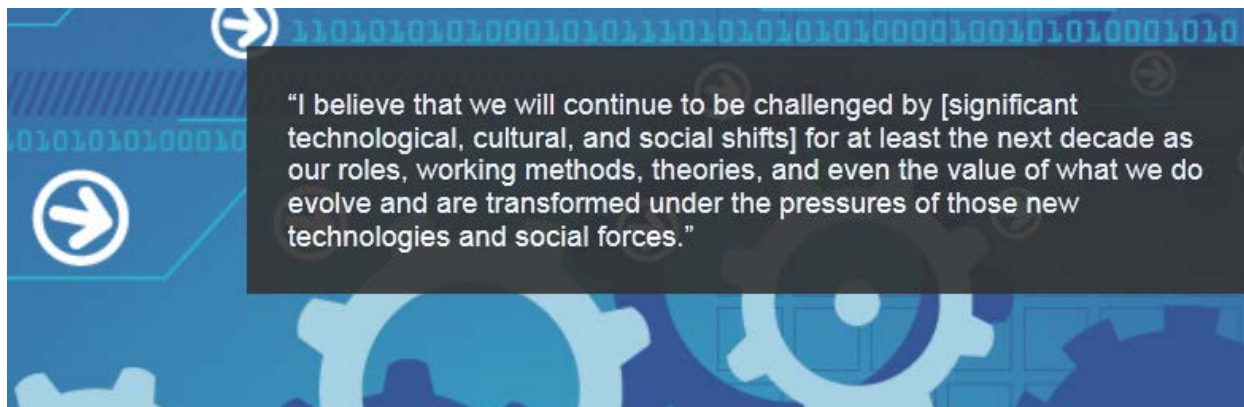


Digimodernism and Learning (Aug 11)

By Bill Brandon

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"Did-ja-*what?*" I hear you asking. Digimodernism (*digital modernism*) is a term that describes "a new paradigm of authority and knowledge formed under the pressure of new technologies and contemporary social forces." If you have colleagues who struggle to accept the notion of rapid eLearning authoring by subject matter experts, or who have a hard time seeing how social media, informal learning, and peer-to-peer learning can have a part in their instructional designs, you know people who are experiencing some of the turmoil that marks the rise of digimodernism.

However, while digimodernism may sound esoteric and academic, looking at the world from this perspective can help make sense of new approaches to learning and instructional design. In this article, I describe a few of these ideas, in the hope that you will find them useful in your practice. I also raise some questions that we need to be asking ourselves in this time of change.

(Before continuing, I feel I should add that "digimodernism" has nothing whatsoever to do with "digital learners," "digital natives" or any other imaginary tribe.)

OK, what is digimodernism, and why should you care?

Alan Kirby is a writer and researcher in twentieth-century literature and culture. In the first paragraph above, I quoted his introduction to an article on the topic in *Philosophy Now* (see the References at the end of this article). Kirby coined "digimodernism" while searching for a way to summarize the effects of computerization. Kirby says the word "denotes the point at which digitization intersects with cultural and artistic forms." He goes on to say that, "digimodernism is the label under which I trace the textual, cultural and artistic ripples which spread out from the explosion of digitization. Under its sign, I seek patterns in the most significant cultural shifts of the last decade or so, in such a way as to have predictive value."

I believe that the readers of this magazine are caught up in one of those significant shifts. I believe that we will continue to be challenged by it for at least the next decade as our roles, working methods, theories, and even the value of what we do evolve and are transformed under the pressures of those new technologies and social forces.

This is not, as you can imagine, a simple topic, and I am not going to try to summarize it here. Again, see the References to find more of Kirby's work and thought – it is worth reading. I am beginning to understand that what Kirby is saying can also help us to understand the changes in what we do in instructional design and the various activities that come under the name of learning.

If a brand is a promise, what is the promise of the brands eLearning, mLearning, social media, and the other technology-supported approaches to improving human performance? Perhaps it is to help

people learn whatever they need to learn, when they need it, wherever they are, for as long as they want. Many professionals involved in learning and instructional design are excited by the cultural and communication effects of digitization, and want to experience this excitement in their work.

In fact, I believe Kirby's analysis will help our dubious, uncertain (perhaps fearful) colleagues understand that the new paradigm of authority and knowledge does not mean the end of instructor-led courses, the Facebooking or Twitterization of eLearning, or the death of instructional design. Instead, it means the extension and expansion of opportunities for learning.

Real and present-day examples

There are already a number of examples of responses to that “new paradigm of authority and knowledge” in the learning community. Here are four that may be new to you.

#lrnchat

#lrnchat is informal, social, collaborative, peer-to-peer learning on Twitter. This format evolved rather rapidly, beginning in 2009. According to the Web site that supports it, “#lrnchat is a place for people interested in the topic of learning to learn from one another and discuss how to help other people learn.” (lrnchat.wordpress.com/about/)

In a sense, #lrnchat is a new form of text: a microblogged dialogue among professionals. Participants come and go during regularly scheduled meeting times, identifying their Tweets as part of the dialogue by using the hashtag (“#lrnchat”). Past sessions are available to all (participants and non-participants alike) on the site lrnchat.wordpress.com. #lrnchat is an exact example of a text form that has evolved under the paradigm that Kirby describes. If you have not taken part in a #lrnchat, I highly recommend that you do so, even if only to observe.

Edupunk

Edupunk is a term created by Jim Groom to describe “a scrappy, DIY spirit in some sectors of educational technology.” (Quote from Leslie Madsen Brooks) However, note that Edupunk is mainly about people, not about technology.

Edupunk is interesting, and often misunderstood (I will try here to avoid adding or perpetuating any misunderstanding). Sometimes, when people read that Edupunk is a DIY (“Do It Yourself”) movement, they think this means going out and finding experts to follow online or in the real world, or finding materials to read about topics of interest. This may be part of an Edupunk approach, but for the most part, DIY literally means “DO it yourself.” In other words, the emphasis is on hands-on engagement, involving a demotion of the expert.

Among the things that Edupunk is NOT is a quick and cheap shortcut to an education. Edupunk is also not about getting a degree or a certificate. In his review of a “Guide” to Edupunk (which he did not think much of), Stephen Downes not only examines the misunderstandings, he also provides a number of good examples of what Edupunk is and what it intends to bring about. There is a link to the review in the References.

Edupunk seems extreme to many who are hearing about it for the first time, but it is also the approach that comes closest to how people actually learn. Read Downes' description of how millions of people learned to write software. It may seem very familiar to you if you are a self-taught programmer!

Personal Learning Environments (PLEs)

Personal Learning Environments involve the use of technology by an individual to organize his or her own learning, in different contexts and situations and from different learning providers, including informal learning.

In Graham Attwell's paper on Personal Learning Environments (see the link in the References at the end of this article), note this statement in his summary: “... we are coming to realize that we cannot simply reproduce previous forms of learning, the classroom or the university, embodied in software.

Instead, we have to look at the new opportunities for learning afforded by emerging technologies.” This perfectly expresses the necessary response in our field to the effects of technology.

MOOCs

MOOCs are Massive Open Online Courses, a peer-to-peer knowledge exchange or learning method. In her recent [article](#) in Learning Solutions Magazine, Inge de Waard defines a MOOC as “a gathering of participants, of people willing to jointly exchange information and collaboratively enhance their knowledge.”

“Massive” may be somewhat misleading as a description. There is no requirement to have tens of thousands of participants. The word Massive implies two things. First, that there is no arbitrary limit on the number of people who can take part. Second, the expectation is that enough people will participate to provide a sufficiently complete exchange of information and to support the quality of that information.

Mobile technology can play an important part in MOOCs, both because it extends the potential population to include emerging regions of the world, and because it makes possible near instantaneous participation, even when participants are away from their workplace.

Blending, extending, expanding

I’m sure you can think of other examples after reflecting on what these four just discussed have in common.

In addition, and somewhat more formally, we are seeing more and more examples of what could be called an extension of the idea of “blended” learning. Originally, blended learning referred to designing structured courses that made use of instructor-led sessions in classrooms and online, as well as asynchronous eLearning modules. But with the rise and popularity of social media, many designers are making use of online services to support learning through more-or-less directed learner interaction. This is a departure from what we have traditionally thought of as instructional design, and brings us into unknown territory regarding outcomes/objectives, certification, compliance, and evaluation.

Where do we go from here?

In a time of change, there are always a lot of questions.

- Do we need another term or another acronym to describe our work in the age of digital modernism? Do we need to start calling what we do “digilearning”? (I sincerely hope that we don’t do that!)
- Is what we do still “instructional design” if it goes beyond designing instruction?
- When does our work product become “education” instead of eLearning, mLearning, or some other flavor of the week?

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