Social Networking, The "Third Place," and The Evolution of Communication

Dr. Larry Johnson, keynote address for the
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The purpose of my time with you today is to put forth a proposition that I hope will generate some pushback, or at least considerable conversation.

I'm going to use some unusual approaches — I have slides, but not really. They are images that I hope will illuminate what I am talking about, but they are not tied to my text in the usual way.

Consider them like a live Flickr stream….

The premise is simple, but touches on concepts and ideas that are well established within the academy, and it is a topic about which there may be some strongly held perspectives. That premise is that technology has not only mediated communication in countless ways, but that the very ways we communicate—and even the ways we talk and think about communication—are changing as a result.

Part of this premise is backward looking, in the sense that if we set literature and the creative side of communication aside for a moment, the formal communication strategies we have been taught in schools were often focused on how to convey lots of ideas or information (at relatively infrequent intervals) and generally in the form of written papers (like this one), books, or compilations.

Added to and fueling the premise is an admittedly unscientific assessment of how we have added to those forms in recent years. A look in almost any direction will reveal patterns of communication very different than the traditional writing in which we were trained. Small bursts of information, technology-mediated for the most part, permeate our experiences, and increasingly we have people with whom we are in contact almost constantly—and more so every day, these people are scattered across the globe.

For example, we have a backchannel going on here….and we're connecting here from all over the globe!

Mediated by new tools and new technologies that have made the marginal cost of long distance communication essentially free, both work and social activities are commonly shared by groups of people who need not be geographically near each other to be close. Our premise, simply put, is that these and similar trends represent a significant shift in the way we interact with others and in the way we understand the nature of those interactions.

I don't want to bore you with a lexicon of terms and definitions. Rather, I ask you to consider the ways that communication is changing and raise the question of how this shift can be applied to teaching, learning and creativity.

The nature of communication has undergone a substantial change in the past 20 years—and the change is not over. Email has had a profound effect on the way people keep in touch. Communications are shorter and more frequent than when letters were the norm; response time has greatly diminished; we are even surprised if someone we wish to contact does not have an email address. Although there are still a few people who print out their emails in order to read and respond to them, most of us are accustomed to the daily duty of reading and answering emails that have arrived since we turned off the computer the night before, and to keeping up with them as they trickle (or flood) in during the day.

Even as we have gotten used to email, though, the nature of communication continues to change. Instant messaging has created another method of interaction, one where the length of messages is shorter and the style of the interaction is more conversational—but where it is acceptable and common to pay partial attention. Broadcast technologies like Twitter transform these short bursts of communication from one-on-one conversations to little news (or trivia) programs: we can "tune in" when we want an update or have something to say, and "channel surf" to other activities in between updates.

The expectations we place on those we communicate with vary from medium to medium, as has always been the case.

Sending a letter through the postal mail sets up an expectation of a response that will come in days; email, in hours; instant messaging, in minutes. We expect the letter-writer to devote a certain amount of time and attention to responding.

With email, the expected time investment is smaller. With instant messaging, we understand that the other party's attention may wander between messages in some cases and remain focused on us, as with a phone call, in others.

New environments like virtual worlds present additional opportunities and challenges for communication. In such settings, there is a visual component to the online interaction that is lacking in email or instant messaging: we can see a "body" that goes with the voice or text conversation. Affordances like this can help foster a feeling of presence and give us clues about when the other person is listening, when he or she wishes to speak, and when his or her attention is directed elsewhere. This is not to say that these environments offer the same contextual cues as face-to-face communication—they do not; but there is an added dimension to interactions in these spaces that does not occur in other online contexts.

Mitch Kapor, the current chairman of the board of Linden Lab, recently said that Second Life, for example, that it "touches something deep in people." My own experience, gleaned through the NMC's research and work in that particular virtual world, echoes that observation, and the idea is part and parcel of why this new technology is so compelling.

There are many ways one might engage in real-time interaction at a distance, such as via a webinar, instant messaging, or even high-definition video conferencing, but in each of these, one never lets go of the essential reality that you are not together. Even with the best of

these, a piece of glass separates the participants. One can do a very simple test to discern this — if you move close to the screen in a video conference, no one on the other end steps out of your way. They know that you are not really there.

In a virtual world, on the other hand, the participants each make a choice to move through that glass and meet in the middle, and in so doing, extend their physical presences into the virtual space. If you conduct the same test of moving your avatar closer to another person's avatar, he or she will move away, just as he or she would in the real world. Not only has that person extended his or her physical presence into the world via an avatar, but a sense of personal space as well. The two of you both know intuitively that you are somehow actually together. You have met in the middle.

It is this simple yet profound sense of being in the same place at the same time, seeing and doing the same things, that is at the center of what is new about this technology. No other technology has this compelling characteristic. The applications for it and for bridging time, culture, and distance are endless.

This subtle change in perception is deeply significant.

Online communication tools can even increase our awareness of the movements of our professional or social contacts. Twitter, for instance, offers an at-a-glance update of things people we know happen to be doing: who is outside cleaning their gutters, who is writing a new blog post, who is about to have lunch with a friend. Clive Thompson calls this phenomenon *social proprioception,* named after the physical quality of proprioception that tells a creature where its extremities are by the reception of stimuli produced within the organism. *Social* proprioception tells us where the nodes of our community are and provides a sense of connectedness to and awareness of others without direct communication. Technologies like Twitter enable us to have this sense even when the members of our community are not within sight.

The context in which an interaction occurs has a profound effect on communication. In face-to-face encounters, factors ranging from psychological to environmental to cultural all have an effect on how the message is transmitted and how it is understood. Online communication is no less subject to context, and may bring with it additional contextual issues that will have an effect on the intended message.

The type of technology being used to facilitate the interaction, for example, has a bearing on the environmental context of the conversation. A conversation taking place through instant messaging in between meetings will have a different flavor than if the same topic were discussed in a virtual world, on the phone, or in an online meeting room.

The challenge of any communication, that of being understood, exists online as much as— maybe more so than—offline. Posts on threaded discussion forums and instant message communications are notoriously hard to decode correctly because of the lack of nuance. As more people participate in these kinds of communications, signals that were developed to add context to text-based messages, like smileys (☺) and tags (like <rant> </rant>), are slipping into the mainstream. The issue of context is far from solved, though, and continues to surface with each new mode of communication that emerges.

The vehicle for these changes is the Internet.

Increasingly, it is the "third place" (the first and second places being home and work) where people connect with friends, watch television, listen to music, build a sense of togetherness with people across the world, and provide expressions of ourselves which are themselves forms of communication. As more people turn to the Internet for professional and social purposes, we are seeing new means of communication, new places to communicate, and new avenues of interaction unfold at a rapid pace.

I see three major changes taking place:

- *New means of communication.* Internet calling services like Skype or Yahoo! Voice turn a computer, a webcam and a headset into a video phone. Blogs, while not new, have grown in usage over the last few years and are now a common way for many people to communicate their ideas to a broad audience and, in most cases, to hear back from that audience. Both Internet calling and blogs are relatively easy to accept, because they are based on understood models (telephones and magazine columns).

  It is more difficult to grasp the potential implications of forms that are not modeled on a comfortable, twentieth-century mode of communication.

  One such example is Twitter: Twitter users post short messages that usually have to do with whatever is happening to them at the time—whether it is intellectual, practical, social, or professional in nature—to create an ongoing log of activity across a community at the minute-by-minute level. Twitter is controversial precisely because it does not have an elder analog; it is a cousin of instant messaging, but its broadcast nature marks it as a different type of communication. Twitter has been described as fun, trivial, innovative, addictive, a waste of time, and potentially a powerful social networking tool; but its implications for teaching, learning and creative expression, if any, are not yet fully understood.

- *New places to communicate.* Increasingly, a computer with an Internet connection is the locus of a range of interactions in a variety of media and a gateway to an array of social spaces for work and play. Social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace and virtual environments like Second Life and World of Warcraft have become online meeting spaces where users—members, residents, or players—can interact and express themselves.

  These spaces give people a way to represent themselves (a profile or an avatar or both) and various means of communication ranging from text and voice chat to public message boards and/or private messaging. They offer a way to keep in touch with existing communities that users belong to offline, such as social and professional groups. They also make it possible for people who would not normally communicate more than a few times a year to keep in touch—colleagues met at conferences, for instance, or friends met through the online community itself.

  These online spaces draw people—and can keep people—in numbers. Facebook claims 45 million active users, nearly half of whom are associated with an educational institution; Second Life lists over a million logins in the past two months, with between forty and fifty

thousand people online at any given time; World of Warcraft has over 8 million active subscribers worldwide. YouTube serves over 100 million videos per day. In a recent NMC survey of educators using Second Life, 49% reported that time spent in Second Life has replaced their TV time, indicating that some online activities are compelling enough to displace traditional leisure time activities.

- *New avenues of interaction.* Online communication channels reduce the distance between people and allow interactions to happen more quickly than they might otherwise. Communication with distant colleagues, relatives and friends is shortened from weeks to minutes and can even be instant, allowing us to maintain stronger ties to a wider group of people than ever before. At the same time, tools like Facebook and LinkedIn help to relieve the additional social burden of these ties by making it easy to keep track of contacts and keep a record of when we last "touched" them.

  The evolution of communication raises questions about the nature of interpersonal interactions, the attractions and pitfalls of online communication, and the potential loss of traditional modes of contact.

  I am going to end with a set of questions, which is perhaps an odd way to end, but I think this topic raises more questions that it answers. In a moment, the microphone will turn to you, and I hope to hear your thoughts on these:

  - Is the nature of the way people relate to each other actually undergoing a change because of online communication? Or is interpersonal communication still essentially the same, with online modes of communication simply offering new opportunities for us to communicate (and *mis*communicate)?

  - Why is online communication even appealing? What makes people interested in the kinds of interaction that take place on Facebook, or in Second Life, or over Skype or Twitter? Why do people go online and talk to each other instead of doing something else, like cooking or watching television or skiing?

  And so I will close with that idea.

  I think it is appealing precisely because it is new, because it is immediate — and because it takes us to that third place — the one where everyone knows your name.

  Thank you.