

## Where is the Teacher? e-Learning Technology, Authority and Authorship in Teaching and Learning

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### Abstract

E-learning is currently proliferating at a rapid rate and the impact of this proliferation on teaching and learning raises many questions with no clear answers. For example what impact if any do the new e-learning technologies have on the role of the teacher in the learning process? To what extent do collaborative authorship practices using the new technologies impact on the role and authority of teachers? And if authority relations between teachers and students are altered, what consequences and effects does it have on learning? These questions and others arose as a result of students' evaluation to a web-based role-play simulation at the University of Melbourne during 2002 and 2003. This paper addresses some of these issues and argues that the new learning spaces enabled by the ICT revolution affect the authority and role of teachers. It recommends a strategy of collaboration and co-inquiry of teachers and learners that may better utilize the advantages of the new learning spaces.

### Introduction

In 2002 and 2003 we implemented a three-week web-based role-play simulation (Fablusi) as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> year 'Leadership in Early Childhood' course, in the Education department at the University of Melbourne. The simulations aimed to familiarise students with issues they might encounter as Early Childhood educators and their performance formed part of their assessment for the year. The students played the different roles in teams of 2-3 students per role, responding to an initial scenario and were encouraged to raise relevant issues. The two lecturers of the course and our simulations coordinator played the role of moderators overseeing the exercise and helping students when needed to resolve technical and substantive issues.

At the conclusion of both simulations an on-line evaluation questionnaire was administered to find out what the students thought of the exercise. Part of that questionnaire addressed the usefulness of the technology for communicating with peers and teachers on the assumption that the technology would enhance such communication. Our assumption was based on the fact that both students and teachers had continuous access and would therefore be able to communicate with one another whenever they felt the need to do so. This assumption however proved incorrect.

While most students (78%) who responded to the questionnaire either agreed or strongly agreed that the technology was instrumental in enabling them to be more interactive with peers as we expected, the majority (51%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that it helped them relate to the teachers in their own time<sup>1</sup> - (see Appendix Fig 1.) This was surprising because a clear majority (68%) agreed that 'Control'<sup>2</sup> responded quickly to queries as opposed to a only handful (2%) who disagreed<sup>3</sup>, and a clear majority (59%) agreed that 'Control' responded to queries within 24 hours while a only minority (12%) disagreed<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, many (47%) agreed that 'Control' was effective in moderating the game as opposed to a minority (24%) who disagreed<sup>5</sup>. However about as many students agreed (32%) that 'Control' was helpful in playing their role as those who disagreed (27%) (See Appendix Fig 2.)

Clearly students did not feel abandoned in hyperspace – they felt that moderators (teachers) responded quickly to queries and that they were effective in moderating the game though not necessarily in helping to play their roles. There was no technological impediment to students who wanted to query teachers and indeed in the pre-simulation

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<sup>1</sup> 5% of respondents did not answer this question. In what follows I will use the terms 'agreed' and 'disagreed' to also cover those who strongly agreed or disagreed.

<sup>2</sup> 'Control' is a term that was used in previous simulations to denote the moderator and mistakenly remained in the questionnaire. But it seemed clear that students understood that it referred to the moderators.

<sup>3</sup> 32% remained neutral.

<sup>4</sup> 27% remained neutral and 2% did not respond to this question.

<sup>5</sup> 29% remained neutral

briefing they were encouraged to do so should they feel that clarification would benefit them or help with either technical problems or substantive issues. Indeed only 8% of the total number (1,808) of Sim-Mail messages in both simulations constituted role-moderator (students-teachers) interaction. So why did the majority of students think that the technology did not help them relate to teachers in their own time though they did think that it helped them to be more interactive with their peers?

In a study of the nexus of authority and authorship in relation to supply or emergency teachers, Alexander Massey reports a comment by M. Morison that "a supply teacher's success may, in some circumstances, be measured by the extent to which she can run the lesson as though the replaced teacher had never been absent, by, in fact, her capacity to be 'invisible' in the classroom" (in Massey, 1996).

Could it be that as moderators the position of the 'teacher' receded into the background so that it did not seem they were also relating to their teachers even when they were? Did the technology make the teacher 'invisible'? Displaced by the moderator or facilitator? Viewing moderators as a temporary, occasional sort of teacher if not a simulated substitute, what at first appeared as a curious fact about students' perceptions could be indicative of a shift in the position of the teacher who has become 'invisible' as an effect of the technology.

Massey's study discusses the relationship between authorship and ownership of course content and the authority of the supply teacher in the classroom during delivery of the content. But Massey, as do many others, omits consideration of the role that technology plays in sustaining authority and authoring practices.

### **Technology Authority and Authorship**

Etymologically authority and author are closely related. "Authority", first appeared in English in the 13<sup>th</sup> century from Old French as "book or quotation that settles an argument," and by the 14<sup>th</sup> century as "power to enforce obedience" its Latin root meaning "'invention, advice, opinion, influence, command.'" "Author" also appeared from the same Old French root in the 14<sup>th</sup> century meaning "one who sets forth written statements." <sup>6</sup> The semantic resonances of these terms filtrate through a history that enmeshed its meaning in institutions for the production of knowledge and the written word as well as in political, legal, and administrative institutions. Both terms also refer to the technology of the 'book' and the 'written word' as underpinning their own possibility.

Western higher educational institutions, more specifically universities, have literally been the spaces for learning and the dominant organizational paradigm for 'secular knowledge' and research since the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries with the establishment of the universities of Bologna and Paris. Given the new technology of print in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they have also become a global model in terms of content since the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries – though not without challenge or modifications. These institutional spaces for learning have also served as a means for organizing and maintaining the authority relations between staff and students for the last 800 years and it is only in the last 10 years that the ICT (information and communication technologies) revolution has begun opening up a qualitatively different and new space for learning – web-based instruction.

Technology and knowledge are so entwined with one another that it is impossible to say where one ends and the other begins. So much more so today that is easy to ignore that this has always been the case and that teaching has always been closely linked to the technological means available. The book and typing replaced the manuscript and the quilt as they replaced the stone and the chisel as media for knowledge, its acquisition and proliferation. The lecture theatre, the classroom and the lab, as well as the blackboard, chalk, erasers, rulers, etc., are no less technological means aimed at effecting pedagogy than computer mediated learning tools currently proliferating as an adjunct, if not as replacement, to the former.

Each of these technological means however is not without its effects on knowledge or pedagogy. Each creates and sustains certain relations between the different interlocutors whose concern is knowledge and the pedagogy that is required for its proliferation (Linser, 2004, Linser & Naidu 1999; Meyrowitz, 1994). The technology of a university lecture theatre, for example, highlights one individual as an authority (more often also an author) visible to all attendees, situating her as the focus of learners' attention, controlling the production of texts in speech, overheads,

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.etymonline.com/a9etym.htm>; also see Hoad, TE. (ed.) The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology (1986)

blackboard, recommending books, assigning exercises, etc.. Her speech and the tools at her disposal pedagogically mediate between students and the knowledge to be acquired.

Of course the authority of the individual teacher is not simply generated by technological means or devices. Rather a much wider institutional and social network of relations grants some individuals authority and on the basis of which others accept it. In the fields of knowledge, authorship of texts is still one significant step in gaining authority. "Publish or perish" motivates many aspiring to maintain authoritative academic positions in their field and at the university. Students, guided by those who have been granted such authority, must author their own work (the essay, exam, book report etc.) in order to qualify in their domain. Both are granted authority based (though not exclusively) on their authorship. The prohibition on plagiarism applicable to both brings into sharp relief the intimate relation between authorship of texts and the institutional grant of authority to individuals.

Moreover, teachers possess authority in the classroom not only by virtue of their institutional affiliation or authoring practices but also by virtue of the students' acquiescence - without which disorder and resistance can undermine not only the teachers' ability to fulfil their tasks but can challenge the legitimacy and credibility of the institution itself (Richard & Roach, 1992; Tozer, 1993; Massey, 1996; Varenne, 2001). Acquiescence however, does not rest only on institutional nor traditional bases, as Max Weber pointed out almost a century ago, charismatic authority of individuals, in our case teachers, is perhaps the most effective means of achieving acquiescence. Can charisma of teachers translate into web learning spaces? Or will they disappear into memory?

### **What impact does authority have in teaching and learning?**

Post-modernist theories emanating from the works of Barthes and Foucault have pointed to the disjuncture between the author and the meaning of the text that bears the author's name proclaiming the 'death of the author' (Barthes, 1977; Foucault 1969). This displacement of the author in literary theory had the effect of shifting the focus on the reader - the authoritative meaning of the text no longer under the control of the author. Is the teacher going by way of the author to be viewed as a teacher-function? (Crosswhite, 1992) In the field of education, constructivist theories, especially those emphasizing collaboration, are attempting such displacement of the teacher, or rather of teaching, and shifting the emphasis on learning (Leitch 1985), and significantly as we shall see on learning in 'authentic' contexts.

Massey's study (1996) clearly demonstrates that the effectiveness of teaching and learning content in a classroom requires discipline - you can't have chaos in the classroom yet expect students to learn content. Who can speak to whom, when they can speak, their spatial presence in relation to one another and what can be appropriately said is an organized affair. Bodies and text are strategically distributed within the learning space to ensure authority is maintained and learning possible. In the classroom the teacher is the authority charged with maintaining this organizational discipline and has an array of strategies to discharge this role - both in terms of stemming chaos i.e. applied to the body of the subject (the learner); and focusing on subject related content i.e. the field of knowledge being taught. Put in Foucauldian terms, both the body of the subject and the body of knowledge are sites for the disciplinary strategies of power.

Some argue that such authority has a negative effect on collaborative learning and that authority has such a bad reputation that people avoid examining it but it is essential to learning (Hübscher-Younger & Naraynan, 2003). Varenne (2001) following Bourdieu (1970), for example points out that pedagogical authority is what makes schools practically possible and according to Cathy Burke (2000) students need the reassurance of authority figures in order to learn. Bennet (2003) argues that the negative effect of authority is a result of its abuse and its coercive techniques while legitimate authority could be used in ways that create conditions of collaboration, empowerment and responsiveness to human needs. Similarly James Laditka argued that responsible use of authority can kindle the possibilities of discourse to help students change the rules for forming discursive objects but "we need to call into question the illusions of authority inherent in oppressive mystifications of "the teacher as one who knows." (Laditka, 1990: 14). Finally, DiBiasio (2001) found that group problem solving was more effective when teams took a stance of authority as they find it in the authoritative sources, professors, textbooks etc., and that this creates an authentic context. Cooperative learning, he argues is less effective when this sort of authentic language and context are absent.

What this literature is suggesting is that authority is necessary for learning and it focuses on legitimate and responsible use of authority as opposed to its abuse and illegitimate use - more generally strategies and tactics in the use of authority for effective learning of content. The argument for its necessity and recommended strategies,

however, stem from the accepted understanding and hidden assumption that teachers and students are in the presence of one another within the institutional spaces of learning. But what happens when the learning spaces are separated out from the institutional space? When the bodies of the subjects (teachers and learners) are no longer present to one another and the linear presentation of content is no longer governed by the necessities of turn taking? When the limitations of who can speak to whom, when to speak, and what can be appropriately said can be divorced from institutional space and organized as the learning content itself?

### **The Teacher as Author(ity) and/in the Simulation**

In the nexus of institutional relations of authority, the simulation played out in web-space opened up an additional level of complexity that seemed to reduce the shadow cast by the institutional authority providing access to this space.

The moderator, played by the teacher, as might be expected inherited the teacher's institutional authority – both in terms of subject expertise and administrative power (eg assessment, authorising access.) But the moderator's authority did not extend over students bodies in the learning space – the strategic location of students in relation to one another and the teacher, in this learning space, became irrelevant. Consequently the authority granted to teachers over students 'bodies' in a particular learning space and at a particular time also ceased to be relevant

'Who could say what to whom' still remained an organized affair under the scrutiny of the moderator but the 'who and the what' were not students but roles and subject related content. On the other hand, 'when to speak', like location in space, ceased to be relevant. Asynchronous communication meant there was no need for moderators to do the work of maintaining discussion in an orderly turn-taking manner like in the classroom. No authority was needed, nor exerted to this end. Participation was fuelled by the feedback of roles to each other.

Thus it seems only the authorship of content (text and image) remained as the site for authority relationships between teachers and students in the learning space. Authorship of content by teachers in the simulation has two dimensions. On the one hand the teacher authored the simulation itself – by creating the roles, the scenario, interaction spaces and providing the resources. On the other hand as moderator the teacher authored texts in response to the roles' messages and for administrative purposes. These however constituted less than 4% of the total messages in the simulation - and they mostly dealt with technical aspects of the simulation.

Compared with the face-to-face requirements of the traditional learning space, say the seminar room or lecture hall – the demand for authoritative presence of the teacher in the simulations as moderator required to maintain content focus and participation was minimal. But present she was and not only by virtue of her authorship. Every authored text by the students could be read, evaluated, assessed, remarked upon, and questioned. Moderators possessed authority "simply by virtue of possessing an overseer's right, the right to see, the right to have everything in sight" (Derrida 1992, 246). And this overseeing administrative and pedagogic function included the right to evaluate the authorial practices of students, to encourage and reform, and to determine that these authorial practices conform to the institutional standards.

In the simulation, rather than focusing on content through the authoritative mediation of the teacher 'over' the student body as in the classroom, the content became an environment for students as virtual roles (represented as text and image) brought to life to interact with one another in a space that was outside the institution but which also had the virtual role of the moderator brought to life by the teacher.

Further, this learning space included its own 'simulated authority relations' derived from the course content – the authority structure inherent in the initial scenario and in the context of which the roles operated - that both provided the authoring context for participants and was negotiated in interaction between them.

### **Conclusion**

The implications of this shift in learning space for relations of authority between teachers and students are many and cannot be adequately discussed within the limitations of this paper. Here we were able to only identify one site and to show how the authoring practices in the new spaces of learning alter the authority of the teacher who is no longer present as body to the students but as text and image. Similarly students are no longer distributed in the space of learning as bodies but as text and image.

The teacher is left only with the authority over content - with a presence that is embodied in the content and reflects the expertise, creativity and perhaps charisma of the authoring teacher; and with the overseeing function of the authoring practices of students required by the institution.

Though in essence both teachers and students author the simulation as a whole – the one providing the disciplinary content as a framework for the authoring practices of the other - there remains an imbalance in the sort of authoring contribution each makes in this learning space. Students could comment and/or question what was happening on-line during the simulation, but in terms of truly being collaborative authors, it may have been useful to involve students in the authoring process of the initial scenario itself - and thus create a partnership of co-inquirers.

The new learning spaces do not exactly create ‘invisible’ teachers, but they do not make them present to the students as they are in traditional learning contexts. Rather they present teachers as the strategic organization of content and as overseers of the content. But if we play our cards right next time, as co-inquirers, teachers and students can transform authoring and authority, text and image, the real and the simulated into an exploratory journey of possibilities in education and learning.

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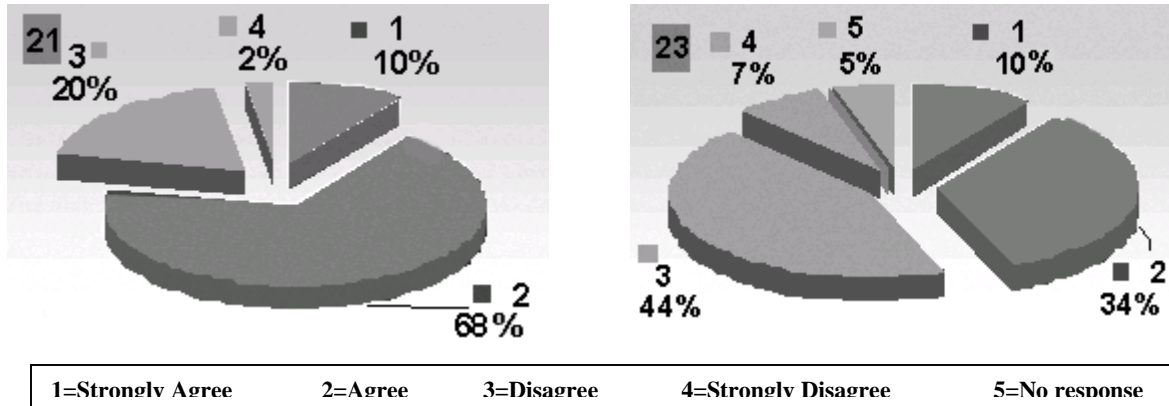
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**Appendix**

**Fig. 1 more interactive with peers vs. relate to my teachers in my own time**



**Fig. 2 Effectiveness of 'Control' in the simulation**

