Embarking on the Randian hero of cloud based education

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This paper will examine the role of the collective intelligence behind social networking format tools for education, while maintaining the creative individualist. The paper focuses on cloud technologies including a NING and Today’s Meet. Each of these cloud technologies were used in past semesters in the author’s courses and the author examines the student responses to each technology. The construction of the Randian hero emerges as students begin to interact in this forum. Individualism is capitalized while at the same time the students embrace the collective which remains important to establishing a community of learners.

The Cloud and Participatory Media

Web 2.0 also referred to as cloud computing or simply, the cloud describes the collaborative spaces available on the internet. These spaces are hosted by independent developers and in many cases can be used for free or with minimal cost to the users. The users are responsible for their own spaces carved out of the larger cloud and the content is generated by the user or the group of users assigned to the space. Each web 2.0 application allows for “a capacity for high user engagement, intellectual rigor, frequent updating, and collective knowledge sharing based on an underlying technological infrastructure” (Fahser-Herro and Steinkuehler, 2009-10, 56). There are innumerable resources available in this cloud format that can be utilized in the classroom. Some of the more common examples are those of the blog, podcast and wiki, each space allowing students to maintain an individual presence while also contributing to the whole as a collective group. Each cloud application becomes a participation platform for students to display knowledge, challenge ideas and create meaning.

![Fig 1 A Wordle (word cloud) of Cloud Based Technology – wordle.net](image)

One challenge of integrating any technology including cloud based applications in one’s class is that of applying it in a meaningless manner. It is important when integrating technology into one’s curriculum that it is not “performatice” (Warschauer, 2006) and that it is not a superficial layering of technology over an existing structure, but that it will actually afford one the ability to accomplish a particular objective in a meaningful way (Eaton, 2010, 24). The technology is a tool and not an end point. In the case of cloud technologies, it is simply the vehicle one uses to arrive at meaning within a digital community. If used in a well developed method of inclusion, cloud applications and participatory media in general can have many benefits including enhancing and encouraging peer to peer learning, development of both communication skills and technological skills, and development of editing and drafting skills as the creating of the document models the process writing construction. Students using participatory media believe their contributions matter and see the tools as authentic to their experiences as well as an opportunity for artistic and academic expression. The use of the cloud also benefits many types of learners. The student that hesitates to participate in class may find this to be a safe space to voice thoughts. Students have an opportunity to showcase their work and thoughts, but they can also step to the margin a bit and provide an assist to those struggling to make meaning in the digital environment. This open format of the cloud allows students to travel their own journey to meaning making as both an individual and as part of a collective intelligence. Each format allows for a refining of different skills for each student and the applications can be manipulated to best fit the needs of one’s class and one’s students.

Perhaps one of the largest benefits of using the cloud in comparison to other technologies that require specific hardware or materials, is that most cloud technologies can be used on a variety of devices and therefore become portable. This speaks to the nomadic nature of the new technologies available. Students can travel with their iPads,
smartphones and other mobile devices and still have access either through a wireless network or through the use of cell phone towers. Cloud applications can all be accessed through my Evo Smartphone. As a result, I can follow the work of my students throughout the day as I find those lull moments and make them now productive. The mobile devices allow for us to take our resources with us wherever we travel.

The cloud feeds the needs of both the “on demand” generation as well as the “look at me” culture that has emerged over the recent years. Students have come to expect that through technology all information and media is now constantly available. The benefit for me as a teacher is that while the students feel fulfillment of this on demand results with cloud technologies, I also require returned visits and development of each of the applications, which forces reflection and development of ideas. The students feel comfortable for the most part in having an online presence. Perhaps thanks to social networking sites such as Facebook, students have no hesitation creating an online identity and sharing part of themselves in a social field. Many of the cloud technologies require that students create an online persona and on occasion requires students to encounter their peers in multiple formats while online. For instance, one site may require that students post written commentary, but may also include a live chat. Students are comfortable code switching quickly between one format and another. This Discourse shift is natural and seamless for students that are used to having multiple screens open at a time on their computers. They are quickly able to alter their language use based on the context.

Each of the cloud technologies described below are excellent additions to the classroom because of the educational value of meaning making, the portable nature of the tools and the adaptable nature of the applications to the needs of the students and classroom.

The Randian Hero

Ayn Rand is well known for her novels and through the course of those works developed the characteristics of her hero. This hero is a creative individualist. One that takes pride in his/her work and thinks independently. The hero displays emotional restraint and is self controlled in the search for knowledge and perfection. Her hero follows one’s own self interest in the solitary pursuit of goals. This industrious person is able to think outside of the traditional expectations. In her classic and timeless novel The Fountainhead, originally published in 1943, Rand introduces her readers to Howard Roark, a young man that is expelled from architectural school for going against tradition and his professor’s demands by drawing modernist designs. Later, he is from a position in an architectural firm for again going against what is expected in conventional design and taking risks in a modernist style. As Roark states early in the novel, “every form has its own meaning. Every man creates his meaning and form and goal” (Rand 1994 p.12).

Rand has been applied to the field of technology before. In the recent documentary, All watched over by machines of loving grace (2011), Curtis indicates the early links between Randian ideals and the developers of Silicon Valley as the innovators there saw themselves as Randian Heroes. According to the early thinking at this time, everyone could be a hero as the computers would create order without central control. It would be a self stabilizing system and the humans could create their own order. The problem emerges when the desire to follow one’s own self interest demands a deconstruction of the collective.

Cloud technologies are able to combat this dichotomy. Within the constructions of group blogs, wikis and other cloud formats, the students can follow their own Randian hero characteristics, but still be answerable to the instructor and their peers. This balance is maintained through the group and with guidance from the instructor. As with any new learning, students must experience scaffolding before being released to explore and develop the cloud technologies. In order to be successful, I have found that I often must go back to very simple basics of what we have come to expect as normalized behavior on the internet. Students that freely explored sites such as Facebook must redefine their “netiquette” and learn to monitor their own input. I often begin this exploration with a simple autobiography post to an easy to navigate blog. In this first stage, students rework what they view as acceptable online discourse and are required to respond to each other in kind. Then, after this very brief introduction, we begin to build toward the more complex sites that are more difficult to navigate socially such as the NING and the use of Today’s Meet.

My goal is to build a community of learners, but not to the exclusion of self. I believe it is important to bring in the characteristics of the Randian hero in order to find balance and to encourage students to utilize their online voice to take risks in a safe environment. Without those risks, the meaning making tends to plateau and the students are too quick to agree with one another and not think critically about the material or the comments of peers. I challenge students to become creative individualists and to aid their peers in that quest as well. This is the balance between the Randian hero and the altruistic collective.

Head in the Clouds

My students meet in a traditional classroom, but we use the cloud to enhance our understanding of course content. It is important to note that my students are not in a distance learning format, but meet in a traditional classroom setting at the undergraduate level. My students are all secondary education students and as a result, I try to model the technologies
they may be able to utilize in their future 7 through 12 classrooms. I can use these technologies as comprehension checks for my students and as a place where my students can begin to make meaning in a community of learners and in a safe environment where they are comfortable taking risks. Students engage with the technology in a way that enhances their learning rather than hinder through a cumbersome structure. Students are not evaluated simply by the appearance of their work such as the use of images in a wiki page, but instead are evaluated based on the quality of their comments and their ability to aid their peers in the search for understanding.

NING

One of the primary cloud applications that I use in my courses with senior students is the ning (www.ning.com). This site allows students to navigate through a social networking style format. There are hundreds of apps (applications that are created by a third party) that can be brought into the class site and this allows me to custom build each site based on the needs of my students. Similar to Facebook, this site allows the students to have their own individual pages as well as join me on our class page which acts as a central hub. Students are comfortable with this format and it is a way for us to stay in contact easily. My class site can be made private and the students that participate are all sent an invitation to join. This keeps the site closed to prevent outside manipulation of content. I have used a document depository, photo uploading, a forum, a homework calendar, a live chat, a bulletin board and many of the other apps available.

Most of my students visit the NING on a regular basis although the course does not require it. I only require that students check it occasionally for updates. Recently when speaking with one of my students about the use of the NING in our classes, she noted that it has become routine for her to check her e-mail, her Facebook and then the NING. One student stated that the NING is her favorite technology used in my course because, “it is always there as a common space where I can go to ask a question (of professor or peers), collaborate, share something, etc…”. Another student noted that she “absolutely love[s] the NING” and because she can, “get everything in one place”.

The use of the NING in the class has both an academic and a social aspect which the students find approachable. It has changed how I stay in contact with my students as well as how they interact with each other. Another aspect of this technology that I have added to the course is the addition of tags included in the syllabus, on our online course manager and on handouts for students. These tags as seen here allow the students to access the sites I use in class directly. The benefit of this is that the students in the past have often made errors typing in long web addresses and this eliminates this problem as students can use a smartphone app to simply take an image shot of the tag and go directly to the link. Adding extra layers to access materials is beneficial for students in terms of retrieving material with ease.

Todays Meet

Todays Meet (todaysmeet.com) is another excellent cloud based tool that has much potential in the classroom. This tool can again be used from multiple platforms and I have used it when lecturing and presenting. By providing my students a space to chat in the “backchannel” when I am teaching, students are able to enhance their understanding and help each other through the material. The back channel is what goes on outside of the lecture. Typically, it is students searching the web, passing a note, or whispering a question and often it is not productive. This tool which is simple to
set up makes use of that back channel and provides a productive means for students to ask questions of their peers, get clarification and examples. The site runs a running dialog that students can connect on while in class. The site allows students to create a user name and will also save the conversation so that I can also look at it later and the students can keep it as a reference.

Rheingold notes that, “in the Japanese language, one pays attention with ki, which means “life energy” (2010, 14). He continues by stating that multitasking is not, “necessarily bad alternatives to focused attention” (2010, 14). The Backchannel allows students to pay attention with “life energy” and they become active in the conversation as they multitask. They are engaged rather than passive in the class. One of my students commented that she, “enjoyed Todaysmeet the most because [she has] never seen anything like it before and liked having more than 1 forum to engage in class discussion”. Another student noted that Todaysmeet was her favorite, “because it was nice to get things out there without interruption. It was also helpful when you thought of something after the fact; you could just put it out there without throwing the current discussion off track”.

Conclusion

Cloud based technologies are user friendly and have much potential in the classroom as tools to assist students in becoming motivated learners committed to a community of knowledge. As students become more mobile with their access to technology, the education must consider the nomadic nature of these tools. Cloud based technologies travel with the students and can enhance classroom meaning making.

References


