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E-Portfolios and the College Community: Towards a New Model of the Online Classroom

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If knowledge is socially constructed, as most contemporary models of online education maintain, it is likely to be lost if that community disperses abruptly at the end of an academic semester. Digital technologies of the online classroom, especially e-portfolios, create more fluid learning communities, which can continue to evolve and grow after a term has ended. These communities, in turn, suggest emerging models of an academic institution, in which the traditional Socratic goal of wisdom will, once again, become the central point or orientation.

The modern university is an oddly hybrid institution, combining organizational structures of the Middle Ages, rhetoric of the Enlightenment, and practices of the Industrial Revolution. This continuity with the past can be an attractive feature, especially in an era when the pace of change is often disorienting. The monastic model is apparent in the architecture, ceremonies, titles, and, most importantly, organizational structures of the university. Institutions of higher education have survived many political upheavals and even the Industrial Revolution with comparatively little structural change since the Middle Ages. But the hierarchal structures of the university, with its traditional vehicles for transmission of knowledge such as the refereed journal, are no longer able to channel the deluge of knowledge and information that has come with the advent of digital media.

Even in the late twentieth century, human knowledge was often measured by the number of articles in academic journals, but today ever more important research is being done by government, industry, consultants, and amateurs, in ways that bypass these scholarly channels.¹ The role of the university

is increasingly challenged by many institutions from social networking sites to corporations.² In order to remain relevant, universities must now accept the exciting but perilous challenge of developing new organizational models and missions for the twenty-first century.

The university shares the function of providing community with many other traditional institutions such as family, religion, neighborhood, nation-state, and workplace. Alone, among these institutions, however, the university community is organized, at least theoretically, around the creation, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. Amitai Etzioni, a founder of the communitarian movement, maintains that a „community” is defined by two characteristics. First, there is a matrix of intersecting (rather than hierarchal) relationships that are imbued with emotion. Secondly, there is a commitment to a shared set of values, norms, meanings, history, and other manifestations of culture.³ His book „The New Golden Rule”, where this definition was articulated, was first published in 1996, when the Internet was just starting to be an important aspect of everyday life, but Etzioni does not even mention relationships mediated by computers. This is surprising, since the online classroom fits the first of his criteria for community, a matrix of intersecting relationships, very closely. His second criterion for a community, the common ideals, is a little more elusive, but it is certainly achievable online.

The idea of learning through a community, as developed by Vygotsky,⁴ has gained very wide acceptance with the advent of online classrooms. Many theorists go so far as to claim that learning is fundamentally „social in nature”.⁵ If that is the case,

¹ B. Sax, *All that knowledge, and so what? Scholarship in the digital university*, „On the Horizon” 2005, Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 216–219, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748120510627330>.

² Consider, for example, the mission of Google: „To organize the world’s information and make it accessible and useful.”

³ A. Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society*, Basic Books, New York 1996, p. 127.

⁴ L.S. Vygotsky, *The Vygotsky Reader*, R. van der Veer, J. Valsiner (eds.), Blackwell, Oxford 1994.

⁵ P. Shea, K. Swan, A. Pickett, *Teaching Presence and Establishment of Community in Online Education*, [in:] Janet Moor (ed.), *Elements of Quality in Online Education, Emerging Communities: Wisdom from the Sloan Consortium*, Newham 2005.

there are several reasons not to allow a learning community to disintegrate too quickly. If the class is not simply a purveyor but also a creator and a bearer of knowledge, what will happen to that knowledge after its demise?

There is a considerable investment involved in putting together an effective learning community, in terms of effort, emotion, and money. This may involve, for example, resolving conflicts or at least soothing tensions before they can become overly severe. It may involve a good deal of coaxing of nominal members who are, for any reason, reluctant to become involved. If the community is disbanded before the full benefits are achieved, that effort will be partially wasted. It is not realistic to expect a community to last indefinitely, but it seems wasteful to cultivate a cooperative spirit, only to abruptly disband the group at a time that is predetermined, regardless of whether it has fulfilled its potential or not. In traditional classes, students and instructors barely had time to bond, when their classroom community was disbanded. The result of so many transient relationships may well have contributed to loneliness and insecurity of students, and it was also a squandering of energy and accomplishments.

E-Portfolios

The Northwest Evaluation Association gives the following definition of a portfolio: „a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student’s efforts, progress and achievements in one or more areas” with „(...) student participation in selecting contents, the criteria for selection; the criteria for judging merit, and evidence of student self-reflection”.⁶ An e-portfolio is simply a digitalized version of this, usually published to the Web. Digitalization not only enables the compression and display of work, but also adds many opportunities for intellectual and social interaction.

In many ways, applications for e-portfolios resemble the learning management systems that are used in online courses. Both e-portfolios and learning management systems contain means by which instructors and students communicate, as well as features designed for the submission, criticism, grading, and archiving of assignments. The major difference is that the learning management systems more closely duplicate the structure of a geographically based classroom in an online setting. They make the classroom into a largely self-contained unit, where the manifold distractions of the Internet may be, so far as possible, shut out. They are also intended for use only for a restricted period of time, usually a semester.

Since e-portfolios incorporate material generated outside of class and are centered on eventual publication to the Web, they are more open to the outside world. The boundaries of the classroom communities using e-portfolios are comparatively fluid, so they can blend relatively seamlessly into other forms of organization. In the words of Chen and Light, „(...) e-portfolios provide insight into the curriculum as students have both lived (in many contexts) and experienced (in the classroom) it”.⁷ Coming near the end of the course, publication of the e-portfolio becomes a sort of milestone, which marks not only the culmination of one stage in education but also the beginning of others.

Like Learning Management Systems, e-portfolios offer tools with which students can share ideas and work collaboratively. In addition, they also offer means by which that sharing and collaboration can be continued or renewed long after the semester is completed. This makes them adapted to programs of study that are extended over several courses or semesters, including competency-based curricula. E-portfolios can help preserve collectively held knowledge by enabling communities retain some cohesion after a semester ends.

Extending Communities Beyond the Classroom

My analysis here is largely philosophical and, as such, is not easily testable. It touches on complex questions of personal and collective identity, which elude the simplistic alternatives that are put forward in most questionnaires. What I am attempting points more to a paradigm shift than to a reshuffling of traditional pedagogical options. One element, however, that we can at least begin to test is the ability of e-portfolios to create communities that extend beyond the temporal duration of the formal class. I attempted to tentatively quantify this through surveys distributed to students that were using e-portfolios.

As a semester-long project for three sections of a junior capstone course during spring 2011 at Mercy College in Dobbs Ferry, NY, a total of 60 students were assigned to create e-portfolios using the application Taskstream. This was a course, taken by all students at the college, intended to document the proficiency of students, prior to their year of graduation, in what the college considered the six fundamental academic competencies: written communication, oral communication, critical reading, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and information literacy. A capstone project was intended to verify that students were not only competent in each of these skills considered in isola-

⁶ H.C. Barrett, *Electronic Portfolios*, <http://electronicportfolios.com/portfolios/encyclopediaentry.htm>, [17.07.2017].

⁷ H.L. Chen, T.P. Light, *Electronic Portfolios and Student Success: Effectiveness, Efficiency, and Learning*, Association of American Colleges and Universities, Washington 2010, p. 3.

tion, but could also integrate their various skills into a larger endeavor. Previously, the project had usually been a written work such as a term paper. This time students were asked to display assignments they felt proud of on the Web, whether these had been done for this course or any other taken in their college careers.

One additional reason for choosing e-portfolios as a capstone project was that the objective of the course, verifying competency in all the basic competencies, seemed to go beyond what could be achieved in the course of a single semester. It was also not something that could be accomplished by the instructor alone, but, ultimately, was the responsibility of the individual student. The e-portfolios would give them the means, motivation, and opportunity to evaluate and improve their skills by themselves, during and after the semester.

To do this, students were given instructions and a rough template, but were granted considerable latitude. The teacher told them, „Select whatever is most you” or „(...) whatever you would like to represent you to the world”. So that the students would not feel pressured to conform to a pre-conceived ideal, the web sites were not graded, beyond being marked as „complete”.

Students were assigned to do various assignments, based on the course theme of „Animals, People, and their Stories”, that would document proficiency in basic academic competencies. As a final task, students were assigned to create and publish a web page based on their work over the course of the term. This URL would showcase their proficiency and their accomplishments, as well as provide students with the means and impetus to continue their collaboration after the class was completed. The students would keep their e-portfolios at no cost for the remainder of their college career at the institution, and could retain them indefinitely if they chose to.

At the end of the semester, students filled out a questionnaire designed to evaluate the implications of e-portfolios for the classroom community. Asked whether e-portfolios encouraged collaboration, students responded as follows:

Table 1. Answers concerning the role of e-portfolio as a collaboration encouraging tool

No	3%
Perhaps	17%
Probably	7%
Yes, but only moderately	21%
Definitely, it encouraged a strong spirit of sharing and collaboration	52%

Source: Own study.

When asked how they would use their e-portfolios, students responded as follows:

Table 2. Students’ responses to the question about the future use of e-portfolios (multiple answers were allowed)

For professional networking	48%
For socializing	38%
For applying to graduate school	45%
For applying for jobs	38%
For keeping records of work	55%
Other (Write-in Response)	7%

Source: Own study.

Asked whether they would use e-portfolios to keep in touch with fellow classmates, students responded as follows:

Table 3. Answers expressing likeliness of using e-portfolio for keeping in touch with fellow classmates

Very unlikely	12%
Somewhat unlikely	31%
About an even chance	34%
Very likely	16%
Very probable or almost certain	6%

Source: Own study.

In summary, an overwhelming majority of students believed that e-portfolios encouraged collaboration, and planned to continue using them for purposes such as socializing or networking. A significant percentage, 22%, though not a majority, expected to use them to stay in touch with classmates.

The results were very encouraging, but, nevertheless, provisional. Inevitably, they can only tell us about the expectations of the students, not what they will actually do. In a sense, measuring satisfaction and learning by means of a questionnaire immediately after a class has been completed is a bit like asking the patient to evaluate a visit to the doctor immediately after swallowing prescription medicine. You will learn of intuitive expectations, which are not insignificant, but the data necessary for evaluation has hardly begun to arrive. The results are easily influenced by transitory enthusiasms and resentments, and the practical utility of the knowledge gained is still almost completely untested.

A study tracing the future of a classroom community would be interesting, but it would involve formidable logistical and practical difficulties. The social media have now made communities increasingly fluid, so it is very easy for people to drift out of touch, and then resume contact at a later date. The vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships are often subtle, informal, and not always consciously noted. Furthermore, the very act of trying to record these relationships could

very easily influence their trajectory. At the very least, this would involve a massive and carefully planned study over a span of decades, and even then the results would not necessarily be replicable.

Informed Knowledge

The strongest arguments for extending the classroom experience by means of e-portfolios after the semester has ended come from consideration of the nature of learning, as well as of knowledge itself. These attributes have changed fundamentally with the advent of online learning, since computers are not simply a tool used to acquire knowledge but also, in consort with human beings, at least a partial bearer of it. The purpose of medieval universities was primarily the preservation of knowledge, which was assumed, as the province of God, to be changeless. In the nineteenth century, the emphasis in universities shifted increasingly to the creation of knowledge.⁸ We can define this process as the processing of experience into relatively tangible and accessible forms.

Peters distinguishes six distinct stages in this genesis of knowledge, particularly when it is mediated in part by digital technologies:

- 1) Signals, signs
- 2) Data
- 3) Information
- 4) Informed Knowledge
- 5) Knowledge
- 6) Wisdom.

In the initial stages the progression may occur at an exponential rate, but it becomes more gradual in the last three.⁹ The final goal, wisdom, in Peters' words, „is fed equally from practical, theoretical, and ethical knowledge of life and cannot be stored. It is lived and experienced by those who possess it”.¹⁰ Since Socrates, teachers have generally regarded wisdom as the culmination of the pedagogical process, even though it is extremely difficult or impossible to measure, but we can now at least chart the process by which it is acquired.¹¹

Stages one through three, five, and six are relatively traditional parts of the educational process, but phase four – informed knowledge – originated with digital culture. It is generated by students as, with the aid of computers, they break down information into units, which are then restructured in a modular way. It is cut off from historical and philosophical contexts, but is very useful in addressing practical tasks. It is far more transient than classical, or traditional, knowledge, and is not dependent on canonical works.¹²

It is useful to distinguish these stages, because they clarify the educational possibilities and limitations of a single course. Most pedagogical activity will be centered on stage four—the generation of informed knowledge. One will have begun to move beyond it to the stage of knowledge, but the final stage – that of wisdom – requires far longer duration, perhaps almost a lifetime of reflection. Nevertheless, education is no longer simply appropriate to a certain phase of one's life, but an episode in a process of lifelong learning. While it is probably unreasonable to set wisdom as a goal of a course or academic program, it can still be an important point of orientation, which can help students to focus their efforts.

Implications for the College Community

In addition to suggesting pedagogical techniques, this essay is intended to explore an emerging model of the college community, which differs from both the traditional academic and the more recent corporate ideals. The former tend to view knowledge as legacy to be passed on, while the latter sees it as a commodity to be bought and sold. Both these perspectives retain a partial validity, yet neither adequately describes the complex ways in which knowledge can be shared and retained. An institution of higher education can become the hub of an intellectual network that extends far beyond its geographic campus, where knowledge is communally generated, assessed, and extended.

Degrees and courses may continue to be significant as milestones or accomplishments, but less so as measures of learning. In establishing wisdom as an ultimate, if not immediately realizable, goal of the educational process, universities can draw on their Socratic and ecclesiastical heritage, traditions which, anachronistic as they have sometimes seemed, have never been forgotten. While the exact organizational models have yet to emerge, universities no longer simply offer degrees for the young but also, implicit or direct, contracts for the lifelong learning that is now almost universally considered necessary for gainful employment. No longer confined to a geographic campus, it will have a less tangible but perhaps more spiritual identity. The possibility of lifelong affiliation will influence administrators and faculty members alike to think not only in terms of the semester or the degree but far longer periods of time.

According to Ezioni, society consists in several levels of communities. It is, in other words,

⁸ B. Sax, *Knowledge and Wisdom in Academia*, „Dialogue and Universalism” 2009, Vol. 19, No. 1/2, p. 77, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/du2009191/278>.

⁹ O. Peters, *Distance Education in Transition: New Trends and Challenges*, Oldenburg 2003, p. 153.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹¹ B. Sax, *op.cit.*, p. 76–77.

¹² O. Peters, *op.cit.*, pp. 157–175.

a „community of communities”, which are constantly evolving.¹³

The classroom, in this case, is part of the larger community of the college, which, in turn, contributes to the yet bigger community of higher education. Today, these communities overlap with many others on the Internet, which are largely devoted to personal interests or to socializing. The classroom, as a community, is not designed to last very long, but it need not be cut short before its work is properly accomplished. It can gradually fade into other communities, which may then pass on its legacy of knowledge, understanding, and personal relationships.

One result will be to foster an understanding of knowledge that is fluid, and not easily divided into discrete units such as the credit hour, semester, or degree. That division of learning is simply one of the ways in which learning – and, by extension, knowledge – has been structured by law and tradition. They go back to the Industrial Revolution, where work, and consequently pay, was commonly measured in units of time. A credit hour, for example, is a measure of time spent in a classroom or workshop, typically about 15 or slightly more per semester. A certain number of such credits, in American universities, in prescribed areas are required for the attainment of a degree. But such credits have never been more than, at best, a very rough measure of learning, and it becomes almost entirely meaningless in an online program. The credit hour, nevertheless, remains the unit on which the entire structure of university programs is still based.

E-portfolios open new possibilities of evaluating academic progress not by hours but by proficiency in basic academic competencies, since they facilitate the collection of a student’s work in a format that is

very easily shared and discussed. This can provide a viable alternative to the credit hour, and, therefore, to the sort of classroom that was designed to accommodate it.¹⁴ That change, in turn, will enable students to learn in ways that are more flexible, fluid, and easily customized. In addition, it will mean that communities need no longer be divided into artificial units, so they can grow, merge, and disintegrate in a relatively organic way.

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¹³ A. Etzioni, op.cit., p. 128.

¹⁴ D. Schejbal, *Right here, right now: a department store for learning*, „e-mentor” 2016, nr 4(66), s. 74–77, <http://dx.doi.org/10.15219/em66.1256>.

POLECAMY

METODY, FORMY I PROGRAMY KSZTAŁCENIA

Konferencja *Przygody umysłu w Centrum Nauki Kopernik*, 26–27 października 2017, Warszawa, <http://www.kopernik.org.pl/projekty-specjalne/konferencja-przygody-umyslu/>

Games and Simulation enhanced Learning (GSeL) Conference, 3 listopada 2017, Plymouth University, <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/whats-on/games-and-simulation-enhanced-learning-gsel-conference>

EDUKACJA I TECHNOLOGIE NA ŚWIECIE

Annual Conference 2017, Beyond islands of innovation – how Learning Technology became the new norm(al), 5–7 września 2017, University of Liverpool, <https://altc.alt.ac.uk/2017/>

8th International Conference on Internet Technologies & Society 2017, 11–13 grudnia 2017, Sydney, <http://its-conf.org/>