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THE DECOMPOSITION OF PRIVACY IN VIRTUAL LEARNING ROOMS AS A LEARNING OBJECTIVE.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the issues in the development of the e-society is the shift in the distribution and the corridors of power (Poster 1995). This shift does not only affect politics, but also the field of education: Introducing computer technology as a dominant medium induces a shift of power in teaching and learning processes. The impact of computer technology on teaching and learning is obvious in the first place: Keeping the audience attentive with upfront teaching in a room were every student uses an own computer is hardly possible. Self directed and cooperative learning becomes a mandatory issue in this situation. Thus the control on the learning process is shifted from the teacher to the learner. At the same time virtual learning environments (VLEs) that often accompany the use of computers in classrooms extend the teacher's power to control the learning process far behind the classroom. Logfiles, email timestamps, IP addresses etc. provide control wherever the learner is. A simple example is the web 2.0 – tool Mediawiki (the software behind Wikipedia). Mediawiki provides version control, that is to say: It is recorded who changes what when. At the same time the webserver behind Mediawiki records every access with timestamp, IP – address of the learners computer, operating system of the learners computer etc. Combining this informations provides detailed informations about who learns when where and how. Thus the control on the learning process is shifted from the learner to the teacher. This shift includes an extension of control in space. The learner is under surveillance not only in the classroom, but also at home, in a pub or wherever and whenever learning takes place.

This extension of control means a decomposition of privacy. While web 2.0 technologies promise open and self directed learning, the internet technologies allow for an extended control of learning. Learners are under control at any place and at any time they learn. The power of the teacher is extended from the classroom into private spaces. Teachers enter formerly private areas by emails, instant messenger, etc.

As the shift of power in politics this shift in the distribution and the corridors of power in education is connected with the bias of computer technology. Therefore, the bias of the medium computer technology is a good starting point to analyse the shift of power that show up in the decomposition of privacy (Innis 1951).

As Innis has shown a medium like the internet has a bias towards control of space and not towards control of time. Considering this shift of power the understanding of power in VLEs becomes an issue for research. This paper argues that (1) power can neither be detached from educational processes nor from research processes, but understood and shaped, (2) the current shift of power in teaching and learning reflects the bias of the internet as a space for human behaviour and (3) understanding the decomposition of privacy as as shift of power fostered by the bias of computer technology asks for a reflected use of power by shaping the software and the content used in VLEs.

2. POWER AND REASON

Most often enlightenment aims at making power visible in order to overcome power by reason. Unfortunately this strategy faces the problem that reason itself necessarily includes power. Adorno and Horkheimer (1969) proved the contamination of enlightment by power. They suggested that power can not be detached from enlightenment. Every reasoning about power, and therefore every research on power, is inherently poisoned with power, since it takes place in a society where power is taking place. From this point of view we have no chance to escape from power by reasoning, since every reasoning has already been affected by power before it could take place. Enlightenment, reflection or reasoning are from this point of view not capable of funding a well informed position beside power.

But this last sentence already includes a way out of this dilemma. The phenomenon that shows up in the

sentence before the last sentence is: While reason is always influenced by power, this influence can again be understood. Reason does not depend completely on power. There always is a way to reflect power, otherwise this statement would not be possible. Of course this reflection is not offering a comfortable position that allows for an awareness of power at large. The reflection of power has again to be considered as influenced by power (which can again be reflected). But using the suggested relational and dialectical method of thinking the influence of power and being aware of the influence of power at the same time offers at least the possibility to reflect power in some respect.

The decision to take this viewpoint is completely founded by reason, but includes power as well. This is necessarily the case since the decision for the taken viewpoint takes place under the condition of uncomplete knowledge. Therefore it is in some respect a decision that could not be founded completely by reason. At the moment of decision it includes necessarily power in some respect. It does not stay that way: later on, that is: after the decision is made, it could be reflected and founded by reason. Power and reason are thought as connected in space and divided in time, and the distance in time opens up the space for the reflection intended in this paper.

From this viewpoint power can not be detached from educational processes since every education takes place in a society where power takes place. The same applies to our viewpoint. But we are aware of and able to reflect the influence of power on our viewpoint as we are able to reflect the influence of power on VLEs. The bias of the internet influences our perception of teaching and learning in VLEs and at the same time we are able to become aware of the bias. This moment of power can be reflected, which again shows the dialectical method we intend to apply here. This method offers a new view on the decomposition of privacy by the internet as a social space for teaching and learning where power and therefore politics gain importance.

3. POWER AND SPACE

Understanding the internet as a social space, as a space of politics and power, we find a well known challenge of power. Despite the phenomena of shifting we can't deny the fact that power matters in the virtual community. There might be e.g. open content, which has changed, at the first glance, the power balance within the question of access to information and knowledge. At the second glance, we realise quickly, that the well established power plays keep going on. Not knowledge, not information, rather the process of certification becomes suddenly crucial. What is it about social spaces that provoke over and over again power asymmetries, no matter how hard people try to avoid them?

Michel Foucault's (2002) struggles with the power/knowledge relationship might help here, specially his analyses of the problem of government defined as a conduct of a person or persons (Foucault 2007). In a narrow sense this addresses the challenge of the government of the self and the other. In a broader sense it raises the problem of the conduct of conduct, which again is traditionally a problem located within spaces for education, since the objective of education is to overcome education. This raises the question how to educate people without education, or to use spaces without space. Being aware of the tricky relationship between power, knowledge and education, we outline possible alternatives how to reflect on this particular power shifting, how to deal with it from an educational point of view. That brings us into the play of questioning the way people are conducted, the way we conduct others and ourselves.

One idea might be drawn from Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Heterotopias are "real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1962). Heterotopias are spaces were deviant people (like crazy people, old people, ill people, dead people) are stored. They are rooms seperated from society at large that are intended to allow for the power of the regular, thus shaping regular people. The Internet might be considered as a collection of heterotopias since it is hardly possible to identify the regular in the internet. Thus the internet as a space that contains spaces offers a wide range of heterotopias. Formerly deviant people (like children) become regular (e.g. digital natives) and regular people become deviant (e.g. digital migrants).

This understanding of the shift of power by the bias of the internet allows to shape the use of the power of internet in education.

4. POWER AND PRIVACY

While the reputation of using power in education is scarcely above lashing on students our discussion has shown that in fact power can not be detached from educational processes. Thus we do not have the choice to avoid power in education. The bad reputation of using power in education and the attempts to transfer the power of the teacher to emancipated self-directed learners have the secondary effect to obscure power. Power is still there (since it could not be detached from education), but it is not allowed to be there. Not admitting the role of power in education makes power more effective, since the reflection of power is no longer an issue. To avoid the reflection of power is a secondary effect of learning theories that do not explicitly reflect the function of power in education. By avoiding the reflection these learning theories stabilise the existing distribution and corridors of power in education. Additionally they foster an unreflected use of power in education.

As the role of power can be reflected there is a better choice than unreflected use of power: Teachers have to use power in education in a reflected way. In particular this includes to decide where power is used and how power is performed. With computer technology there are two shapeable layers to perform power in education and a third layer that could not be shaped. The third layer is the hardware: The configuration of computers as universal, digital and electric Turing machines in a network can hardly be changed. It can be substituted by other media, and it should be considered in which cases the power of the configuration of the medium contradicts the educational objectives. One example for this is an educational objectives that asks for mandatory and confident communication. Communication through computer technology is hardly ever confident and it is less mandatory than a face to face talk (Turkle 1995); here again the decomposition of privacy shows up. If privacy is required other forms of communications, like hand written letters or face to face talks are the first choice. Concerning the hardware there are two sides of power again: The choice of the medium is one way to perform power in education, but since the choice is based on media it is influenced by the power expressed in the hardware.

While the computer hardware can hardly be changed but chosen there are two other layers that can be changed more easily. The second one is the software. As software currently executed in a computer can not be separated from the hardware every piece of software has to be regarded as a specific medium. This medium, the specific machine, the algorithm used in education can be changed by writing or rewriting code. In comparison to building a TV or a radio station writing software is quite easy. Using software to express educational ideas is a powerful way since the software can not be suspended while using the software. Users adopt themselves to software use most often in an unconscious process (Tufte 2006). While doing so they accept the ideas expressed in the software. The ideas in the software can be explicit or implicit, but it can not be avoided to express ideas in software.

That is: Power is expressed in software. We can not choose to not express power in software, but we are able to think about it. As an example: While the concept behind moodle claims to follow constructivistic learning theories (that do not reflect power in education) and therefore focuses on the construction of knowledge by the learner, it is still a certain software that forces the learner to communicate and construct knowledge following the logic of the algorithms. In this regard, the learner is not supported in constructing the knowledge in his own way, but forced to reconstruct the idea of knowledge construction expressed in the algorithms behind moodle. This leads to a contradiction: On the one hand it is claimed that individual knowledge construction is fostered, on the other hand the knowledge has to be constructed using a certain software with computer technology, which forces a certain way of knowledge construction.

Another message of moodle (as of every VLE) is the decomposition of privacy. This indicates a shift of power in teaching and learning processes that is expressed in the software. The decomposition of privacy is a learning objective expressed in software. While people use the software they get used to social spaces without privacy. This might be understood as a perfect preperation of citizens for a surveillance state. At the same time it offers new opportunities to understand power.

The last layer is the content. Turning the ideas expressed in this paper into educational content suggests itself. The fact that the decomposition of privacy in particular and the structure of power in education in general can be known claims for turning this idea into a learning objective for teachers and learners. Teaching this learning objective through a VLE might lead to bildung.

5. LITERATURE

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