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"Are they talking yet?" Online Discourse as Political Action

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Political talk is not talk about the world; it is talk that makes and remakes the world.
(Barber, 1984, p. 177).

Rationale

We have been hearing for some time about the potential value of the Internet as a forum for dialogue (Schuler, 1996). Numerous publications celebrate it as a collaborative medium for dispersed learners. Further, it has often been suggested that its collaborative nature promotes discourse that is egalitarian and inclusive (Harasim et al, 1995; Hollenbeck, 1998); these qualities both feature in our understanding of a "participatory" and "democratic" social environment (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984). This being the case, we might reasonably expect it to hold great promise as the site for public debates on government policy. These debates have traditionally taken place in select groups, to which concerned members of the have little access. Decisions are made, documents are published and policies are formulated with little participation from groups or individuals outside of these select groups.

Education policy is one realm in which greater public participation could make a significant difference to the quality of this process. The stakeholders are many, including the students themselves (in public, private and home schools), parents, teachers, school administrators, teachers' federation officers and ministry personnel. The Internet – with its capacity for asynchronous and real-time discussion, the sharing of documents and personal insights across vast distances – therefore presents itself as a medium for bringing these groups and their respective concerns into one single forum. It is an environment in which concerned citizens might discuss policy matters with each other and offer advice to decision makers in only the time it takes to send an email.

The research community's understanding of this medium remains sketchy, however, with the balance of publication still equating the simple adoption of new technologies with social change, and in particular, progress

(Kester, 1998; Kling, 1996). With little data to go on, we cannot fully assess the potential of virtual environments for useful, coherent dialogue; dialogue which contributes to rather than detracts from crucial issues and allows the participants to participate in a deliberative democracy of the kind envisioned by Mill or Rousseau. A site which fosters valuable public discourse demands time and commitment from the users and the hosts of the medium, as well as those whose work may be affected by this discourse: the policy makers themselves. We need to understand the influence of interventions by moderators or emergent leaders on the talk and on the way in which other forms of information (including newspaper articles, research material, staff-room conversations, policy group meetings) are referenced within that context. In other words, we are still asking, What kind of medium have we made?

The Research

This paper is derived from the results chapter of my doctoral work in educational technology. It reports on my experience of moderating a public, web-based discussion forum on the future of educational technology policy in British Columbia (Public Knowledge Policy Forum, or PKPF; <http://www.pkp.bctf.bc.ca>). The site was to act as an arena for sharing and shaping public opinion and was developed with the cooperation of the BC Ministry of Education; officers from the Educational Technology Branch provided documents for publication on our site and visited the discussion boards regularly.

The PKPF was created via a collaboration between UBC, the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF) and Simon Fraser University. The BCTF had already been instrumental in forming a committee at the Ministry in 1999 (TLETAC; the Teaching, Learning and Education Technology Advisory Committee) which ultimately reported to the Deputy Minister for Education, Charles Ungerleider. This committee was unusual in that it included a large percentage of practising teachers but no representatives from industry.

Learning to Moderate

I developed my goals and expectations as a site moderator through three strands of experience. The first of these was a voluntary position as moderator for eWorld, Apple's former online service (1995-96). It was here that I received real-time training in hosting real-time chat among diverse groups of people. The

atmosphere among visitors to eWorld was cordial, welcoming and allowed for a great deal of verbal banter. Among the hosts themselves, suggestions on how to improve one's style were always forthcoming and delivered with goodwill.

My work for the Ministry of Education (British Columbia) subsequently helped me to develop a sense of what moderating a policy forum - rather than a social space - might entail. Early in 1999 I was recruited by the Ministry advisory committee on technology (TLETAC) as an assistant to the research sub-committee. I attended meetings moderated by a policy consultant who had been jointly recruited by the BC Teachers' Federation and the Ministry. I watched how she kept time and order amongst these people while - on occasion - several would request the floor at once. I hoped to convey a similar sense of generosity and hospitality toward a diverse set of opinions in my own work as a moderator.

I also drew on my readings of the online moderation literature, which reminded me that vigilance in our language practice is essential, both online and off. I drew heavily on the work of John Coate, who emphasises the importance of hospitality in online settings. As a moderator you are effectively the host of a gathering and must learn to hold entertaining exchanges or your guests will not return. They might need to be gracious, informal conversations, but they could equally be characterised by hostility and ritualised put-downs. A host needs to establish the colour and character of the environment from the outset. Knowing how to establish rules of engagement with participants and when to step in to see that these are followed are both crucial aspects of the host or moderator's role. Visitors must know how they are expected so that everyone can be sure of a consistent environment. Many of the visitors (including the host) are strangers to each other at the beginning so it is important to err on the side of caution if you want your witty, provocative comments to cause laughter rather than offence. I also drew heavily on Howard Rheingold's recent guidelines for online behaviour (<http://www.rheingold.com>); these were a great help in shaping my attitude towards - what I hoped would be - a mature, professional environment characterised by informed debate.

The education literature corroborated my understanding of what made a "good" conferencing environment. Kuehn (1994) found that "...a conversational style of teacher messaging produces the highest levels of student participation." (p.175, in Mackinnon & Aylward, 2000). I deduced that maintaining a somewhat casual interaction style would encourage people to post; excessive formality might make the environment seem forbidding to those visitors who were unfamiliar with the bulletin board format or with the material we had posted. I was conscious that, since a person's presence is declared by their text alone, I would not be able to act on the usual visual cues. These include nodding, smiling or gesturing, "go on" (Kimball, 1996); as moderator, I would also be unable to

walk among the participants as they talked. Nonetheless, I could follow the advice of Mackinnon and Aylward, offering “periodic input” (2000, p.59) posting messages which would “clarify, to focus, to pose related queries, or to lend closure to non-productive asides.” (Ibid.).

I then moved onto literature which discussed the purpose and value of online talk in the public (non-school) sphere. I have tried to differentiate between means and ends, where talk - and online talk in particular - is construed as the means to improving the quality of public participation in decision-making, not an end in itself. This participation then promotes public knowledge about the issues at hand and the processes by which they are resolved.

I experimented with my moderation style and learned a great deal in doing so. Throughout, I hoped to appear friendly, approachable and - most importantly - available for comment or assistance within an hour or two of an email being sent. I wanted to stay away from feedback that seemed too critical or divisive. I knew that many opinions could be represented and that, while each view would be respected, consensus might be impossible. I therefore introduced each forum with a message addressing key issues with a light (but not too light) touch. I addressed my goals for the forum as follows:

To some extent we hope to promote a sense of community here. We invite the opinions of people who share a common interest in educational technology, whose interest is rooted in the province of British Columbia and who have a stake in the policy determined by the Ministry. It is, however, a brief gathering, akin to a professional development conference or a public debate at a town hall.

I also acknowledged that:

This is the first site of its kind in BC and it may be the first opportunity you have had to take part in a web-based discussion. As you find your way through the site, please don't hesitate to ask me by email if you find any part of it difficult to navigate. This is an experiment in public policy, so we'd like to hear how we might improve later incarnations of the site.

.....

Any questions or concerns voiced to me privately, by email, will remain so. Nothing sent to my inbox will ever be copied, pasted or distributed without permission. We value your contributions and trust that all

contributors in this space - although virtual - will be afforded the same dignity as if they were speaking before an audience.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you,
Your moderator,

Shula Klinger

I hoped to promote a dignified environment in which different degrees of technological literacy were expected and acceptable. I was also conscious that some visitors might be shy of public consultation exercises and hoped that the PKPF could develop into an environment of sufficient dignity and hospitality to make room for all opinions.

The practice of moderation

In moderating, I was constantly challenged by new questions. Which conversations did I join? Which participants did I respond to in private and which in public, on the forum itself? As Mill (1869) comments, "all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility." (in Acton (1972), p.79). Was the power to silence discussion mine alone? I was challenged on what I thought constituted "useful" and therefore "good" discussion. For example, did I expect or hope that everyone on the forum might agree by the end of the debate period? Did I value resolution over conflict, answers over questions? And what kind of information did I privilege? Did I read accounts of personal experience more closely than densely referenced arguments? Or was I pushing visitors toward Ministry materials?

I tried to remain conscious and critical of my position as moderator, the elements of discourse over which I had some control, and those over which I had no control at all. As the moderator, I represented the PKPF team, based at a university, and (to a point) the Ministry: the site described me as former research assistant to the Ministry committee. It said nothing about my engagement with the BC Teachers' Federation, but it did not reveal my origins (ie. that I was not a BC teacher). I wanted to remain as neutral in my presentation as possible, to avoid giving the impression that I was uncritically pro-technology.

I knew that there would be room for conflict where groups with different priorities were thrust together in dialogue, but my hopes for establishing any kind of closure within our forum were quickly diminished. My understanding of what it meant to be an impartial host also changed as I was challenged to

acknowledge my own expectations and political beliefs. For example, one might hypothesise, based on personal experience, that a union exists as a separate political entity from its members; that it discretely pursues its own ends while maintaining a public image as a union representing a membership. You might "know" that the Ministry is not "really" listening to teachers; or as one respondent puts it, "...all curriculum is politically determined ... I don't think educational considerations or educators' opinions are the foremost determining factors in Ministry policy." I struggled to lay these assumptions aside, fearing that they could limit my participation and skew both the questions I asked and the answers I received.

Outcomes

The PKPF publicised the Forum mainly among teachers, via the BC Teachers' Federation. Faxes were sent to every school in the province alerting them to the site and a notice was posted on the BCTF home page. Messages were also sent to numerous professional listservs and I made direct contact via email with some remote schools in BC. In the end, our participants included home-schooling parents, distance and online educators, ministry officers, elementary and high school teachers, parents, heads of professional associations, students and researchers.

With almost forty thousand teachers in the province of British Columbia, the task of accessing the opinion of the entire body was clearly considerable. In the end, we heard from seventy-one contributors. Many of our visitors had chosen not to post. My attention, which had previously been focused entirely on the value of public talk, was swiftly turned towards the element of listening: what did this look like online? Who was doing it? Who was conspicuously absent? Why? Several of my colleagues were more than happy to discuss their perspective on the planning process with me privately, but expressed anxiety at the prospect of sharing their thoughts online.

I then went on to analyse what those present actually did choose to say. I found that most contributors did not want to talk about Ministry documents at all. They wanted to have an agenda-setting conversation in which the order of priority was established. They wanted to know whom they were addressing, and in the case of the Ministry, to whom they were listening (the Ministry declined to join the discussion, except to address factual errors). I also observed a lingering perception that the online medium was "easy," even though many participants' experiences with online discussions have been far from straightforward. In truth, they are more usually fragmented and incoherent, very much like ordinary

conversation - yet more leaden since, being read rather than heard, they lack the fluidity and spontaneity of spoken dialogue.

Having now hosted part of my own classroom online, I have become more attuned to the challenge of listening online. My students describe their frustration at their inability to show they are listening, that they have learned or are still thinking unless they post a message themselves. They feel that the medium escapes from them and privileges those students whose hands were always the first to go up.

Conclusions and Questions for the Future

The PKPF has been a vital stage in exploring the potential of online dialogue to contribute to policy-in-the-making. Its value does not lie in its mere existence as a product or artifact. It is more of a barometer for professionals in research, education and policy making, a way of testing the climate for participatory action and planning for the rough weather in future. As it is among the first of its kind, the Public Knowledge Policy Forum offered BC educators an opportunity to observe how online dialogue might be used as a truly public arena for debate and learning, a place where individuals might undertake leadership roles, developing their ideas and establishing new perspectives for export to policy decision makers.

It has been challenging to retain my conviction in the possibility of a genuine, free and public forum. In doing work of this kind, one only has to approach two or three colleagues to see one shaking his or her head, wondering aloud if there is a point, wondering if anyone is "really listening." In having my own conviction challenged, I came to realise that political hierarchies may largely be supported by our early attempts to use communications technologies in new ways, to alter the existing lines of power and information (Hodas, 1996) described by a provincial education system. I came to see that if the population at large is to use the technology effectively, they must embrace the opportunity to speak up; however, the ability to do so is as dependent on their confidence in the virtual medium as on their technological literacy.

Finally, I have learned that we can sometimes be tripped up by our own metaphors. We regarded the online discussion as a "forum," which happens to be the term of the day as well as the name of the product we used. However, what we were really doing was provide a space for the collaborative generation of text. The journey of ideas from public debate into political motives and later policy documents can be a perilous one, so it is crucial that we understand what kind of text this was. Furthermore, if the medium we choose is to make the

textual journey more straightforward and inclusive, we must first return to the basic questions surrounding any forum:

- *Who will attend?*
- *Who will speak and who will listen? Why?*
- *Who will moderate the forum? Why?*
- *What kind of document do we hope to generate?*
- *What other outcomes do we anticipate? (eg. Documents, actions or agreements).*

For the future, I am encouraged to think about the following:

- *How long might an online forum of this kind last and why?*
- *Should the forum be an ongoing feature on the informational landscape?*
- *To which part of the policy process could the forum contribute? (eg. Agenda setting, document creation or feedback to policy documents once published).*

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