Stop the E-train! A plea for the thoughtful use of language in computer-conferenced contexts

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ABSTRACT   *In this paper, I take the position that the recently increased 'e-talk' permeating our language potentially compromises our field's professionalism by 'one-minutizing' learning that uses computer-mediated technologies. In so doing, I discuss historical aspects of adult education, the importance of language as a naming function, the evolution of the romance of cyberspace, and the need for adult and distance educators to maintain a clear sense of their practice as distinct from the amorphous clamouring of the burgeoning e-world.*

The explosion of an 'e-talk' lexicon used loosely to describe transactions that occur in computer-mediated environments threatens the integrity of the long and honourable tradition that adult education has brought to its current partnership with distance education. The plea for restraint that comprises this paper rests on a studied commitment to the continued use of Internet-based technology as a valuable tool that we now have at our disposal. Used well, Internet-based technology compounds the abilities of providers to nurture meaningful educational experiences among learners—both for those who continue to attend face-to-face classes and for those who, due largely to situational barriers, have not been able to involve themselves in campus-situated instruction.

In this paper, I lobby for a critical look at the language that we as stakeholders either use to describe our craft or allow to be used by those with whom we engage in scholarly discussion or exchange. While not reporting exhaustively on the variety of terms that has sprung up around the integration of technologies in distance education, I argue against the rampant use of those terms whose meanings have been recast by the addition of the letter 'e' to the front of them, 'e' meaning electronic. A good example is e-learning. To this, I could add e-technologies, e-tutoring, e-groups, e-instruction, e-tivities and countless others. My comments pertain to adult and higher education not only because that is where my work and experience are located but also because it appears to me that most e-talk is directed to the adult world, as manifest by the worlds of e-business, e-governance, and eBay. The affiliating flow of all things 'e' to adult undertakings has soundly embraced adults' opportunities in the educational world.

The point of my argument is this: the development and acceptance of this lexicon negatively impacts the nature and shape of the work we do. In the collective 'we', I include all administrators, scholars, teachers, learners, policymakers and stakeholders who are engaged in the facilitation of learning using computer-based Internet technology, one of the most important and revolutionary recent technologies—with the telegraph, television, and telephone—in the history of communication (de Kerckhove, 1997; Standage, 1998). Rendering our practice apparently instantly and easily accessible through 'e-talk' jargon is a reductionist activity that diminishes both its importance and the integrity that must accompany new ways of learning. It allows the solidity of viable pedagogy to become lost in a marketing jumble of promotional hype. It mimics the tendency of the training field to embrace 'one-minute' solutions. E-talk permits the exploitation of the learning process by confusing the enterprise with derivative cultures when, in fact, despite new delivery tools, the intent of education that resides behind the introduction of new technologies has not changed.

Or has it? While some colleagues have declared that 'e-education is a game distance educators can not avoid, and the game is about organizational survival' (Rumble, 2001), I believe that educators are, at heart, educators—whose genuine interests lie in the facilitation of quality learning experiences for their students. It's true, however, that the 'educational game' that teachers, administrators, and policymakers have nurtured and promoted has changed its shape as a result of the recent and energetic expansion onto new, cyber-playing fields.

The Initial Beguiling Charm of Cyberspace

The evolution of communications technologies has been exciting and newsworthy. To trace the development of such technologies through history—from print through the telegraph through image technologies and, finally, to the wired and wireless cultures of the Internet—describes a soaring arc of dynamic growth. Arguably, the breakthrough to cyberspace has been one of the most important developments in the history of communications technology:

> The early days of cyberspace were like those of the western frontier. Parallel, breakneck development of the Internet and of consumer computing devices and software quickly created an astonishing new condition; a vast, hitherto-unimagined territory began to open up for exploration … Networking fundamentally changed things—as clipper ships and railroads changed the preindustrial world—by linking the increasingly numerous individual fragments of cyberturf into one, huge expanding system. (Mitchell, 1999, p. 315)

In 1993, scholars who were gathered at the Modern Language Association meetings were already discussing the issues around the newly-evolving phenomenon of computer-mediated communication while experimenting with new language that included terms such as 'virtual world matrix', 'cyberspace' and 'the World Wide Web' (December, 1994). Practical issues of technology, electronic publishing and

design melded with broader discussions around the use of rhetoric and communication tools, as academic stakeholders recognized that scholars not only

> communicate on networks as part of their scholarly activity, but they examine electronic communication and its products as objects of study in themselves, creating insights that go beyond a technical understanding of the infrastructure to humanistic concerns of broader cultural and social effects. (December, 1994)

Subsequent explorations of the 'cultural and social effects' of evolving humanistic concerns came to rest initially within the cyber rubric, in what was perhaps an attempt to position the out-of-time, out-of-space, any place character of the Internet. Form mirrored content when cybercafes became popularized as virtual spaces for discussion in both educational and entertainment venues. Much of the emerging literature, some of it web-based, described cyberspace with an almost futuristic flair as it celebrated the behaviours and relationships of the new medium (Davie & Inskip, 1992; de Kerckhove, 1997; Gackenbach, 1998; Murray, 1999; Rheingold, 1993; Shea, 2002; Suler, 2002; Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999).

Drawing the Line between Cyberspace and Education

In its infancy, cyberspace enjoyed the novelty and excitement of a new territory that invited ownership, claiming or 'staking out' (Chu, 2002, p. A1). Literature representing a broad spectrum of interests, among them psychology, entertainment, education, and communication, sought to address a growth that was 'ad hoc, spectacular and peripatetic' (Laurie, 2001). It was suggested, however, that the 'alphabet soup of seemingly formless chaos' that purportedly described the cyberworld continued to extend 'right into online education … E-mail, bulletin boards, course support tools, as well as the Internet, are all in vortex' (Laurie, 2001). In continuing, the author's concern entertains thoughts that confuse elements of cyberspace phenomena with educational purpose:

> Part of the problem in online education has been the disassociation between all the tools and the educative elements. As developers keep working on more patches to overcome drawbacks technically, the questions must be asked: is the solution actually a conceptual one? Is there a way to make sense of, and turn these weaknesses to strengths—to move from dis-integration to integration? (Laurie, 2001)

From such implied catastrophe, the following questions arise. Is the situation so dire? Is the causality articulated in fact a fair representation of the state of technologically-enhanced education? Should cyberworld productivity be measured quantitatively, analogous to a chef fretting over having too many jars of spices? The answers are all no, the reasons expressed by Kearsley (1999) in language reminiscent of Daniel and Marquis's earlier (1979) exhortation to 'get the mixture right': 'The bottom line is that cyberspace is not about technology, but about human creativity, human spirit, and compassion for others'. Cyberspace is also not *about* education—

specifically or uniquely—and the observations that are made about universal Internet behaviours are only guardedly applicable to online learning environments (Conrad, 2002a).

Distance education, by definition and of necessity, has spawned, and will continue to spawn, endless tools that serve as conduits for practice. In like manner, the rich medium of television has moved from black and white to colour transmission, from a handful of broadcasting channels to the 500-channel universe and to the box-on-top. As an entertainment venue, it has broadened, deepened and become many times more potent than was promised by its infancy, reaching creatively to most parts of the world. Chaotic? Disintegrated? No. Diverse and competitive? Yes, as are our technologically-enhanced educational interests. It is the pressure of those forces on the integrity of adult and distance education that creates the need for this paper's argument.

Language as Determinant of Thought and Custom

It is inevitable that language should evolve to accommodate change and growth (Baron, 2000). Logan (1995) adopted Vygotsky's notion of language as a tool for 'social intercourse and generalizing thought' (p. 63) and defined language as 'a medium for both communication and cognition' (p. 63). Language changes are significant to our meaning-making. We use language to making sense out of symbols by first naming them. As Eco demonstrated in his discussion of rain and dew, naming is a fundamental and important semantic behaviour:

> How, for example, can we say that it is raining outside right now? We have to negotiate what we mean by 'rain.' It must not be confused with 'dew'; it is water on your hand, but the water shouldn't fall from the roof, otherwise it cannot be rain, and so on.

> So even such an easy statement as 'it rains,' that seems to reflect immediately what is the fact, in fact requires a negotiation. (Kingwell, 1970)

Email, the first e-word to make its way into the language, evolved to describe a new type of communication functionality. Once distinguished by an 'E' and a hyphen to denote 'electronic mail', it is now usually non-hyphenated and without its 'E'. In the way that language evolves, the word email has come to represent a new way of sending interpersonal communications that no longer requires paper, stamps, or a traditional postal system. Like the word cyberspace, email captured early on a new and important concept that garnered universal acceptance.

Cyberspace exists, and important facets of education exist within it and because of it. The establishment of a distance education culture in recent years has been described as astonishing, and, as Tapsall (2001) pointed out, 'the role of distance education in the university of the 21st century is more vital, and more difficult, than ever' (p. 44). Speaking from a culture that has been especially proactive in its use of distance technologies, in its melding of technological and commercial ventures, and writing as a self-confessed 'techno-groupie, email and Internet addict' (pp. 37–38),

Tapsall's language is already the language of commerce, and her articulation of distance education issues is nested in management frameworks such as Christensen's theory of disruptive technologies. She worries that the burgeoning and often-privately-run 'instant' education and training markets will 'win out' over more traditionally-oriented university fare as the 'higher education process is being disaggregated into constituents parts of what was a unified value chain, and the jobs of academics are being broken up' (p. 35).

That a culture of electronic commerce and an accompanying rubric have developed is undeniable. This paper does not attempt to evaluate the worth of electronic commerce to either education or to society. As educators, however, we should not be looking over our shoulders at the encroachment of technological innovation into our lives; we should not be frieze-framed by inactivity nor should we accept the seductive language that has developed to propagate other cyber-related enterprises. We have important work to do, even as our ground may indeed be shifting from the pressures of electronically-motivated change (Campion, 2001; Oblinger, 2001; Tapsall, 2001).

The Ongoing Challenge for Adult Education

As a field, adult education has struggled to locate itself within the general realm of education. It has struggled to identify its enterprise as a field, as a discipline, or as a process (Knowles, 1970). It has historically, and repeatedly, been marginalized both from its institutional homes and the public by fiscal policies. The literature of adult education, over the years, has addressed issues of identity, fit, purpose, mandate and vision, often wistfully recalling its rich heritage and history of productivity, language and citizenship education (Welton, 1998) that detailed its considerable contributions to the evolution of our social consciousness in past years.

Within the field of adult education, it has been difficult for practitioners of content areas as diverse as skills training, second language education, apprenticeship and trades, volunteerism and community activism to transcend their specialty niches and recognize a unity of purpose. If, as a field of study, adult education is to fulfil the mandate outlined by philosopher George Grant (1963) when he declared it the last hope for properly educating adults in democracy, originality and sense, we must, as practitioners, be not only diligent and enterprising but also wary and protective.

Kasworm *et al.* have added their voices to the choruses of adult educators who for decades—since the earliest golden years of citizenship orientation and social consciousness—have struggled to declare their role to the world amid identity and fiscal challenges. Following the passionate universal rhetoric of Freire, Horton, Coady, Tompkins, Corbett, Kidd, and Welton, they asked:

> As we reframe and redefine the place and role of adults in higher education, what should be our key efforts as change agents and advocates? …
> Our actions will redefine the adult learners and their reality, create more
> inclusive access and related resource funding support, and integrate

policies, learners and institutions in a lifelong learning model. (2000, p. 455)

The cyberworld is indeed with us, and, in spite of Laurie's distress with its apparent randomness and overabundance of tools, it is not inherently a bad thing. In fact, online learning provides new avenues for choice and flexibility for some adult learners [1].

Indeed, adult and distance education as a field of study could be seen by some observers to have been eclipsed by its infant offspring, computer-mediated, or online, learning. The development of e-jargon has conveniently permitted an evolution in our language that itself adds new swagger to the 'passing parades of techno-glitter' (Burge, 1999) while also giving rise to hyperbolic evaluations such as Laurie's (2001) that measure the condition of the field by the size of the parade.

The introduction of communication technologies into education should not alter, however, nor be perceived to alter, the pedagogical underpinnings of learning. The diminishing of the language that has been accompanying adult and distance education's innovative use of technologically-mediated delivery formats invites the perceived reduction of its value. Chekhov described a similar phenomenon in his famous short story 'Little Darling', in which his protagonist, Olenka, unable to deal substantively with important emotional issues, trivialized them into smaller and more manageable pieces through her use of the language as a diminutizing tool.

To fall prey to e-talk opens our educational practice to the vagaries of the next 'killer app', the Next Big Thing, or similar flavour-of-the-month profiteers. Our principles become dangerously susceptible to the reductionist tendencies of one-minute applications and 'solutions'. While seasoned educators may be able to separate the wheat from the chaff, the glittery promise of e-success that can appear to be within the grasp of novice teachers or learners by mastering a handful of e-techniques smacks of the shallowness of tips for trainers rather than reflecting the thoughtful solidity of, for example, *Making Sense of Adult Learning* (MacKeracher, 1996) or Brookfield's classic *The Skillful Teacher* (1990). Sites such as the one promoting 'The E-Learning Guide: a guide to successful e-learning projects' promise new media, solutions, and training for communications while peddling the 'E-Learning cost justification model (CD-ROM): a unique tool to cost justify your E-Learning project'. While there may be a valid market for the e-learning cost justification model CD, my concern is that its inventors have carved their entrepreneurial niche into territory that mimics education while profiting from its seat on the e-bandwagon. My stance is not, at heart, anti-entrepreneurial. Having spent 13 years in a faculty of continuing education in a largely cost-recovery system, I have an affinity for and an appreciation of the entrepreneurial model for educational purposes. The end product, however, must be sound, pedagogically-based education that respects its first principles (Burge, 1999; Daniel & Marquis, 1979; Kanuka & Conrad, 1999).

How many sites exist today to sate our collective appetites for 'solutions', for instant training, for the killer app (a particularly telling and nauseous term that has found its way into academic literature), and for the ultimate educational tool that

promises to elevate its users above all the others? They are so plentiful as to be uncountable. But retail enterprises and commerce are viable contributors to economy and society and now there is e-commerce. This paper asks only that zealous advocates and guardians of best practices in education keep separate the nature of education from those who would trade on it.

I raise a final concern in response to new literature that promises to deliver handfuls of e-tivities to construct successful online learning experience. Accommodating the sense of democratization and access that e-talk promotes, new resources offer themselves as one-stop answers to 'the craft of e-moderating' (Salmon, 2002, back cover). E-tivities 'are frameworks for active and interactive online learning. E-tivities are in the hands of the teachers themselves and promote active leaning' (Salmon, 2002, back cover). In welcoming the availability of research-based resources, I think it important to restate that rosters of dynamic e-tivities, presented efficiently by well-trained online teachers, are certainly preferable to courses that are led by poorly-prepared online facilitators that do not conform to best practices (Conrad, 2003). And although design and delivery are critically important to potential learning success, learner engagement is strongly affected by inter-related factors of community and social presence. The complex quality of community emerges as a result of learners' sense of social presence, which, shaped by external forces in learners' lives, is then brought by them *to* the learning environment. Integrated with, and responding to, the dimensions of other learners' social presence, the online group develops, over time, its own sense of character or community (Burge, 1994; Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Conrad, 2002b). To suggest to those planning online courses that potential success lies only in the 'right' combination of learning activities is to deny a very potent part of the learning transaction.

Concluding Remarks

In one of his most famous bon mots, media guru Marshall McLuhan declared that the medium was the message. A lesser known conclusion to that remark stated that the user was the content. As communicators, as educators, we are inextricably bound to our medium, our message, and the style with which we connect the two. In a technologically exciting workplace where expansionist opportunities have become part of distance education environments, we are challenged to remember both our medium and our message. The freedom and flexibility of cyberspace can serve us without owning us.

At a recent presentation to postsecondary practitioners at a Western Canadian university, I mentioned that I was writing this paper to speak against the proliferation of e-talk. The enthusiastic applause that filled the room reinforced my notion that professional decorum, in language as in all things, is still held dear.

Note

[1]   Once heralded as a broad avenue for universal access, technology has proven to be another
      agent of separation (Conrad, 2001). Statistics in adult and continuing education continue

to show that more highly educated members of society seek more education. Taken together with statistics that show that more highly educated workers earn more money and are more likely to purchase computers and other technological hardware, it can be concluded that patterns of access to education have not altered significantly in recent years. Although those learners who would have sought additional education before technology increased accessibility are still largely the receivers of education delivered at a distance, some learners who fall into the 'middle-class, educated' statistical domain—previously geographically challenged in their educational efforts—are now able to continue learning.

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