



08 » Time, Ownership, and the VLE

Oct 2005 This is the first of several posts I'll be making about stuff I learned at yesterday's conference at FIT--which was *excellent*. It's not often that I go to a conference where I find every single speaker to be interesting, but this was certainly the case here. (Raymond Yee apparently live-blogged...er...live-wiki'ed the first part of the day.)

Anyway, keynote speaker Rachel Smith pointed out a great little project called *Dracula Blogged*. Basically, the author, noting that *Dracula* is written as a series of dated journal entries, decided it might be cool to republish the novel as a weblog, posting each entry on the same calendar day (e.g, October 6th) as the dated entry in the novel. I think the success of this experiment underlines a couple of attributes that we need to think about for next-generation VLE's.

One of the most obvious cool things about *Dracula Blogged* is the temporal aspect. The story unfolds as it was imagined. If three days pass between posts...er...entries, then the reader has to wait three days to find out what happens next. This temporal dynamism is typically challenging to reproduce in an online class. And yet, it is a central element to many, many successful F2F classes. A good teacher will often design a class experience to unfold like a mystery novel, first posing a problem, then allowing the students gather and analyze clues, and finally climaxing with the answer to the whodunnit (or, occasionally, teasing with a cliffhanger) near the end of the class period. While it is *possible* to construct this sort of narrative suspense in a hypertextual medium (as *Dracula Blogged* demonstrates), it isn't easy. In fact, one of the strengths of the web is precisely that it weakens linearity--including the linearity of story lines.

The most sophisticated way in which today's LMS's attempt to recover some of this narrative power for online teachers is through various sorts of selective release tools, which enable teachers to set conditionals on content access by the student, e.g., show this document only after September 3rd, show this document only if the student scored below 70% on test #2, etc. These tools are becoming increasingly powerful and cumbersome in equal measure. One of the reasons that I am high on LAMS is that it restores some of that narrative power in an *intuitive* way. It uses a drag-and-drop flowchart metaphor, representing the flow of learning experiences in a way that teachers (or, at least, the particular teacher writing this blog post) tend to think about structuring class experiences. The affordances are obvious and there are very few unnecessary clicks required to navigate the system.

Anyway, a second cool thing about *Dracula Blogged* is its success as a social experience. Because the blog software enabled per-post comments, readers began spontaneously annotating each entry, wikipedia-style. Naturally, I couldn't resist showing

this to my wife, who has a lifelong passion for teaching literature. As we began playing around with different ideas for using this novel-as-a-blog method in the classroom, she suggested that it would be cool to have the option of toggling students' access to their peers' comments off and on. Sometimes you want everyone to see what everyone else is saying in order to generate conversation. Other times, though, you want to give each student the opportunity to think independently *before* allowing him or her to be influenced by the other students in the class.

This got me to thinking about ownership of speech acts--which, after all, are what blog comments are. We typically think about comments on a post as metadata about the post itself and design our software systems to mirror that conception. But when you think about showing or hiding a particular person's comments, you start to think about the comments as metadata about the *author*. And gosh, isn't that one of the main goals of the exercise in the first place? Aren't we at least as interested in what the comment says about the student as we are in what the comment says about the novel?

So a VLE (or LMS, depending on where you draw functional boundary lines) should probably be structured to consider a student's speech utterances (and assignments, and so on) as metadata about the student, first and foremost. One of the benefits of this approach is something like an auto-generated ePortfolio. For example, if you go to view my posting history on the OpenACS web site, you can read through my early development as a student of online learning and knowledge management applications, just as this weblog is a kind of journal of my more recent development. Most of the posts themselves are completely uninteresting as metadata about conversations whose shelf life has long since passed. To me personally, though, they still have value because I can use them to reconstruct an important chunk of my intellectual development. (And I'm relieved to note that I am significantly less stupid today than I was in early 2000.)

I believe that focus on the teacher's ability to construct and control experiential narratives and on the student's ability to own his or her contributions to the class are two important areas of further development for next-generation learning management systems.