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Introduction

This paper poses four questions for distance educators that interrogate social and cultural aspects of distance education design. It articulates these questions in the context of the design and production of a web site (<http://www.cancershock.com>) that is influenced by cultural studies approaches to pedagogy that value difference, open-endedness, and conductive reasoning (Ulmer, 1989) that proceeds according to collage, appropriation, and fragmentation. I argue that these four questions encourage distance educators to produce curricula and programs that are more supportive of making sense of the multiple subjectivities and complex discourses that lifelong students confront in a postmodern era.

Computer-based distance education promises to provide increased educational opportunities for a variety of individuals from children attending public schools with limited resources to adults with busy schedules. The promise is being addressed from numerous institutional and corporate perspectives. These efforts include widespread plans at universities and colleges to offer distance courses and degrees and has led to a new privatized industry [\[1\]](#) offering courses, certificates and degrees online. The rapid adoption of computer-based education has been swift as distance education has ridden the crest of rapid technological innovation in the delivery of content using computers and the Internet. Douglas Noble (1998) aptly summarizes the widespread promotion of technology within and outside education when he observes that “Technology has become the centerpiece of the

redesign and reinvention of public education by outside forces, serving both as the impetus for this redesign and, increasingly, as its lever.”

While the efforts to provide educational opportunities from a distance are numerous, there are few distance education designers considering distance education classes and programs from critical social and cultural perspectives. Even though critics have challenged the economic motivations and highlighted the pedagogic pitfalls of distance education (Noble, 1997), the criticism rarely influences how distance education curriculums are conceived. In other words little curriculum research examines how social and cultural issues related to the negotiations of power and identity are acted out when the computer screen becomes a primary window for curriculum.

Distance education design is strongly influenced by the four basic questions that have come to be known as the Tyler Rationale (Tyler, 1949). The Tyler Rationale provides an objectives-based template that advocates the predictability of outcomes measured by assessments that are directly linked to educational objectives. For some types of knowledge such an approach may prove effective, yet a growing body of theory, research, and political activism within education (see for example Ang, 1996; Britzman, 1995; Lather, 1991; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993) believes that such an approach may not best serve individuals trying to live in and make sense of a postmodern era where multiple subjectivities, intertextuality, and social and cultural heterogeneity are more conducive to rhizomatic epistemologies in which knowledge is formed through multiple, non-linear connections of thought.

In this paper I argue that addressing the four questions posed about curriculum and distance education will provide a framework for curriculum designers of distance education to create what some have called a postmodern curriculum. Slattery (1995) indicates that a postmodern curriculum “...will encourage autobiographical reflection, narrative inquiry, revisionist interpretation, and contextual understanding.” Such an approach to curriculum leads to learning that is deeply personal and contextual while remaining historical. Such a curriculum would lead to what Gregory Ulmer calls “conductive reasoning.”

According to Ulmer people reason and classify as much by means of images and narrative as by logic and

argument. In explaining his notion of "conductive reasoning" he writes that "aesthetic and narrative forms associated with collage and conductive reasoning would explore dream-like logic, displacement, representational devices of collage, citation or appropriation, juxtaposition, fragmentation." Conductive reasoning is not the type of cognition promoted by traditional forms of instructional design within distance education, which, in Ulmer's language, "...promotes the dominant analytical-referential style of thought, which sets itself apart from and opposes all other styles of cognition, taking them at best as objects of study." He goes on to say, "The desire to know, the love of learning, in any case is experienced emotionally, carried not in arguments but in images and stories, at the level of memory." He argues for pedagogies not constrained by the "poetics of realism"; that no longer strive for complete coverage.

To explore the notions put forth by a postmodern curriculum and conductive reasoning, this paper will discuss four questions that distance educators may wish to consider when designing curriculum. These questions center around the analysis of curriculum as a dynamic mechanism for the negotiation of social relationships and multiple knowledges.

These questions will be answered from my experience designing and creating a web site that provides cancer patients, doctors, healthcare professionals, and patient supporters with a forum to write and rewrite specific aspects of their experiences confronting cancer. The site was created to support cancer patients and healthcare professionals in creating non-linear, flexible discursive spaces for cancer treatment. It exists as a pedagogical space for people confronting cancer to find their own meanings about cancer (i.e. conductive reasoning). It exists as a curriculum that has taken into consideration the four questions posed below. The site uses media including text, audio, and animations to provide an environment for individuals addressing cancer to reflect upon and rethink their identities and roles as cancer patients and care providers.

The four questions that I ask include:

- What counts as knowledge in distance education?
- Who does distance education think that a student is?
- What counts as pedagogy in distance education?

- What counts as computer interactivity in distance education?

1) What counts as knowledge in distance education?

As Kliebard (1992) points out, decisions about what knowledge is valued in a curriculum historically have been “half conscious” and are often tied to issues including class allegiances and self interest. He notes how the social context of a particular time creates different access to knowledge. This is evident in current distance education practices that are influenced by cognitive conceptions of learning (Gagné et al, 1988) which are developed through linear, rational models of instructional design (Dick and Carey, 1990). In posing this question about what counts as knowledge in distance education, one of the things that I am asking is how do the “half conscious” decisions about curriculum impact different people’s access to knowledge delivered from a distance? This is directed related to the question of, “Who’s interests are served by particular kinds of knowledge?”

Noble (1997) warns of corporate promoters of distance education who seek to “create a reliable cadre of adaptable ‘problem solvers’ and technicians.” In this question about knowledge, I hope to make a distinction between technical knowing (that represents the most common leaning in distance education) and ontological knowing (Oliver, 1989). According to Oliver, “Technical knowing refers to adaptive, publicly transferable information and skill; ontological knowing refers to more diffuse apprehension of reality, in the nature of liturgical or artistic engagement.” Ontological knowing is closely related Ulmer’s conductive reasoning in that both notions support local, non-linear, associative kinds of learning and knowledge that are not easy to assess using traditional instruments..

Epistemological questions such as this, when addressed from a social and cultural perspective, explore the relationship between knowledge and power which come together through discourse. Discourse in its most general sense can be defined as language performed in specific social and cultural contexts. Within this definition, discourse describes how language considered through specific contexts can make specific meanings and understandings (i.e. knowledge) possible while excluding others. In a postmodern society, individuals do not encounter a single monolithic language, instead they communicate using multiple languages (i.e. discourses) that vary by cultural context. As Lyotard (1984) observes, ways of legitimizing knowledge are

always provisional and temporary. Meaning is not something reflected and expressed in language it is produced by language. Foucault (1981) argues that discourses regulate and discipline populations by constituting fields of knowledge. Therefore in asking the question of what counts as knowledge in distance education courses and curricula, I am asking what discourses can be identified within a distance course and curriculum and how do these discourses make certain knowledges possible and impossible. Does a distance education course train “problem solvers” and “technicians” as Noble claims or can we design courses that create ontological knowing and conductive reasoning?

By asking this question, I hope to challenge the computer/machine metaphor of traditional, cognitive approaches to distance education design that often address students as information processors. I invite the designers of distance education to create new forms of pedagogical address that are more in line with ontological knowing and conductive reasoning. Questions of address represent important considerations for distance educators and distance education designers who often never see their students/audience face-to-face. I would like to consider the notion of address more closely in the next question.

1) Who does distance education think that a student is?

This questions relates to the analytical concept know as “mode of address” (Ellsworth, 1997) that allows one to trace how power gets articulated to knowledge by the ways an online course or curriculum offer particular social and cultural positions to students. It asks, for example, what does the imagery, language, and structure of an online course make possible and impossible for a student’s learning. Looking at mode of address raises questions about pedagogy by asking "who does a piece of media (or pedagogy) think you are" in terms of your subjectivities (i.e. race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, etc). While media interpretations are varied, some readings are more likely than others, depending on a media's mode of address and how that media hail specific positions and subjectivities within the student. Reflecting upon a distance education course’s “mode of address” provides the context to ask what social positions are being offered to students.

Decisions in media design are based on (often unconscious) assumptions about who the user is in terms of her or his race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability and gender and what cultural competencies s/he possesses (Kress, 1999) . Users must take up the offered metaphors and structures and

negotiate their own meanings. The distance education student, however, is rarely fully aware of who the text thinks s/he is. Often, multiple modes of address occur simultaneously, adding layers of complexity to individual interpretations, confounding the intended logic of a text.

The importance of considering mode of address for distance educators lies in the way that it closely links the content of a lesson or curriculum with the presentation of that content. In this sense the content becomes inscribed by the delivery medium and vice versa -- one cannot separate the content from the mode of address of the content. For example, the discourse(s) of the content - its tone, visual representations, and icons - all possess interpretive structures that have implications for the way that a distance course hails the learner. Therefore, the same information will be read quite differently based on its mode of address.

In order to help answer the question of how does one create a responsive pedagogy that engages multiple modes of address, I have developed a set of questions that I used in CancerShock in order to think about how the site addressed its audience. These questions include:

- Who is being addressed (i.e. who does the distance course / curriculum think the audience is)?
- What assumptions does the course/curriculum make about the person's race, gender, class, age, ethnicity, social status, physical ability, size, educational achievement, geography, sexuality, political ideology, etc. ?
- How might learners who are not part of the imagined/intended audience read the distance course/curriculum?
- Where might slippages, negotiations, and contradictions between the intended meaning and the constructed meaning occur?
- How might these slippages, negotiations, and contradictions be put to productive pedagogical uses?
- What kinds of readers have access to the language and codes of the distance course / curriculum? What groups do they belong to?
- How are the readers being addressed?
- Who is not being addressed?
- Who is speaking (e.g. teacher, student, expert)?
- What is the tone of the speaker?

- Is this form of address part of a larger discourse?
- How is the reader invited into the discourse, for instance, as consumer, as equal, as outsider?

Thinking about how a student is addressed in an online course has direct implications for what counts as pedagogy in distance education.

2) What counts as pedagogy in distance education?

Pedagogy specifically focuses on the teaching aspect of education in relation to learning. McWilliam (1991) warns of the bifurcation of teaching and learning in which one finds a “preference for substituting the term ‘delivery’ for teaching, and/or the substitution of ‘instructional designer’ for ‘teacher.’” She notes that this trend is marked by a use of pedagogy to erase teaching from learning. This warning can directly be addressed to distance education in which “delivery” and “instructional design” are a significant part of the discourse, when often creating a “teacher-proof” course is part of the design objective .

McWilliam goes on to describe theoretical and political work being done across the humanities and performing and visual areas in relation to pedagogy that create powerful reminders, “of the importance of the irrational, the excessive –even the grotesque—to the production of knowledge.” I draw upon this work to ask “What counts as pedagogy?” for distance education. I encourage distance educators to create pedagogical contexts and environments that invite teachers, students, and curriculum designers to explore learning that takes into account visual pleasure, intertextuality, the play of the unconscious, reception contexts and other aspects of spectatorship as they relate to pedagogy.

After centuries of teaching represented as the transfer of information, culture and skills from one person to another or group of others we have come to a point in educational history when it is possible for educational content and pedagogy to be totally mediated by sources other than a human being. Of course, books and other educational media like video and film have delivered educational content, however the communication was one way from media to audience. Connected computers allow for the interaction to flow two ways from the content and back to the content. In the context of the proliferation of the computer and its evolution through new media, it is important to ask what are

the implications of this adoption and growing ubiquity on teaching.

Based on the continued adoption of connected computers and the social shifts created by an information-based economy and digital culture (Negroponte, 1996), new media are challenging and destabilizing what it means to teach and learn. They are causing educational theorists, teachers and lay people to reevaluate the role of the teacher and what counts as “educational” in light of dense and shifting information landscape that requires people to develop skills to abstract, package, and communicate information (Reich, 1992). This creates pressures on the curriculum and in teaching to develop ways to help students develop relationships with the digital world, relationships that are based on the subjective positions of students. Therefore I would suggest a notion of curriculum in which curriculum provides mechanisms and pedagogies that do not teach a static knowledge base but use the constantly morphing information landscape that lives on the Internet as a subject position – a position created by shifting discourses - in which curriculum creates ties between the subject position of new media processes (i.e. information that is highly dynamic, volatile, and intertextual) and the learner/audience/student. For example, this could take the form of narrative pedagogies in which a curriculum helps students to construct narratives about information, much the same way that CancerShock tries to help its audience tell stories about cancer. These narrative pedagogies could incorporate notions of agency by using strategies of repetition, reconceptualization, and resignification in order to (re)tell stories about information/content/knowledge/skills (i.e. “educational” content) that address and incorporate the individual’s multiple positions in relation to that “educational” content.

If the old standards of teaching based on Tylerian curriculum models and static content cannot be sustained in the presence of new media that continually decenter and transgress the boundaries of knowledge and understanding, then how should this re-negotiation of the terms of teaching occur? A few of the themes that resulted from the design of CancerShock indicate some areas to consider. One is the notion of communities of learners who are able to come together online to help each other learn. The advantage of these communities is that because they gather to meet very specific pedagogical

goals (e.g. to talk about a particular kind of cancer) they arrive with a set of experiences (e.g. in the case of cancer, experience with doctors, treatments, etc) and subject positions (e.g. as cancer patients in Western industrialized societies) that give them a particular insight (e.g. based on their experience with treatments) and skill (e.g. to evaluate medical information and their bodies) in addressing each other from multiple positions (e.g. based on gender, class, race, nation, sexuality, life experience, etc). They have an understanding (e.g. based on common experiences) of how cultural models (e.g. based on what narratives they tell about cancer like restitution, quest, etc) and subject positions (e.g. cancer patient, spouse, sibling, etc.) intersect while addressing particular experiences like cancer.

Therefore, one way that I would answer the question of how do you design distance education curricula that addresses people from different positions and discourses is to create a space that attracts and invites people into particular subject positions. This might mean hailing and inviting the audience based on subject positions (i.e. African-American women of a particular class from a particular part of the country with breast cancer) and/or emotional states of mind (i.e. scared, confused). One could hail and invite users into these positions by the mode of address of the text and aesthetics (colors, images, music, sounds, font selection, etc) of the media. These invitations would allow people to qualify themselves (i.e. by saying “this is a web site that has created a place for me”) as a potential member of an online community. But more than this, such invitations create the terms of communication and interaction within the community. For example, I am fulfilling both aspects (i.e. 1) invitation and 2) setting terms of interaction) of the invitation when I say in the “welcome” of CancerShock that it is 1) a place for people with cancer and their supporters to 2) find new ways of talking about cancer. In the FAQ it explains in more detail some of the things that are meant by finding news ways to talk about cancer.

Another site of renegotiation is an extension of the previous point. Not only should one consider how one attracts and invites people into a pedagogical spaces but once they are there, the role of teacher (i.e. the person or pedagogy that sets and maintains the terms of teaching) shifts to that of moderator (i.e. person or pedagogy that creates and sustains the relationships between the audience/learners and the content and each other). Teacher as moderator creates and maintains the relationships between the fluid virtualized borders of the audience’s subjectivities and the educational

content. The teacher as moderator understands the unique performativity of subjectivity that online communication fosters and is able to make productive the control that people exert over the representations of their subjectivity online.

Moderating online discussions requires a new set of skills (i.e. making productive the virtualized performativity of subject positions) that can't just be the transfer of classroom management skills but requires a sensitivity to the medium that involves an understanding of how people negotiate their social existence and relationships virtually. These negotiations are leading to new constructions of subject positions/cultural models, based on the virtualized performativity of subject positions, that people are bringing to virtual learning environments. These constructions are less anchored to traditional subject positions like gender, race, physical ability, sexuality, etc that are tied to the real world experiences and interpretations of people that are based on the physical/visible experience of another. Instead notions of performativity and self-representation become opportunities for individual agency if these moments are fostered, through the promotion of reflectivity and reflexivity, by the pedagogy of the new media. A new media pedagogy that is responsive to virtualized performativity of subjectivities and self-representation within the audience creates modes of address that don't address the learner as fixed and static. Instead, it becomes easier online to invite distance education learners into positions that they don't inhabit in their physical world. For example, in an online learning environment a teacher (real or virtual) could invite someone that occupies particular subject positions in their physical world to other positions that they can't otherwise occupy (e.g. inviting a man to take on the role of a women in an online discussion about a social or historical issue).

The teachable moment, the moment in which the learner moves away from centered, unchanging conceptions of self to the fluid borders of subjectivity, discourse and knowledge, still exist in the form of opportunities to create new knowledge based on existing experiences, but its virtual manifestation may feel quite different because new knowledge will not only feed back to one's real world/physical existence but to one's virtual existence, as well. Based on the current state of new media as a learning tool, the teachable online moment represents an experience marked by a combination of both virtual (more fluid, less defined positions) and real world (bounded in space, time, and physicality). This simulacra between real and virtual will require distance

educators to build relevance, connecting learning to both virtual and real world subjectivities, while addressing the teachable moment to both kinds of experience. This involves a new media pedagogy that moves fluidly between these experiences. This shatters existing assumptions and cultural/historical constructions of students that locate them as definable and addressable. The displacement of these assumptions impacts what is considered computer interactivity in computer based distance education.

4) What counts as computer interactivity in distance education?

While the promise of complex interactivity has continually been utilized to promote computers as educational tools, the reality reveals narrow forms of interaction made by simplistic responses to human input (Laurel, 1993). This limited interactivity has been masked by graphics, animations and videos that create the appearance of dynamic content but add little pedagogically. This is not a problem of technology, rather, it is a design issue. Certainly technology presents some inherent limitations to what it can accomplish educationally, however, some of these limitations are determined by socially and culturally structured blind spots in human imagination.

By posing the question, “What counts as computer interactivity?” distance educators are asked to look at how and when a computer program or an instructor from a distance interacts with students. Outcomes-based design objectives create different kinds of interactions compared to design approaches influenced by the goal to create ontological knowing. This question not only includes considering the quantity of interactions (i.e. is a computer-based course offering a linear slideshow with little interaction?) but, more importantly, the quality of interactions. By considering quality I hope to instill a notion that learning is a social act done in particular historical contexts in which learning is connected to those local contexts.

While computer-based learning in the form of tutorials, drill and practice lessons, simulations, etc has a relatively short history, having been in existence for the past two decades, I would like to suggest, based on the widespread adoption of computers across all segments of society and the rapid growth of the Internet over the past five years, that there has been new changes in the way that people learn with computers as the result of the emergence of new media. New media not only provide for more, higher resolution graphics and video and clearer more complex sound, but they offer interactions between interconnected computers on networks like the

Internet. This not only provides an ease of content delivery but it allows for people to interact with one another while learning. Previous computer-based learning opportunities occurred on solitary computers or small clusters of computers connected in local area networks (LANs). The scale of this connectivity has expanded to an International level.

The implications of this connectivity allows people to interact with educational new media from a variety of locations. They can be at a school, at home, a public library, or at work while accessing an online course. Therefore one of the shifts in interactivity have occurred at the level of access. This has specific implications for the way that educational new media is designed, especially new media that try to address people at the multiplicity of their subject positions. A person accessing an online course from home will have different needs than someone accessing it from a public place like a library, where people are around or work where network administrators may be monitoring employees computer activities.

While I did not consider this in the design of CancerShock, the design of the site made me consider a new media pedagogy that offers content differently according to the locations (physical, emotional, discursive) with which someone accesses a learning environment. For example, if someone is using their computer while wearing a robe at home they are likely to be in different subject position then when they are wearing a suit at work. Wearing the robe may be indicative of a state of mind in which the person is relaxing in their private, personal space while wearing a suit, a public communication of formality and custom, may indicate more task oriented goals associated with work. This is just one example, but there are numerous examples based on location, role, and state of mind that could be addressed in a new media pedagogy that is able to present multiple modes of address. Such a new media pedagogy could be more responsive to meeting people, like cancer patients, at the emotional/intellectual/discursive level at which they wish to be addressed.

Such a responsive new media pedagogy could be user-defined because it would be difficult for a new media program to sense where a person wants to be met in terms of address. For example, the user could select the language that they wish to communicate through. The language selected could be defined by formality, local idiom, or tone. Selecting a particular language could adjust many aspects of the navigation and content presentation and structure. The user selection would go beyond current user controllable categories like font,

color and presentation variables to include language, representation, and discourse (i.e. how would one like cancer represented). Following such a model, new media interaction becomes a collaboration between program and user rather than a one way communication from program to user. It should be noted that even if one considers such a collaborative notion of interactivity that the experience will still be bounded with the choices programmed into the mediated experience.

Conclusions

Streibel (1998) observes that computers are not neutral delivery systems, they are “environments in which certain values, biases, and characteristics are played out.” The four questions that I have posed to distance educators in this paper work to articulate the non-neutrality of computers as transmitters of curriculum while showing how these inherent biases can be put to use to create rich intertextual environments that promote non-prescriptive spaces for learning.

There is little doubt that distance education will continue to grow in coming years across all levels of education. The pedagogical models that guide this growth present important considerations that deserve close scrutiny and criticism. In addressing the four questions of this paper, I have shown one way how the design of distance education can be influenced by cultural studies approaches to media reception and pedagogy. By offering this perspective, I have suggested distance education practices that possess greater sensitivity to audience / author / text relationships by encouraging distance educators and designers to take into account social and cultural differences and identities, contexts of viewing, and historical moments of learning.

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[1] See for example <http://www.cbt.com>