9-1-2007

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Reschooling Society and the Promise of ee-Learning:
An Interview with Steve Eskow
by Chad Trevitte and Steve Eskow

Steve Eskow is president of the Pangaea Network, an organization currently working on education and economic development in Africa. He was formerly president of the Electronic University Network, one of the earliest online learning consortia, and throughout his career he has contributed to the growth of continuing education, distance learning programs, and the implementation of online technology in higher education at large. During his twenty-year tenure as president of SUNY Rockland Community College, Eskow helped transform the institution into a primary provider of nontraditional education in the state of New York. He has also founded two organizations—the College Consortium of International Studies (CCIS) and the International Partnership for Service Learning and Leadership (IPSL)—that provide study abroad and international service opportunities to students across the United States. Meanwhile, in addition to his various publications on distance learning and online education, Eskow continues to serve as a frequent conference speaker and workshop leader on these and other related topics.

As guest editor of this special issue of *Innovate*, Eskow granted me an insightful interview in which we discussed ee-learning, its relevance to various theories of learning, and the promise it holds for revitalizing educational practice in the academy.

Chad Trevitte [CT]: Perhaps the best place for us to begin is to discuss your understanding of ee-learning as a distinctive mode of pedagogy. How would you define the term?

Steve Eskow [SE]: The term is a hybrid one that brings together two kinds of e-learning. What I'll call "e-learning1" is *electronic learning*, in which the new communication technologies such as the computer, cell phone, or television provide the scene of instruction. The computer can house and move anywhere all the older media—the book, for example—as well as all the media and methods associated with traditional pedagogy: the lecture, the recitation, the discussion, or the tutorial. MIT is putting its laboratories online and making them available to students around the world; the British Open University is making its courses available. And simulations and the new game pedagogies begin to bring new teaching methods to the instructional scene.

What I'll call "e-learning2" is *experiential learning*, a pedagogy that uses the everyday world as the scene of instruction. There is of course a long history of attempts to bring hands-on experience into the classroom and campus, but this sort of pedagogy is much more likely to involve professional, practical, or real-world environments: offices, shopping centers, hospitals, churches, boats, mountains, or even the dinner table. In experiential learning, the distinctive attributes of an everyday scene—its activities and settings, its obligations and entitlements, its excitements and boredoms, its spaces and places and people and the problems they deal with—serve as the primary textbook for learning.

The argument is that ee-learning can bring the two scenes together in a single and powerful pedagogical practice. On the one hand, the student is situated in a scene in the everyday world, and that world, its people and its setting, becomes the textbook and teacher. On the other hand, the student uses a computer or other technology to be in easy and regular communication with other teachers and fellow students who are themselves situated in scenes of the everyday world. Students and teachers together read the textbook of their work or service or family structures, and they use information from the academic disciplines to find new meanings in those settings.

CT: This model of learning is innovative in many respects, but to what extent do you think that it is also faithful to the aims of education advocated by past scholars?

SE: As you know, Chad, there's a long history of debate between those who think the university needs to have its conversations in a space set apart from the noise of the town—Michael Oakeshott (1989) argued this persuasively—and those like Pierre Bourdieu (2000) who think that "scholastic enclosure" is a problem that needs to be overcome. For Bourdieu, this "enclosure" creates an "intellectualocentric" distance between the campus and the community that neutralizes the impact of the disciplines on students and society (2000, 41-42).

Other educational leaders expressed similar concerns well before Bourdieu. Arthur Morgan, president of Antioch College and director of the TVA in the 1930s, compared university education to a pair of shears and argued it needed the two blades of practice and theory to have the proper cutting edge (1945, 25). Harold Taylor, president of Sarah Lawrence college and another one of my teachers, expressed the matter more vividly a few decades later:

If you want to ride a horse, dance a jig, climb a mountain, build a boat, write a novel, study history, think intelligently, become educated, a certain amount of instruction in a class in the subject will be useful—perhaps for two or three sessions. After that you will need to get a horse, start dancing, climbing, building, writing, thinking and educating on your own. Otherwise you will not have learned what you need to know, that is, how in fact to do the thing you have set out to do. To learn something it is necessary to practice it. (1975, vii)

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, who had fought his own battles to reform the British school system, articulated a similar position during his later tenure at Harvard: "First-hand knowledge is the ultimate basis of intellectual life. To a large extent book-learning conveys second-hand information, and as such can never rise to the importance of immediate practice. Our goal is to see the immediate events of our lives as instances of our general ideas" (1929, 61).

Whitehead and Morgan and Taylor and all of the others who argued for a university without walls did not have the tools for a pedagogy that would allow students to be scattered in space and time and yet in regular touch with each other, with faculty, and with intellectual resources. In ee-learning, we now have the pedagogical tools to help students connect the immediate events of their lives with the propositional and conceptual learning of the academy.

CT: Your comments also bring to mind the views of another thinker—John Dewey. This philosophical connection is explicitly made in the case of one of our current features in this issue (Riedel et al. 2007).

SE: Yes: Dewey and James, all the pragmatists—as well as Emerson with his "American Scholar" address (1837)—were and are important influences. Dewey thought school leaders could bring experience into the classroom. Ivan Illich, priest and rebel, did not think that schools could be reformed in this way; instead, he claimed that they were intrinsically hostile to experience. In his view schools were by design and practice the agents of a consumer society that only served to commodify learning by accustoming students to think of knowledge as something that came in labeled packages, so that the role of teachers was simply to select the learning packages, administer them to students, and grade the results of the treatment. His proposal, then, in *Deschooling Society* (1970) was that school should be "disestablished" and that compulsory schooling should be replaced by informal ways of linking people who wanted or needed to learn something to those who could help them learn it.

There are, then, those reformers who think that the forms and forces that Illich railed against can be changed, and who believe that the teacher should bring real-world experience into our schools and colleges: The

Dewey of *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Experience and Education* (1938) would represent such a belief. And there are those like Illich who see the school as hostile to experience: stripping the world of its textures and colors; turning practice into curriculum; substituting drills, schedules, and examinations for play, work, and service.

In my judgment, the reformist agenda of Dewey—which emphasizes "reschooling" rather than "deschooling"—is certainly a more appropriate context for understanding the promise and potential of ee-learning. That is, ee-learning assumes that the new communication technologies enable us to connect the disciplines of the world and the disciplines of the academy, that these disciplines are compatible and mutually reinforcing, and that education is enhanced when the first-hand learning of the world and the second-hand learning of the academy come together.

CT: So if you regard ee-learning as a means of educational reform in the spirit of Dewey, then you would also see it as providing a better means of preparing students for their lives as professionals and as informed citizens.

SE: Yes. Jane Addams, one of those who influenced Dewey, established the early adult education programs at Hull House with just this goal in mind. In her comments about this project, she borrowed Tolstoy's phrase "the snare of preparation" to diagnose the problems she saw in her own early education: "It was not until years afterward that I came upon Tolstoy's phrase 'the snare of preparation,' which he insists we spread before the feet of young people, hopelessly entangling them in a curious inactivity at the very period of life when they are longing to construct the world anew and to conform it to their own ideals" (1912, 74). I believe ee-education holds much the same promise of avoiding this trap in higher education.

I'm looking now at a book in my bookcase titled *Binge: Campus Life in an Age of Disconnection and Excess* (Seaman 2005)—an account, I would argue, of how college students resist the snare of preparation and search for excitements and meaning outside of the classroom. "Disconnection" is another word for the separation of life and learning that Addams described.

CT: While Addams's Hull House provided an alternative model of continuing education, it was still a bricks-and-mortar institution. Yet as you suggested earlier, an ee-learning approach involves the premise that such physical structures are not necessary for effective learning. What are your further thoughts about these conflicting paradigms?

SE: First, regardless of where one stands in this debate, it seems fair enough to presume that many educators out there would agree with Addams's rationale: They do not want their students to be living in a bubble—a Foucauldian heterotopia shielded from the learnings that come from the mundane world. Is the college, then, a bubble that shields the students from such everyday encounters?

How one defines the bubble depends significantly on one's pedagogical approach. To illustrate, let me cite two articles that appeared last year in the popular press. The first, published in the *Los Angeles Times* (Silverstein 2006), relates the experience of a computer science instructor at UC Berkeley who used online technology to provide students access to his lecture notes, audio and video recordings of his lectures, and online discussions of course content. Having incorporated these resources, he discovered that among the 200 students enrolled in the course, only 20 showed up for some classes. In his comments to the reporter, the instructor referred to the experience as "demoralizing," and he concluded: "Getting students out of their media bubble to be here is getting progressively harder" (A1).

In the second article, from *The New York Times* (Gordon 2006), we have a very different view. Here we have an account of an interdisciplinary course at Trinity College in which the professor sought to expose his students to their surrounding community off campus. In this course, entitled "Invisible Cities," students were assigned the task of creating Google mashups to map out a range of distinctive social environments in Hartford and visiting these environments in person to explore them in greater detail. Eventually the students

also shared the results of their projects with local agencies in order to illustrate the potential use of this technology for community improvement efforts. In her comments about the course, one student comments: "It really helped me to realize how we live in a bubble, especially at Trinity. . . . In this class, we step outside of our bubble and get off campus" (A25).

Comparing the two sets of practices involved in these cases is instructive. On the one hand, the Berkeley professor took his kit of classroom pedagogies—the lecture, the recitation, the discussion, the exam—and put them online. He created, then, the classic distance learning or e-learning mode. With the ability to structure the learning encounters around the other routines of work and play, the campus and the classroom become dispensable. Yet the instructor, or his department, or perhaps the ethos of the university, insists that the classroom is central to the educational experience. The instructor is forced to compel reluctant students to attend his live classes. The Trinity College professor, on the other hand, uses his classroom, the online milieu and resources, and the real world as an ensemble of related pedagogies. They discuss disciplinary theory as well as their findings from the online and everyday worlds in the classroom; they use the online resources to locate learning resources; and they visit the agencies, meeting with practitioners and clients. Each element has its role and function in the pedagogy, and they are mutually enhancing.

We can take the Trinity model a step further. The faculty member can be in Boston, or Brooklyn, or Bombay. The students can be scattered in time and space. The disciplinary learnings of the classroom can take place in the virtual lecture halls, classrooms, seminar rooms, libraries, and offices created by the computer. We take one step beyond the Trinity experience, and we are completely out of the bubble and into ee-learning.

CT: The Trinity College example is a compelling one. It seems that the key factor in any case would be whether the two environments of ee-learning—the electronic learning environment and the specific environment of real-world practice—are compatible with one another, and in turn compatible with the pedagogical goals of the course.

SE: When considering online learning environments, the question of compatibility is always influenced by one's prior pedagogical investments—which tools and techniques from the classroom do we keep, and which new possibilities emerge in the new environment? For example, one strong argument that those who favor scholastic enclosure and its "intellectualocentric" distance from the world make is that the richness of the classroom—the impact of the face-to-face environment, the spoken connection with teachers and students able to enrich communication with visual and oral cues—cannot be duplicated online. This position may often go hand-in-hand with the view that the university's special calling is to foster the growth of propositional and conceptual knowledge within the academic disciplines—indeed, that only these structures can be defined as knowledge. For the sake of convenience, we might term these scholars "conceptualists"; for them, the standard for compatibility in online learning environments is most likely to remain based on the self-contained traditional classroom, where students refine their knowledge at a remove from the messier world of everyday experience.

One counterargument to this view is that the face-to-face milieu does not necessarily allow for reflective thought. When the teacher asks a question, the student is unable to say, "That is most interesting, I would like to think about that for an hour, perhaps consult a book, before I answer." That time for reflection can be achieved online if the online environment is asynchronous. Even on conceptualist grounds, then, the privileging of direct interpersonal contact in the classroom cannot be maintained. A much more radical critique of this valuing of speech over writing has also been provided by Derrida (1976) and the deconstructionists, who refer to it in terms of "phonocentrism," "logocentrism," and a dubious "metaphysics of presence."

This valuing of face-to-face classroom instruction is turned on its head in a more pragmatic way by the experientialists, who explore the impact of situation on learning. They argue that what is learned in the settings and encounters of the world—the factory, the farm, the hospital, the office, the agency—has a richness that cannot be wholly captured or simulated in a lecture, textbook, computer screen, or video game;

in a war game, the video warrior is not in harm's way. These scholars are more inclined to propose that the privileging of self-contained, face-to-face communication must be overcome if learning is to become more than what can happen within a room, virtual or otherwise. If online technology is used, the standard in this case demands that such technology should not become the primary learning environment, but should rather allow students to navigate their way through the world of everyday experience they confront.

When the experientialists argue that what is learned in the settings of the everyday world has a richness that cannot be captured or simulated in a lecture, textbook, screen, or game, they are convincing—that is, they convince me! But I am also convinced of the great power of the propositional and conceptual learning of the academic disciplines, their ability to fix learning in durable and transferable structures of knowledge.

CT: If these different perspectives already inform discussions about online learning environments, how do you see ee-learning in this context?

SE: I argue that bringing these two streams of pedagogy together in a single enterprise creates the possibility of a new institution that engages the strengths and offsets the weaknesses of both positions. The experientialists have compelling claims, but if they are adopted too rigidly they lead to a wholesale abandonment of formalized education. Conversely, the conceptualists have their own compelling claims, but if they are adopted too rigidly they lead to the very sort of "bubble" that we need to avoid in our pedagogy. The key goal is to ensure that learning environments accommodate everyday experience as well as reflective thought on the part of students, and ee-learning offers a vital means of achieving this goal.

Young people who have come to school buildings for 12 years are ready to move out of those environments and into the other places of the world, ready to become apprentices, to test themselves in work and service, and to use what happens to them in these engagements as texts for sharing and study with other students and teachers. In the university I envision, the students become members of two learning communities: the community of practice, where they gather procedural and process knowledge, and the academic community, where they connect their reflections on these experiences to the disciplines. Along the lines suggested by Riedel et al. ([2007]), I believe that the term "scholar-practitioner" can name a new partnership for education. In the case of both faculty and students, the practitioner of the everyday world and the scholar of the academy join together in one role —that of the scholar-practitioner—in the new ee-university.

My coinages, "ee-learning" and "ee-university," will not survive; they are more advertising than academy. They are intended as pointers to the possibility of a new university that brings together the pedagogical powers of experience in the everyday world and the connective powers of the new communication technologies. The development of this new university is already underway as teachers and practitioners approach it pragmatically. My hope is that naming it will speed its coming and encourage others to develop its theory and practice.

CT: Thank you, Steve, for your thoughts about ee-learning and its role in the future of higher education. Your comments will provide a helpful foundation for readers as they explore this issue of *Innovate*, and we very much appreciate your contributions as guest editor.

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