessed in the context of daily classroom investigation, not as a separate event. (Shapiro, 2003, pp. 337-8)

The process described by Shapiro is organic, meaning that as dialogue between student and teacher develops, a flow of communication enables learning to be designed in ways meaningful to students' individual experiences of the world. This in turn creates the relevance that is a critical element in the constructivist approach to learning. Shapiro discussed the notion of giving students 'the big ideas' or central concepts rather than drip feeding information in 'bits'. This approach not only addresses creating understanding of the embedded concepts that influence the way we view, understand, and interpret the world, but is also a more democratic sharing of knowledge. This approach extends the social constructivist perspective that there are only 'socially constructed facts' into the realm of student learning, and acknowledges that students have the means to construct their own understanding(s). This relates to Shapiro's first principle that student perspectives should be valued and nurtured as new learning approaches.

Under the broad constructivist framework there are several other theories that add further dimension to this area of thought. The psychological theories of cognitive development can support the constructivist approach by developing the notion that a comparison of views helps build and shape understanding of issues. Murphy (1999) discussed two different approaches to understanding how we learn through shared activity, from the educational theorists Vygotsky and Piaget. Rogoff (cited in Murphy) argued that, while Piaget and Vygotsky agree that social interaction is the forum in

which understanding can occur, they disagree on the process and location where this will happen. "In Vygotsky's perspective, joint problem solving occurs between partners, whereas in Piaget's view, individuals work with independence and equality on each other's ideas" (Rogoff, cited in Murphy, 1999, p. 72). Cognitive theory can be critiqued for its assumption that knowledge exists as a definable and verifiable source, rather than a product of social construction (Bruffee, 1993, p. 156), but it still offers interesting insight into learning perspectives, particularly in terms of the dialectic process that leads to comparison and clarification of knowledge through social interaction.

Another theory that supports the constructivist approach is the notion of collaborative and whole-group learning. Bruffee (1993) described conventional assumptions about knowledge as based on a foundational or cognitive 'top down' understanding (1993, p.3). People perceive knowledge as like a commodity in a market place passed from one party to another. Collaborative learning, however, takes the 'bottom up' approach, and asserts knowledge is constructed through discussion and consensus and hence is built by the participants rather than transferred or acquired:

> Collaborative learning assumes instead that knowledge is a consensus among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers – something people construct by talking together and reaching agreement. (Bruffee, 1993, p. 3)

Within this context, Bruffee described characteristics like language that bind the group and create membership of the knowledge community. However, questions about equity and access to critical tools such as language are influenced by factors including gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic circumstances.

The notion of capacity to access membership of communities intersects with citizenship theory. Hudson and Kane (2000) pointed out the complex but enriching role that being a member of a community promotes:

> To be a member of a community is to belong to something larger than oneself and also to have community responsibilities that one is expected to fulfil. Belonging brings responsibility and fulfilment of responsibility promotes a sense of belonging. (p. 223)

Citizenship theory (Marshall 1950, Turner 2000, Hudson & Kane 2000) also raises the problematic ideas of 'equal' status and access, so that all citizens may be fully participating members of society. For some, the boundaries can be insurmountable and result in members who have partial rights in society or are 'second-class citizens'. Membership of knowledge communities and the collaborative learning process can be equally problematic. Bruffee discussed how teachers can overrate their influence in creating equitable and inclusive learning environments. Rather, according to Bruffee, environments that nurture inclusiveness and membership should be created. Brufee argues that tertiary educators "have their greatest influence indirectly, when they establish conditions in which students 'spend a good deal of time together'" (Bruffee, 1993, p. 4). Learning is particularly effective when students are able to interact "without a sense of constraint – jointly [creating] norms, concerning their common interests, by which each of them is influenced" (Bruffee, 1993, p. 4).

For Bruffee, language plays a critical role in constructing functional learning environments. Linguistic systems constructed by a learning group in writing and reading activities help fashion, maintain, and celebrate group membership and invite other people to join. This is an important step in the acculturation process, in the individual's development and allegiance to the new culture.

What then is the role of the teacher when applied to student-centred constructivist learning theories? Is it just to mediate and facilitate this development? Cranton's (2001)

notion of the 'authentic teacher' provides a complementary intersection with constructivist thinking. A critical question teachers need to ask to understand the notion of authenticity is are they 'themselves' when they stand in front of their students or are they instead playing an elaborate role, and adopting dress, manners and behaviours of the ideals they think they should be? Cranton discusses this interesting notion in higher education at length, suggesting it is a fundamental attribute of successful teaching and learning to be an 'authentic teacher'. According to Cranton, the key to becoming an authentic teacher is self-awareness. Knowledge of who we are and how our perspectives have evolved is essential for individuals to be able to deconstruct and become critically reflective. Without this critical reflection, Cranton (2001, p. 6) argued, it is impossible to be a 'good teacher':

> Brookfield (1990) proposes that being an authentic teacher includes making sure our behaviours are congruent with our words, admitting we do not have all the answers and can make mistakes, building trust with students through revealing personal aspects of ourselves and our experiences, and respecting students as people. These are undoubtedly good things to do in order to be authentic, but I believe there is more we can do to bring our Self into our teaching, to merge Self and Teacher. Teaching is about people communicating and working together toward a common goal. Doing this well requires bringing ourselves as human beings into the relations. Working together comes only if we know one another. (Cranton, 2001, p. 44)

Teachers must understand both who they are and why they are. Beyond self-knowledge, Cranton believes it is also important to act or be prepared to act on what we have defined as essential individual values. Cranton therefore implied a political context in which those values are situated. Once teachers have defined who they are, they must be prepared to speak up and engage with that volatile environment and its multiple communities (2001, p. 94). In practice, this means participating in public debates and actively engaging on a range of levels like committees. Lastly, authentic teachers need to feed those defined values, situated in the wider contexts of state and society, back into their educational communities. This will achieve the paradoxical goal of developing students' reflexive, sceptical, and critical thought while also achieving a holistic integration of their professional and personal self:

> When we grow towards a clearer perception of ourselves as individuals in our personal life, this will influence our teaching selves if Teacher and Self are integrated. Similarly, when we develop as teachers, our changed perspectives filter into our personal lives. The authentic transforming teacher is engaged in a lifelong journey of individuation. Since there is no artificial separation between the person and the teacher, all growth is relevant to both personal and professional life. (Cranton, 2001, p. 114)

Online critical and professional capacity development

The PCC students' first assessment piece was worth 40% of their overall mark. Evidence of online participation in either of the two options gained a bonus mark.

The first option was an online role play titled 'Save Wallaby Forest'. The role play aimed to deepen students' understanding of the theoretical frameworks of pluralism and Marxism and the complexity of relationships between groups in society. It asked students to adopt an allocated perspective and 'cast' themselves as either a property developer or an environmental activist in a public debate. Participants in the role-play were anonymous and randomly divided into two groups. Anonymity was designed to facilitate greater involvement, and thus to help students experience 'what and why' the situation/debate

developed. The random allocation to a group meant preconceptions and 'natural' leanings might be challenged.

The role-play used a four-step structure to move students logically through the complex task of understanding the debate, forming a group completing a shared task, evaluating the experience, and linking it to the theory.

1. Introduction and Scenario Review
2. Planning
3. Performance
4. Evaluation

In the first step, participants watched a four-minute dramatised video that set the scene with generic information about an environmental planning dispute. Next they were asked to research their particular theoretical position through hyperlinks to web information. Then, in their separate groups, participants were provided with further 'private information', a detailed 'role profile' description, and a group task to complete. The group task was to produce a 500-word speech to post at a public meeting. Finally, after they had posted their speeches representing different perspectives, the two groups were encouraged to critique each other's position.

Drawing on the work of Bantow, Goodwin, Mulready, Stacey, and Thompson (1999), the role play exercise addresses the key philosophy and pedagogy of constructivism. Bantow et al. (1999) discussed how constructivism is an epistemology that when linked with sociological views of learning "gives rise to the notion that knowledge is socially constructed" (p. 12). Experiential learning contexts, such as Save Wallaby Forest, can contribute to more meaningful understandings because they are communicated through active learning and 'interaction'. In the Save Wallaby Forest role-play, a housing planning debate in fictional Burralinga provides PCC students with a platform to experience how social construction occurs via the theoretical outlooks of either Pluralism or Marxism. It allows learners to "construct their own meanings from their educational experiences" (Bantow, 1999, p. 12).

The role-play also addresses the notion of 'cognition', in which comparison of views helps build and shape understanding of issues. In Save Wallaby Forest the groups must actively critique each other's position in a public forum that simulates a 'town hall' meeting. 'Constructed' knowledge is contested by debate in a dialectic process that contributes to depth of understanding, exploration, and issues.

Collaborative or whole group learning was evident in the role-play from structural and cultural perspectives. Structurally, the exercise was designed with a group task that required collaboration and consensus. Both groups' objective was to discuss, construct arguments, and reach agreement expressed in a document that would be reviewed by 'knowledgeable peers'. Students contributing drafts of the speech and identifying themselves by name developed group membership.

PCC's second option was an online group forum with three areas related to the major study themes. A click on one of these headings would reveal a range of question headings with short punchy titles, like 'Junk culture?' and 'Positive PR or spin magic?' Another click would reveal the full question and present students with an opportunity for reply. For example, the live title 'Junk Culture' opens with this question: "Junk science, junk food, junk media. Are we destined for a world where commercialism and vested interest inevitably colonise the public sphere?"

Once students responded, they could either list their own postings under 'References' at the end of the assignment or as quotes or references within the text of their formal essay. Students were encouraged to contribute to all three discussion areas and answer as many questions as they liked. They were also encouraged to respond to other student questions and points. This DIY (do it yourself) assessment approach aimed to provide students with a meaningful assessment task and to stimulate lively discussion. It presented an opportunity to enhance and extend student understanding of the study material through peer review, discussion and debate.

This second task encouraged collaborative and whole group learning and created a stronger and more scholastic academic community. The

bonus mark for active online participation gave students a tangible incentive and discouraged 'lurking'. The forum became a lively publishing house where peer reviewers scrutinised and elaborated on successive messages. Some students made over twenty postings (a minimum of three was required for the bonus). The discussion was focused, scholarly, and academic in tone and content. Beyond this, students were engaging in substantial theory and were able to relate theory to practice and examples from their own experience, as well as critique other points of view. For example, one student wrote:

> I partially agree with Habermas's idea of the public sphere. I do believe people are favouring Technological progress over that of moral progress. As Lucy said most people are out there for personal gain, and with the rapid improvements in technology these gains are becoming easier and more frequent to obtain. Moral progress seems to be a thing of the past, do computers have morals i dont think so. Modern society is always looking for the easy answer the quick fix, and i think if you look at a large percentage of the population today Habermas is surprisingly accurate in what he says about what he calls the public sphere.

Another responded:

> Yes I agree with the notion that he has proposed, modern society does favour technological advancements over moral progress. Cloning is a perfect example of this! We trust experts and scientists to lead the way and also trust the information they provide us in the public sphere. Debate has been limited to governmental groups.

The notion of authentic learning can also be applied to this learning exercise. The basis of the case study and theoretical material used in the course originated in my PhD research. One of the case studies was specifically from one of my own academic articles. In this sense I was revealing to students my personal values and professional interests. This openness, and the students' ability to see my commitment to the subject material, contributed to building the trust and respect that Cranton saw occurring when we disclose our experiences and, implicitly ourselves:

> As teachers, our primary role is interaction with others. We work with students and often with colleagues or administrators to promote student learning and development. In order to interact well with others, we need to be genuinely ourselves. A person playing a role or behaving in ways that are contradictory to the natural way of being cannot maintain the kind of authentic connection with students that leads to meaningful learning. (Cranton, 2001, p. 14)

The use of personal research material and experience as a primary teaching tool thus relates directly to Cranton's idea of the authentic, transforming teacher. Cranton argued that authentic teachers nourish educational communities with their real life values.

Discussion - finding student voices online

The role-play was significant first because of its powerful effect on students' understanding of the theory and second because it demonstrated the effectiveness of the pedagogy in an online context. It successfully facilitated a number of roles within the group for example; leadership qualities developed in particular students while others adopted a variety of support roles. The sense of satisfaction and immersion that students derived from the exercise is evident from the following extracts in a discussion thread:

> Hi girls... I think we are winning!!! Our comments have been much more damaging to their campaign and much more reasonable and I think we have definitely attained the moral high ground!! Woo hoo we have made them

look childish!! (Save Wallaby Forest, 2003).

Yay!!! Go us!!! … you guys rock? I have posted i think about 3 responses - do you guys think we have missed anything - It finishes tonight doesn't it? I think we are winning too - They are sniping at us, i think we definitely have shown a higher moral ground and stuck to our agenda - Good work gals, GO ENVISION!!!! (Save Wallaby Forest, 2003).

That sounds good … - I have really enjoyed working with you guys too - you have totally changed my perspective about group work - I saw the one liner in there, nice conclusion!! Good work girls!! (Save Wallaby Forest, 2003).

Students' representing both the developer and activist groups demonstrated understanding of the different theoretical frameworks. In one activist group member's response, the power of how ideological views influence the ways we behave is evident:

Participating in the on-line exercise has developed my perceptions in how people think, and why they act the way they do in particular situations. I believe that the ideological views of each group most definitely shaped the way that arguments were formed, and in my own experience altered my perceptions throughout the case study. (Save Wallaby Forest, 2003).

In this extract from a developer group member it is evident individuals' personal preferences became subordinate to greater group goals:

The Save Wallaby Forest exercise brought up some very good issues and challenges. I was a developer, which was not a side of the argument that I thought I would have identified with at the start of the exercise. Before doing this assignment I thought that it would difficult to write from the point of view of a developer, not having been one and by assuming that activist groups always have the easier task and the better arguments. (Save Wallaby Forest, 2003).

One of the less anticipated results of the online discussion forum was how students extensively referenced themselves and others as authors within their submitted assignment. Did the students become more aware of intellectual property and the individual's rights in our own 'public sphere'? The examples below show how students quote their own online contribution in their submitted assignments:

They each researched their quarry, and engaged in unique, clever and effective methods of combat. "Research and Knowledge became the minority group's most powerful tool." (Student H, 1/9/03, Stonehaven and Werribee)

Talkback radio, best described as 'infotainment' is also a powerful way to get your message across. "used to promote one's self-interest though, it can work against us, causing cultural impoverishment." (Student R, 25/8/03, Machines not Morals)

Some students paraphrased their own contributions in their submitted assignments:

As discussed on DSO lay people in risk society are more likely to question or scrutinise claims made under the banner of 'science' because of their increased ability to interrogate knowledge (Student C, 15/09/03).

The unit's 100 students spent 560 hrs in the online environment, which represented 2891 DSO sessions. Of these sessions, the discussions, e.g., the online forum and role-play, registered that students read 18, 637 messages.

WebCT tracking reports showed that students posted a total of 642 messages over the semester. For students with international backgrounds, the high rates of online participation are significant. In this cohort, unfamiliarity with language and competition from articulate and confident local students can subdue participation in face-to-face teaching situations. The online forum enabled these students to have a voice and the time to compose their responses without the hindrance of language or other factors.

The Deakin University Unit Evaluation System (2004) registered this response to the use of on-line technologies and their relationship to the learning experience:

18. The use of on-line technologies in this unit enhanced my learning experience				
	No			Yes
Answer 1	2	3	4	5
Count 1	2	11	9	18
% 2.44	4.88	26.83	21.95	43.90

Summary perceptions

Rice (2004), found that, overall, student evaluations indicated that they were very satisfied with the unit; it was valued highly by 62% and moderately by 32%. Only 6% thought it was of minimal or no value. All but two students provided comments about the unit, particularly their use of DSO. The majority of them (21 of 32) were very positive. In particular they liked the accessibility of unit materials through DSO, the opportunity to contact the lecturer at any time, and the fact they could learn from other students' comments in the discussion areas. Student comments included:

> Participating in online discussion throughout the initial weeks of semester forced me to get a clear understanding of each topic.

> Very useful, a better way to learn than just referring to books or classroom situations. The info is always there when you need to refer to it and it's easier to read and understand than straight textbooks. I was really impressed with DSO and the whole online interaction and prefer that communication to face-to-face communication, as it is more accessible. Very easy to use and fun as well.

One student mentioned the fact that contributions could be made without interruption and after some thought, resulting in more considered postings. Some students would like to have made more use of DSO resources and discussions, but work and other commitments reduced the time they had available.

One issue raised was the importance of the lecturer in the online environment. Students felt that DSO was better used in this unit than in others and that the lecturer's presence made a difference.

> I learned and gained a lot by using DSO in this unit and I believe our involvement was very much affected by the lecturer as well as the subject whether it is interesting or not.

Conclusion

PCC is a study unit conceived directly from my PhD research, and reflects both personal and professional areas of interest. Save Wallaby Forest began as a classroom activity several years earlier that examined 'public relations' from a community action group viewpoint.

The scenario had its roots in a local planning debate in which I had been involved several years earlier. I felt the exercise embodied a critical area of contemporary communication activity that students needed to explore. Public relations conventionally views community action groups as target publics of a large organisation like business or government. But smart and media-savvy community action groups are facing and responding to a range of

complex debates with sophistication. In the process they are dealing with media framing and intensive media relations to win over large corporations and governments. The integration of this type of issue into teaching represented a distinct intersection between my personal interests and my professional output. It links to several key pedagogical theoretical notions, including Cranton's ideas about authentic learning, and, I believe, is a merger of what Cranton calls Self and Teacher. The development of Save Wallaby Forest defined the type of public communication in which I was interested and the political context in which those values are situated. The role-play gave students insight into the complex processes of public debate by asking them to actively engage in its simulation.

Deakin University's 2003 Online Teaching and Learning Fellowship (OTLF) encouraged recipients to 'take a risk' and explore pedagogical approaches in relation to the online. The experience demonstrates satisfying and innovative teaching and learning outcomes. But it also shows that educators are at the cusp of a new learning culture and face a range of choices and new areas of concern. This article has raised the issue of students' and teachers' redefined role in online learning. It has argued that the role of the teacher is nebulous within a purely constructivist philosophy. The idea of the 'authentic teacher' has been introduced as an important element in a successful constructivist approach.

Educators are at the cusp of a re-acculturation; that is a 'borrowing' between the culture of the face-to-face classroom and the virtual classroom. At this intersection various pathways present themselves for future teaching and learning. For example, educators may create environments that merely become 'edutainment'; students may have 'fun' but do they learn anything? Educators may also take the human element out of learning and simply automate teaching and learning as a process, therefore fulfilling expectations of a passive and sterile online learning experience.

Alternatively educators can recognise and resource students' rich, powerful, and meaningful online experiences with a complex mix of high-level professional mediation, pedagogy, and learning design.

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