

Media Literacy and Online Learning

Stacey Lince
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Prof. Jessica Parker
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Introduction

For my final project, I will explore Moodle and learning management systems (LMS), in general, based on my experiences with "boxed" curriculum in online and blended learning environments and my observations as an assistant in Sonoma State University's Faculty Center. A learning management system (LMS) is a software program which is used for delivering online curriculum to students. As higher education institutions and high schools continue to adopt elements of online learning in an effort to save costs and "embrace 21st century learning skills," educators need to become aware of what it means for students to be "media literate" and how teaching and learning in virtual environments will take place. What seems to be lacking is a critical analysis of "what is lost and what is gained" (Berger, 1972) by moving classrooms from brick and mortar environments to the virtual realm. As educators copy, paste, and upload their current print-based content into the LMS, there is little discussion of how the shift in the delivery of this content will affect their curriculum or the effects this new medium will have on the student learning process, teaching methods, and relationships between educators and students. Through my observations, I have found that the "training" provided to educators seems geared toward teaching the technical skills required to navigate the LMS, but fails to incorporate discussions regarding pedagogy and best practices.

Method

In the following pages, I will provide a background of my personal experience with online education, define media literacy as it applies to the LMS, address areas of concern such as the participation gap, online pedagogy, and continued use of "print texts." In conclusion I will offer suggestions as to how educators can create participatory online learning environments. The information found in this essay was obtained from class notes and discussions, course readings,

and personal communications with faculty members and administrative employees. All names have been omitted in an effort to maintain confidentiality.

Media Literacy Connection to My Professional Life

After ten years as a "brick and mortar" classroom instructor for a private vocational college, I transitioned to the "virtual" classroom as an online course developer and educator for private (for-profit) higher education vocational schools, also known as "career colleges." Shortly after entering the online realm, I began to look closely at the content of my curriculum and the information I was delivering to students. I questioned not only the medium through which this content is delivered in distance learning programs through the use of learning management systems (LMS), but also at the lack of information and media literacy skills among enrolled adults. I began pondering if the content of this "one size fits all" (Hirsch, 1987) was truly meaningful and beneficial to *all* students. As students blazed through the courses without "reading" the textbook, listening to the audio lectures, and seemed to rarely engage with fellow classmates other than in assignment discussion forums—I wondered what they were gaining from this experience. Were they in fact learning or merely going through the motions of completing the course?

After acceptance to graduate school, I enrolled in the Educational Technology program thinking I would learn how to create meaningful curriculum that would be applicable to my online classroom which would allow students to become better learners in the online environment. It didn't take me long to realize that there were deeper issues at stake when considering technology and learning. I believe I was looking to be taught the "skills" to develop curriculum without much consideration to online pedagogy. The first article I read that applied

to educational technology and media literacy was David Buckingham's (2008) *Introducing Identity*. This article altered the path of my course of study and redefined my views of technology. While I have always believed that new media is a powerful tool that has the ability to make certain daily tasks in our lives easier and open the doors to global communication and information, I did not consider the side effects of the online classroom or the effectiveness of the technology (Schwab, 1969, p.133). For example, were the students actually gaining employment after taking my courses? Were they merely learning job "skills" or were they becoming critical thinkers? Did the content enable the students to climb the metaphoric socioeconomic stratification ladder?

Within the *Identity* article, Buckingham (2008) states that technology is often seen to emerge from "a neutral process of scientific research and development, rather than from the interplay of complex social, economic, and political forces" (p.11). As I reflected on this point, I realized that my views of technology were, in fact, quite neutral. When I considered my own use of technology and even that of my children, I viewed our experiences online as what Buckingham (2008) defines as a form of "information determinism – a neutral good which appeared from nowhere" (p.11). The ways in which I applied technology and incorporated information into my curriculum were as if I had lifted my brick and mortar classroom into a virtual environment. I expected to see similar results in the educational processes of my online students as the on-ground students I had taught for ten years. I also had an expectation that the information was now available to populations of potential students or individuals who may not otherwise have had the opportunity to participate in higher education. As it turns out, I discovered that I was only delivering information through a new tool which allowed more people to become vocationally trained; but the delivery of the content in itself was not going to alter

society, change the social stratification my students experienced, or create more employment opportunities for my students. I, like many educators, failed to understand that online education should be about creating a different kind of structure for learning and teaching, not the use of technology.

Through my observations at the Faculty Center I realized that I am not alone in this form of information determinism. Administrators seem to be under the impression that brick and mortar classrooms can be easily transitioned into the online realm without disruption to current curriculum or pedagogy. Faculty are provided little-to-no training on how to not only utilize the LMS, but also on how to create engaging and participatory learning environments in their online classrooms. In the eyes of John Dewey (1944), as educators, we have an obligation to see to it that "the technical subjects which are now socially necessary acquire a humane direction" (p. 279). In order to provide democratic learning environments, educators must consider the task before the tool (Parker, Sonoma State University, 2011) to ensure they are creating environments in which students are able to collaborate, share experiences, and contribute to the production of course content.

By virtue of using Moodle, the Sonoma State's LMS, administrators feel confident that they are embracing 21st century learning skills, have overcome their trepidations or inhibitions about technology, and, perhaps, even consider that the technology has made the practice of teaching "easier" (personal communication, October 2011). Moodle is also an open source program which means the software can be implemented with minimal cost. While these are aspects of online learning to embrace, as higher education institutions and high schools continue to adopt elements of online learning in an effort to save costs, reach new populations of students (Jaggers, 2011) and promote the use of "21st century learning skills", educators and

administrators need to, first, define what 21st century skills they anticipate their students will acquire through the use of the LMS, become aware of what it means for students to be "media literate," and how teaching and learning in virtual environments will take place.

Defining Online Classroom Literacies

Lemke (2005) has argued that because of the way new media integrates text, images, animations, video, voice, music, and sound effects we need a "broader definition of literacy itself" (para 5). The skills required in the online classroom have typically been confined to information literacy and information computer technology (ICT). The American Library Association (2006) defines information literacy as "the set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (as cited: (Associaton of College & Research Libraries, n.d., para. 1). These important skills allow students to perform tasks such as proper research, understanding trusted websites and reliable sources, and navigating hyperlinks and hypertext within online media content (Class notes, September 2011). According to Buckingham (2007), information computer technology (ICT) is "based on the decontextualized practice of teaching technology skills" (p.147). In the online classroom these skills might include knowledge of document processing, uploading of documents into the LMS, or instructions for completing online quizzes or navigating the classroom. While having proficient information literacy and ICT skills are essential to navigating the online classroom, there are other literacies that are necessary for communicating and learning in the online classroom.

In addition to information literacy and technical skills, students and educators must also acquire media literacy skills. In the opening to his book *Media Education: Literacy, Learning,*

and Contemporary Culture (2003), David Buckingham asks, "Why teach media education?" (p.3). It is important to note that the term "media education" is used in the United Kingdom to define what the United States later adopted as "media literacy" (Class notes, 2011). In the context of this paper, the terms are synonymous. However, the discrepancies in the usage of the terms reflect the challenges of integrating media literacy skills into a global curriculum. For the purposes of this paper, I will use David Buckingham's (2003) definition of "media education" to define the media literacy skills required of students as they navigate the online classroom. Buckingham (2003) defines media education as the "process of teaching and learning" about media, the aim of which is to "develop both critical understanding and active participation" (p.4). By active participation, Buckingham (2003) means individuals are able to make "informed judgements as consumers of media" and "become producers of media in their own right" (p.4). The term "media" applies to the texts we create to communicate messages. The term "text" applies to not only print media; but also images (moving or still), sound, music, and written language. Texts can also be considered the medium through which the information is delivered television, video, computers, cell phones, the internet, social networking sites, and so forth (Class discussion, 2011). In the context of the online classroom, the "media" are the learning management systems used to deliver educational materials, the course content housed within the system, the work that is produced by students, and the means of communications used by students and instructors.

Buckingham (2003) points out that media education should not be confused with educational technology or the use of new technologies as "teaching aids" which are often seen as "neutral means of delivering information" (p.4-5). However, I would argue that this is the precise reason why educators should become media literate so they begin to understand that the LMS is,

in fact, a form of media and not a neutral tool for delivering information. They need to look critically at the system itself, its ability to create meaningful learning environments, and understand its biases. Students, alongside educators, need to acquire the skills that will allow them to become producers within the LMS, not merely consumers of the information housed within the media system.

Areas of Concern

The Participation Gap

In their haste to implement online learning environments, administrators have ignored the digital divide that exists between the tech-savvy and the digitally-challenged. There is an assumption made by online curriculum developers and educators that they are addressing a common reader (Hirsch, 1987, p.135) who are equally literate in new media technologies. On the contrary, a vast majority of students make up what Henry Jenkins (2006) refers to as the "participation gap" or "the unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare individuals for full participation in the 21st century" (p.3). The students I work with struggle to navigate the digital landscape of the online classroom. Most lack the ability to abstract and transfer information from written examples in the textbook to the computer screen, rarely engage with other students outside of required discussion forums, experience difficulty researching topics online, and struggle navigating hyperlinks within websites to locate information. The faculty at Sonoma State find themselves in a similar technological predicament as my students in their attempt to navigate new terrain in Moodle.

As Laura Bradley (2010) points out in her blog post, *The Myth of the Digital Native*, "kids today may be less intimidated by technology than their older teachers, they are no more likely to be competent with technological applications than a child growing up in a kitchen is a

competent chef" (para 2). Educators and administrators assume that because adolescents entering college have grown up with computers, they are tech-savvy and will understand how to not only navigate the LMS, but also perform basic information computer literacy skills such as sending emails, attaching documents, and performing research tasks on the internet. The implementation of Moodle often seems directed toward this tech-savvy generation of "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). I have frequently heard references in the Faculty Center about "this young generation" of students and the importance to "move with the times" (Personal communication, November, 2011) by addressing the needs of a digitally orientated generation. On the contrary, as Henry Jenkins (2009) discusses, children are acquiring these skills at different rates in society (p.25).

Because of the variations in technological skills, to utilize an LMS effectively, educators need to create a participatory culture within their classrooms. According to Jenkins (2006) a participatory culture is one which "shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement" (p.4). Educators need to become learners and rely on those students who are tech-savvy to become mentors in assisting students and faculty with technology skills. Educators also need to be open to discussions with students about how the LMS can best serve the educational process. The classroom thus becomes a participatory culture which offers "strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (Jenkins, 2006, p. xi).

Pedagogy and the LMS

The Faculty Center at Sonoma State is a new department that was developed when the school migrated to Moodle after the contract with their former LMS expired. The purpose of the center is to assist faculty members as they begin to adopt online learning

components in conjunction with their on-ground courses. The center is staffed by former IT department employees and student assistants whose role is to aid faculty members with technical operations such as uploading documents and files, inserting weblinks, utilizing the gradebook, and developing online quizzes in Moodle. Faculty members are offered assistance through drop-in hours, occasional workshops, and email communications. While regular meetings with the Provost are held within the center, these meetings rarely involve discussions regarding online pedagogy. The few meetings that have taken place are reserved for faculty and are not open to the center's employees.

According to Polley Ann McClure (2008), CIO of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, because of the development and adoption of learning management systems, “instructional paradigms will have to shift.” Instead of focusing on memorization of material by their students, instructors will focus on the application of knowledge to particular problems (as cited, Glenn, p.6). Sam Scalise (2008), CIO of Sonoma State, echoed similar statements when he asserted in an article with the *Economist*, “The professor’s role is evolving from instructor to mentor,” and “homework, quizzes and projects will have to be designed in such a way as to require genuine thoughtfulness on the part of the student” (as cited: Glenn, p.7). While these are desirable aims for the future of education at Sonoma State, the lack of faculty discussion and support on how to bring these changes is troubling.

As I consider the way in which educators at Sonoma State and other campuses within the California State University System are utilizing Moodle, I fear they will build their classrooms based on current vocational school models. Curriculum in private vocational schools is geared toward the fundamentals students need to know to be successful in the workforce. The curriculum includes prepackage lectures and online quizzes. The courses designed by many of

the faculty members resemble this boxed curriculum. The courses are packed with PDF documents, multiple choice quizzes, and lack collaborative learning components. In some instances, professors have shifted away from essay and critical thinking questions by incorporating true/false and multiple choice options. These choices have been made to ease the burden of grading. As one faculty member commented, "I am using all true/false because they are the easiest to import into the quiz, the system will automatically grade the questions, and there are no discrepancies" (Personal communication, November, 2011). Professors increasingly look for ways to allow grading to become automated, for example computerized grading of forum posts and ways to offer "cut and paste" feedback into assignments. As one professor described, "This is a new way of teaching. I am performing administrative tasks and have become a manager of my classroom" (Personal communication, October 2011). The role of the teacher as now a manager, exemplifies the need to assist faculty in shifting the types of content housed within the LMS. The aim of online learning components should be to take the burden of administrative tasks such as making copies and grading away from the instructor; however, this can be achieved by incorporating assignments that foster critical and collaborative learning experiences that do not cut short the learning process.

These statements by faculty members and actions within the LMS are a far cry from the aim of implementing online course components to create learning environments that allow for mentorship and thoughtfulness on the part of the student or instructor. These examples indicate that many faculty members' approaches to the use of Moodle is in a manner similar to theories of the liberal media literacy paradigm in which media literacy is woven into existing curriculum with little change to pedagogical practice (*Major Paradigms of Media Literacy Movement*, 2011). In this sense, faculty continues to view the components of their courses as print texts that

are entrenched and, in many ways, limited by the LMS technology. Because of the continued use of print text as the basis of curriculum, the faculty find themselves forced into rote and automated learning practices such as the offering of multiple choice questions and assignments that are easy to grade. In order to engage students in more meaningful learning experiences, educators must, as Hobbs (2007) suggests, "enlarge their definition of *texts* to include all the forms of symbolic expression that convey meaning from authors to readers" (p.7). As David Perkins (1993) emphasizes, educators should design "learning for understanding" experiences (as cited by Hobbs, 2007, p.8). According to Perkins (1993) learning for understanding allows for "a long-term, thinking-centered process, providing for rich, ongoing assessment and guidance." He encourages teachers to use "powerful representations" and methods that encourage learners to discover solutions for themselves by "showing them how people formulate and solve problems within a shared intellectual framework" (as cited by Hobbs, 2007, p.8).

There are examples of faculty members who are using Moodle to provide "learning for understanding" experiences. These professors incorporate the use of wikis, online collaboration projects, discussion forums, and use of classroom Facebook pages. These collaborative projects and communications become forms of shared knowledge and experience in relation to the course content. Another example includes an art professor who has recorded podcasts of his lectures that were previously delivered in class which he uploaded to Moodle. Student homework assignments include listening to the lectures to be prepared for the next class meeting. This professor noted that he initially felt the LMS would "replace his role as an educator" when in fact, he has experienced the opposite result (Personal communication, November 2011). The professor noted that his online process has freed up class time to allow for valuable class discussion and group collaboration in which he feels more connected to his students and spends

less time lecturing "at them" and more time engaging in meaningful face-to-face discussion. (Personal communication, December 2011).

Conclusion

While media literacy theorists do not address online learning specifically, they do mention the evolution of new and informal learning environments. For example, Buckingham (2003) devotes a chapter of his book *Media Education* to "new sites of learning" in which he argues that "we can and should be attempting to understand both their curriculum and their pedagogy (p.189). Buckingham's (2003) question, "Why teach media?" then becomes applicable to higher education online and blended learning environments. As we explore these new technologies, Kress (2005) suggests we ask, "What have we got here? What remains of the old?" (p.8). These questions should be applied to teaching and learning in blended and online environments in terms of how the instructor's role and curriculum can incorporate the old teaching methods and the new. The new technology of the LMS should enhance and reshape old practices, but not detract from meaningful learning experiences. Kress (2005) continues by stating, "What we need are new tools for thinking with, new frames in which to place things, in which to see the old and the new, and see them both newly" (p.8). These tools are not the technology of the LMS, but the ways in which we interpret the texts of the classroom. What is required is a shift in the focus of curriculum as "print texts" and assessment driven by testing. By offering cooperative and collaborative learning projects by the use of wikis, discussion forums, or blogs faculty could allow for more meaningful learning and assessments.

In order for this shift in pedagogy to become realistic, educators need a Faculty Center that encourages a participatory culture. One that allows for not only support in technical skills, but also provides pedagogical guidance, an atmosphere that promotes trial and error approaches

to new projects within the LMS, and a forum in which faculty can become mentors to each other, share best practices. By allowing for shared experiences in this manner, educators can shift their focus away from the tool that is being used to deliver curriculum, concentrate on the types of learning experience they hope to create, and then work together to help build the experience.

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