

Book review

Teaching crowds: Learning and social media

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Dron, J., & Anderson, T. (2014). *Teaching crowds: Learning and social media*. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada: Athabasca University Press (pp. 370).

In *Teaching crowds: Learning and social media*, Jon Dron and Terry Anderson examine the critical questions and emerging trends associated with the role of social software in the online learning environment. Drawing upon their extensive years of experience as online distance educators in the tertiary sector, Dron and Anderson suggest that the ability of social software to aggregate behaviour and choices is changing the nature of online learning. They contend that social software is set to become a significant feature of the online learning environment.

In ten chapters, readers are provided with a comprehensive history of the development of online learning, associated learning theories, ideas for good practice, and a little future gazing. At 370 pages, this book isn't necessarily a quick read. However, each chapter provides depth and exploration of its topic, bringing together research and practice. It is undoubtedly an extremely useful practitioner's guide that will appeal to teachers, trainers, researchers, students, and administrators.

For those who are unfamiliar with the array of social software currently available, chapter one provides a valuable overview. The authors give comprehensive examples of social software, explain the types of interactions they afford, and describe their pedagogical value in an educational context.

Chapter two examines the history and development of learning theories, pedagogies, and their associations with technology in online social learning environments. The potential and the limitations of each theory are considered in the context of online learning. The authors acknowledge that Moore's theory of transactional analysis, which defines the "distance" in "distance education" as the psychological and communication gap between teacher and learner, is applicable to learning in formal situations. However, in less formal, social situations where learning occurs in crowds, they suggest that a new model is needed. Adapting Paulsen's theory of cooperative freedom, Dron and Anderson propose their own decagon of cooperative freedoms, which define learner agency in social online learning environments. They contend that the interplay of the inverse relationships of the ten "cooperative freedoms" in social learning affects the success of the individual's experience.

In chapter three the authors encourage the reader to engage further with their conceptual model for online learning and distance education. They set out to categorise the types of interactions possible in online learning contexts in formal and informal learning situations. Contending that three main social forms of learning formerly existed (namely "groups", "nets", and "sets"), they suggest a fourth, that of "collectives", is now emerging. Each form enables interaction, whether it is one to one, one to many, or many to many. Specifically, groups define interactions in more formal educational contexts; for example, in classes or tutorials in schools and universities. Nets or networks are made up of nodes (which may be people, objects, or ideas) that connect or interact at the edges. Nets, like people and their interests, can change over time. Sets, on the other hand, are defined by the commonality or shared interest of the people they bind. Collectives are different in nature. They arise out of the aggregation of activity made possible by the internet, whereby the crowd acts as a single entity, possessing the potential to give guidance in the

learning environment. This is not to say that the forms are mutually exclusive (Schreurs et al., 2014). The authors detail intersections that manifest in familiar social organisational forms, and the social software that supports the different social forms.

The following four chapters explain in detail the characteristics of groups, networks, sets, and collectives. The authors discuss the opportunities presented by each to support learning in the online environment.

In chapter eight, Dron and Anderson describe their experiences teaching distance education students online. This chapter gives the reader an opportunity to glimpse the different interactions made possible by the affordances of social software. Helpfully, the authors share what has worked well for them, and why.

Chapter nine focuses our attention on the need to acknowledge the pitfalls when using social software in educational institutions. The authors suggest that educators should recognise the disruptive nature of the innovation and rethink the traditional learning process, reconceptualising it from that previously used for groups. But in doing so, we are warned to remember that, while socially orientated technology and software are opening up new opportunities for learning, using these innovations is not without risk.

In chapter ten the authors chart the history of higher education and, while noting current trends, engage in a little future-gazing. Suggesting that the system, still largely based on an outdated and inappropriate medieval European model, they attempt to predict the future of online learning in higher education. We are urged to recognise that facilitating learning as part of a net, set, or collective will require us to reconsider not only learning processes, but the structures and controls that surround them.

George Siemens has suggested this is one of the most important books in the field in its year of release, and it undoubtedly has the potential to be an excellent resource. It is likely to be of greatest use to those currently practising in the field, or to experienced educators new to the field of online learning. They will find the insights provided by Dron and Anderson, on teaching crowds and how crowds can teach themselves, to be invaluable.

The book can be purchased in paperback, or downloaded at no cost from:
<http://www.aupress.ca/index.php/books/120235>

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References

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