Learning Places : Building Dwelling Thinking On-Line

Lack of information is hardly our problem. Information comes at us in waves, sloshing out of the magazine rack, lapping at our computer monitors. It repeats and repeats on all-day news shows. It comes neatly packaged as sound bites, or little nuggets ready for trivia games. We have plenty of information, but it's not often the information we need. Even if it is, we need to learn how to deal with it. It's not just the amount, but the speed. Too much happens everywhere that may be important anywhere. Too much comes for us to think it over.

A serious enemy of education is a life of quick immediate intensities. Little intense bits of information delivered by sincere talking heads. Isolated serial intensities, one show or one song after another, one simplified role after another. Moments of intense experience, branded and labeled. Neither the information nor the experiences are abstract in the usual sense of the word, but they are abstract in another sense, taken from Hegel and Marx, where to call something abstract means that it has been pulled out of its constitutive relations and contexts, and so not encountered in its full reality. Education should restore those relations and contexts. It should dispel that illusory immediacy and completeness.

On-line Issues

We are all familiar with the liberal arts rant about specialized education and the need for critical thinking and a wide background in an age of mediazed superficiality. Few would disagree about the danger. But what do we do?

At Bates College, the library was redesigning its web site, and they asked me to participate in a usability study of the new pages. They presented several trial versions of the pages and asked me to locate certain information using each version. While I clicked and searched they timed me with a stopwatch and noted the sequence in which I visited the pages. I was told later, however, that when they tried the same procedure with some students, the library staff were not able to do the timing and sequencing because the students clicked, scanned, clicked, and changed pages so rapidly that the observers couldn't keep up. If what the students were looking for didn't jump out at them they were on to another page, and another. (note 1)

As an educator perhaps I should find this discouraging, since it shows that the students are scanning for bits of information instead of going for context, structure, and critical evaluation. Part of the answer to increasing the critical and evaluative component of on-line education has to involve slowing down the inhabitation of the net to provide time for thought and evaluation.

That's true, but it would be a mistake to conclude that we should teach people to read all web pages more slowly. We scan in print too. Watch how experts leaf through a series of periodical issues in their field. A deeper inhabitation is not achieved just by going slowly and analytically. Readers do that when they get near to what they are looking for. We have to teach that what to look for is not always quick bits of

information. The expert relies on an already built-up structure of categories and priorities in which to relate what is taken from the pages. The educational worry is that the web scanning student has little such background cognitive structure, or, perhaps worse, has only the uncritically accepted background forced at us by the interests trying to control the media.

The best way to have someone develop a more sophisticated cognitive and evaluative background is to help them develop it themselves in contact with the material in question. If the media glut is on-line, education ought to be there too. The learners have to spend aware time there, and try new concepts, make mistakes and get feedback. They have to stay there a while. But is there any 'there' there?

The Sense of Place

Part of what is needed on-line is more sense of place. If an on-line educational site is more than a series of pages I flip through, if it is a place where I am willing to linger, then I may have space and time to reexamine and reconstruct how I construe and evaluate information, and re-examine my values. I still would not treat every single web page or piece of email as a teacher might want me to treat a page of Shakespeare or Nietzsche. It would be the site or the location, not the individual screen-ful, that would be a place I could linger in. If I did, then I might be disposed to spend a lot of time on important screen-fuls, once I could tell which were the important ones.

In my writing I use some non-standard (read: not Microsoft) software: Nisus Writer for word processing, Storyspace for hypertext, Mailsmith for email. These come from small companies (Nisus Software, Eastgate Systems, Bare Bones Software) that each probably have between five and twenty employees. Two of the companies are supplemented by mailing lists where users share tips, observations, hopes and complaints with one another and with company people. Software-oriented mailing lists are quite common, but the lists associated with small companies develop a greater sense of belonging and ownership. Perhaps it's the shared feeling of vulnerability, or the feeling that one is part of a select few; perhaps it is a sense of connection when the president of the company answers your email; in any case you occasionally find on such lists self-congratulatory messages about the list itself and how much people enjoy its personality. That kind of self-reflexive belonging is one component of 'a sense of place' even in the limited text-only environment of email. There is a small community where I fit in, where I am at home with the conversation and feel that the horizon and the people are familiar enough that I can expose my vulnerabilities and ignorance with a little humor and confidence.

I have created mailing lists in connection with my classes, but they have never attained this level of at-home-ness. They have had questions and answers, and occasional enthusiasms and a few flame wars, but they have never had the sense of community I've noted and felt on the software lists.

Email is a restricted medium compared to what can be done on the web, and the web is restricted compared to what will be coming down the fiber in a few years. But if even email can create a sense of community, we should be able to make on-line educational environments more like places where someone would want to linger, with time to reflect and to shape and be shaped by the atmosphere of the place.

Such on-line places would need to have some amplitude, some room to wander and hang out, and those internal differentiations that allow for place creation.

The Place Debates

What does it mean to inhabit a place? Is it important to have a sense of being at home or rooted in a place? Can inhabitation be self-critical? There is a rich architectural and planning literature about place and inhabitation. (note 2) Much of that discussion involves the relation of architectural objects to the natural environment, and worries about the destruction of traditional towns and the banalities of modern planning. There are ways to transfer that debate to considerations about the net and on-line places. For instance, within that literature there is serious dispute about whether effective places need architectural centering devices and hierarchical structure. Traditionalists and modernists both urge centrality and hierarchy as a means to clear legible places, with many modernists wanting a more univocal legibility. Various kinds of deconstructionists favor labyrinthine constructions and unexpected topological connections. Most web sites opt for hierarchical organization around a few central pages, but some have experimented with more complex kinds of connectivity. There is also dispute in the architectural literature whether or not we should strive to amplify the sense of being at home in a place, with modernists and deconstructionists urging that such a sense is ideologically dangerous and defeats attempts to live with full awareness of the precarious nature of our interpretative frameworks. The underlying issue is the degree to which inhabitation can be or should be mediated by critical reflection. This is a relevant issue for educational places, and especially for those participatory on-line places that are experienced as entirely deliberate constructions, such as MOOs and MUDs. If these are put to educational use, it seems appropriate to build so as to encourage critical inhabitation, helping the user confront and reflect on the local conventions and rules as such, especially if the user has some means of influencing the content and structure of the site.

Much recent debate about place refers to Heidegger's ideas, especially those in his 1950s essays 'The Thing' and 'Building Dwelling Thinking'. Heidegger wants to show how places and things open up for us the meaningful structure of our world. Being at home is not just a nice feeling; it tells us when we are in a place that 'gathers' our world together.

Heidegger describes true places and things as events in which four aspects or dimensions come together. These include fruitful yet retiring support ('earth'), cycles of time and changing mood and atmosphere ('sky'), vocation and aspiration ('gods'), and self-aware finitude as the place of revelation ('mortals'). These dimensions are not particular beings such as rocks or clouds, although his descriptions rely on our familiarity with them. The four are aspects involved in every authentic encounter with things and places. Things and places are not fixed beings but ongoing events in which each of the dimensions comes into its own by being brought together with the others, and their particular mode of togetherness is both the place and our encounter with it. Cycles of time and atmosphere, for example, are what they are and have their meaning through their interpenetration by aspiration, surrounded by ongoing supportive presences in the open intensity that comes from awareness of oncoming death. That awareness, in turn, is what it is through its sense of vocation to be worked out amid

generous yet self-retiring things revealed in a particular temporal and mood atmosphere.

This could be translated into the language of the social and sciences--the four dimensions would become: objects, times and moods, values, and individual subjects. Heidegger would object that such a translation would be yet another example of redescribing experience in a vocabulary that reduces the revelation of things to a process going on among already revealed items. This blocks our understanding of the more basic ways in which things and places locate and define us, rather than being merely our tools or products.

Heidegger's four dimensions do suggest ways in which truer places might be constructed on-line. For an on-line site to be a place, it needs to be more than a static block of data. It needs 'earth', objects to interact with that have some independence and thickness of their own; it needs 'sky', times and changes, so that it is not always the same but varies according to its own rhythms; it needs 'gods', ideals and aspirations and calls to what we might become; it needs 'mortals', a sense that choices are meaningful in finite careers, that time makes demands and is not unlimited in amount. This sense of opening possibilities and an identity being offered and forwarded puts more 'there' there.

However, Heidegger's four dimensions are often read so as to block from the outset any attempt to create technologically mediated places. Heidegger has many negative things to say about technology, and his examples favor rural life. The four dimensions can be read as describing a deeper mode of being in the world than technology allows. This deeper dwelling would be more open to the interplay of our mortality and the rich presence of things. We can get in touch with that deeper dwelling only if we stop building technological places and renew our relations with time and nature. We are dominated by an understanding of being as raw material for manipulation. We need to change our way of thinking and living. This romantic reading of Heidegger forecloses any discussion of how we might make livable and learning places within the on-line world, which can only be seen as part of the problem.

There is another reading, however, which sees Heidegger's fourfold play as a description not of a specific primal dwelling but of the process by which any world, including the technological world, is revealed. Earth and sky can gather and we as mortals be open to the gods whether we are with jet airliners and computers, or the wine jug that Heidegger describes. In technological items a different constellation of possibilities and roles reveals a different time and new aspirations. They are in some ways less rich, and in other ways more free, than the traditional world of the wine jug. But there is no other, deeper dwelling available to us underneath the technological world. We need to learn how to live in this world more attuned to the process of its revelation. We need to grasp more authentically our groundless dwelling in the play that is a meaningful world.

In philosophical jargon, this second reading of Heidegger takes his discussion of the dimensions of our living as anti-foundational. This seems to me a better interpretation of Heidegger's ideas. It encourages us to make our places richer in those dimensions that all places share. It also warns how our inhabitation can be unduly narrowed (in the case of on-line sites: overly information-oriented).

This other reading can also encourage us to add to the play of the four dimensions gestures and creations that foreground our process of dwelling. With this we return to the issue of self-critical inhabitation. In creating a learning place we want to help people to be aware and critical not just of facts and arguments, but of the process by which they inhabit and learn. If our on-line places are more than just collections of facts, and have something of those four dimensions, there is then room for becoming more aware of how we dwell there. This awareness can be aided by writing, artworks, and architecture, on or off line, that work to question the naturalness of received structures of place and urge a deeper and more self-aware inhabitation. In the context of this discussion these can all be seen as educational gestures.

Such gestures and works are often called deconstructive, but deconstruction is not un-building. It is an attempt to show how dwelling within familiar meanings, such as a sense of enclosure and at-home-ness, arises and is supported within a play of dimensions or processes that goes beyond our ordinary conceptions of stable meanings and objects. Educational places on-line need to learn how to incorporate such gestures in order to help learners deal with the immersive and seductive qualities of the new media.

Heidegger's fourfold play offers a privileged vocabulary and an essential description of what it means to be in a place. Much debate around the notion of place fights about what is the best vocabulary for describing places. Theorists hope to find in a privileged vocabulary guidelines for designing places. While I do not think that we should be limited to one privileged vocabulary, we do need a way of thinking about places that will suggest what we might do to improve the place-quality of on-line sites. Above, I tried to show how Heidegger's fourfold could help in this regard, but I do not think that it gives us enough guidance. To discuss the sense of place on-line, We need a description of place that is general enough to include on-line places and give us guidance about what we could do to improve their place character. we need a way of characterizing places that does not reduce them to collections of data, nor claim they must resemble our most familiar and homey dwellings.

To this end I suggest the general description of a place as an extended location where a perceived (physical or virtual) expanse is linked to norms and expectations for appropriate or inappropriate actions. For example, if you and I are conversing as we walk along the street, there may be no particular relation between the character of the area we walk through and the moves we make in our conversation. Our conversation takes place in an area but that area does not function as a special place, only as a background. But if we stop and continue the conversation in a cafe or on a park bench, we may soon set up norms and expectations that create a special place for our talk. When we were walking along the sidewalk, the distance between us varied but these variations were irrelevant, at least within some culturally defined limits, but now that we are seated, when I lean forward or move away on the bench, this signals a new phase in the conversation, or changes in my attitude. The width of the bench, or the table between us, now become sites of our activity in a stronger sense than was the sidewalk or the trees we passed while walking. Highly ritualized places such as courtrooms, or concert halls, or fast food emporia, have their own normative sub-locations and behaviors; here we socialize and there there we all look in one direction: here we talk and there we are silent; here we stand in line and there we sit. (note 3)

Places -- including virtual places -- are loci of 'our' actions and expectations and norms. Some email lists may have a sense of belonging that includes local expectations for how one writes or presents one's self, but for a thicker sense of place, we need a more perceptible locale, which could range from the colored backgrounds and designs of some web pages, to the engrossing graphics in a game of Myst or Riven, to some future apparatus that you plug into and find yourself re-located into a virtual world that has all the perceptible marks of daily reality, such as William Gibson imagines in some of his novels. In this last case, the virtual world would probably be larger than the various places contained within it. It is not their virtual design that would make them places, but the way we use them and associate them with norms and expectations and meanings for action.

If there are no such appropriate ways of acting, and no 'we' correlated with local features, then a physical or virtual locale offers only a background. This is hardly trivial, for a background may influence us strongly by its shape or architectural features, as the weather influences us, but if the region does not offer significant sub-regions with differential appropriatenesses for our action, it is not yet our place. The four dimensions Heidegger speaks of do not come together specifically there. This is the case for most current on-line sites.

Places are not the result of a dominant creativity simply imposing on passive space. There is a mutual interpretation of features of the space and features of our action, each enticing the other. Qualitatively different regions and textures invite the assignment of possible actions, as we build and reinterpret ways of acting linked to features of the locale. Such place-making, however, becomes more complex with on-line places, since their background regions and textures are in fact our creations. We have to learn how to use the revisability of on-line locales to solicit mutual creation of the place, the community, and the norms of action in that place. Too many on-line locales provide only a background, often quite literally a background graphic on a web page. To make these into places where we can be and change together, the locale needs to invite more possible trajectories of action. It needs differentiated sub-places with differentiated norms and expectations.

On simple sites this might be as straightforward as indicating: read here, comment here, post notes here, chat here. But this is not enough; we need to design to suggest an appropriate style and trajectory of actions, and provide a sense of the community people can join by sharing here. For the kind of education we are speaking about, the norms need to encourage and the place permit pauses for self-reflection and change. Such environments need a user interface that does not get in the way, while still capable of a large-enough range of possible actions and responses. The environment, whether it is a perceived virtual space or just a sequence of web pages, also needs a memory. It needs to record traces of our interactions, so that we can make it ours. What's the electronic equivalent of carving one's initials in a tree, or putting a book on a special shelf?

The Open Space

Inhabiting a place involves more than learning the rules; it also involves playing around with them. On-line places of learning need to provide openings for departing from the script. This goes against the teacher's fantasy of the totally controlled classroom.

Imagine a virtual classroom where the students were in effect chained to their desks and where they could not be distracted by what was happening outside the windows during the discussion. Many on-line learning locales try for such commanded attention, thus reproducing the worst of the old programmed learning machines and memory drills. This is the wrong way to build a learning place.

There is space in a real place to push the rules, to try out behaviors that don't quite fit, to look out the window, to pass notes to your friends. This is distracting in a classroom, but the urge can be used to help group learning activities. The same is true on-line. I 'spoke' (from Maine) at a virtual conference session hosted at IATH-MOO (in Virginia). The other panelists and I wrote introductory statements, which were posted in advance. We than made live comments on each other's remarks, and carried on a discussion with the audience. We panelists attended on line, but the audience was mostly assembled physically at a university (in Florida), where they sat at terminals in a large room together. While they asked us questions and contributed to the official conversation they were also holding side conversations with one another on the local net. The final transcript of the panel included both the official and the side conversations. Those side comments were irreverent, impatient, sometimes irrelevant, but also showed a lively engagement with the topics and with one another.

My own and other teachers' experience with real-time computer conferencing is that such side conversations always develop. If the technology allows, side conversations develop on the net; if the technology does not allow that, the side conversations happen as vocal comments. In a classroom on-line discussion led by Michael Joyce at Vassar I saw his students simultaneously carrying on a central conversation on the top of their screens, plus several smaller conversations on the bottom of the screens, plus comments made aloud to the persons sitting around them. Students multitask such sessions. For instance, In several course I have invited outside speakers to 'talk' from a distance with students who had read their articles in advance. On the earlier occasions I used an amplified telephone conversation, with students coming one at a time to a microphone to ask questions. Side conversations developed in whispered comments among the students away from the microphone. On later occasions I had students and speaker gather together in a room at a convenient MOO. Students did not wait their turn, so there was more of a jumble of questions and comments that the speaker chose from in framing remarks. The software also allowed the students to send private remarks to one another. I recorded what I thought was the public conversation but the log turned out to include all the private remarks as well. I was surprised at how successfully the students were carrying on several parallel conversations.

Movie theaters now have to post notices requesting the audience not to talk, since the active audience and side-conversation has spread from home TV to film. Maybe educators should not view this noisy participation as a bad trend, since we are trying to get people to respond critically. We need to encourage informal communication and side conversations into a learning mode, to be analytical or reflective about the ongoing central conversation or about contexts, attitudes, frameworks, values. Such official side conversations would undoubtedly generate yet another layer of unofficial side talk, but the point would be to enlist this tendency of the on-line medium, in order to heighten the participant's sense of reflection and critical thinking.

At the Florida conference and in my classes it was important for the side comments that the participants had been with one another for meals and for face to face talks and

discussions, and so had developed ongoing relationships. We panelists had no such connection among ourselves. One of the best recipes discovered for on-line education has turned out to be a mix of face-to-face sessions and on-line communication. In already mixed physical/on-line settings such as a residential college such opportunities already exist. Some on-line business degree programs require that participants come together for summer workshops or other communal activities. When distance or finances make that impossible, a similar effect might be achievable purely on-line by special requirements for shared formal and informal on-line time together, but designing places that encourage that kind of sociality would be a major challenge. (note 4)

The Disney Move

So far I've discussed education on-line largely as an extension of traditional read-and-discuss seminars or group projects. Perhaps something like required readings are available on line, perhaps these are being jointly composed by the students, and the discussion component becomes more prominent. One tries to build an environment where people feel at home, a place where they can accept norms for this small community, risk some self-exposure, and be willing to challenge their own preconceptions and learn new modes of critical inhabitation.

But if we are going to talk about education on-line we have to consider a very different model than the seminar. You can build a web site, but Disney can build a world. What about computer games, virtual reality rides, theme parks, simulations, immersive worlds? Is there a way to make them more available for learning?

The usual suggestion here is the use of simulation. There are many kinds of simulation with different educational effects. Dissecting a simulated frog or practicing a skill in a simulated setting make for good training. However, the more complete the simulation becomes, the more some critics fear that it may lead learners into solving fantasy issues that avoid real world problems. However, virtual experience can rehearse dealings with real situations. Virtual experience can increase our sensitivities. A virtual world can hold real events. Shared simulations can become real group activity. In a MOO that is having policy debates about the rules of the game, democracy is not being simulated, it is happening.

Simulation doesn't have to be on-line. For instance, on one of the several islands in the Caribbean where cruise lines have manufactured a protected vacation experience, there are artificial fossil whale bones buried on the beach so that children can uncover them as part of a paleontology program. (Patron, 1998, p. 67) Whether in a crafted physical environment or in a computerized virtual reality, similar educational issues arise. For instance, how do we balance the educational benefits of a carefully planned simulation that carefully guides learners into the complexities of a situation or a subject matter, as opposed to the different educational benefits of surprise and working together on difficulties unexpected even by the teacher or planner?

There is also the issue of helping learners discover how to use simulations as tools. We give children toys that simulate adult activities. We encourage them to watch highly produced educational TV shows full of fictionalized history and far too convenient nature. We don't want them to think that these simulations are just like the real world;

we want them to learn how to project from the simulation, how to read the analogies. We need to find ways that people can be *in* the fantasy but not *of* it. This is another role for side conversations and simultaneous reflection. We get immersed in the movie or the Disney ride, and yet at the same time we are wondering how they produce the effects, or perhaps whether the effects are altogether salutary. Education wants to increase the internal complexity of experience. We shouldn't reject virtual edutainment experiences just on the basis of their preplanned artificiality. The educational issue is content and complexity, and whether meta-level acknowledgment and reflection is encouraged.

A good example of how to encourage reflective participation is the simulated phone-in conversations that occur at the end of the children's TV show *The Magic School Bus*. The show presents a teacher and her class travelling in a magic bus that can, for instance, become very small in order to show them the inside of a machine or an animal. Each show is devoted to some topic such as sound, the chemistry of cooking, astronomy, spiders, together with some examples of interactions and tensions among the members of the class. At the end of the show, the animation switches to the office of the show's producer, and fictional child callers criticize the show's characters, correct the facts presented, and give viewers the sense of belonging to a community that uses, rather than is captured by, the fantasy. There are printed books derived from the show, and they also contain texts of such phone calls.

The Thoreau Strategy

I have been suggesting that we can take on some of the features of the new media that seem potentially destructive, and use them for educational purposes. Side conversations, simulation and immersion, rapidity of interaction, excitement and stimulation can all be turned to learning. But there is another approach, what we might call the Thoreau strategy of withdrawal, to achieve perspective and get in touch with deeper values.

In the debates about architectural place this has been strongly championed by Michael Benedikt, who writes about what it would take to create 'real' places that are outside the bustle of style and image.

> The urge is strong to make a building complete in itself and finished, a totally encompassing, dazzling, climate-controlled and conditioned experience. But totality and completeness are too often achieved at the expense of reality. . . . much contemporary architecture lacks emptiness, by being quite literally full. Full, if not of people and goods and pushy displays, then of Design. (Benedikt, 1987, p. 60)

Benedikt wants us to get away from places that try to Mean too much, so we can locate ourselves in the encounter with rock and wood, ordinary human needs, and the dimensions of our own mortality. This is a salutary admonition. Does it then follow that education on-line is doomed to such cloying fullness of Design? Current crowded web-pages certainly make it seem so. Should we then escape from the on-line buzz, or let it be at most a tool but never a place for us? While the grounding in built solidity and quietude that Benedikt talks about is surely valuable, and can give people more space to

be, will it manage to give learners the critical edge and skills we need in the media storm?

Ann Cline writes about creating places where we can get away and into ourselves into temporary communities formed around basic needs. She suggests building simple primitive huts in backyards and interstitial places.

> In societies like ours, where architecture and history make meaning out of vast and shifting complexities, the primitive hut is a search and attempt to pare away what is given and apparent, to find something else to satisfy our deepest emotions. (Cline, 1998, p. 109)

Cline imagines a utopia where such huts are common healing refuges.

> Many of the early huts were created for tea making, or for coffee making . . . soon, however, there appeared huts with masters who told stories or provoked poetry or discourse, who practiced magic or seance, who explored fable or fetish--who, in short, encapsulated the rich opportunity for moments of engagement brought about by existence as a human being. By these moments, increasing numbers of people saw as miraculous and whimsical the temporary forms of energy in the universe and engaged in an appreciation of them so long as life and breath held together body, mind, and spirit. (Cline, 1998, p. xiii)

Could this happen on-line? Maybe it already is? Cline and Benedikt would probably deny the possibility, because the on-line world epitomizes that bustle and hurry and Meaning that we need to escape. But while I think that their strategy has a vital role, we should not cede the on-line world to the marketers.

Cline speaks about the need to provide, 'free from aggressively righteous agendas . . . a contingent community, a sangha of silence'. (Cline, 1998, p. 130) It sounds almost blasphemous to suggest an on-line community of silence. In a physical hut you can share silent presence as you serve tea, or watch the moon rise. On-line, you can't do that, at least until VR becomes infinitely better. But don't essentialize the technology; it may be used in more than busy ways. Imagine quietly composing a jointly written poem together, or listening to haiku. Imagine an on-line place where works of art are shared peacefully but intensely, where discussion evolves slowly. The technology and methods currently used do not favor such places, but they are not impossible.

One characteristic of such a 'hut' on-line would be a weakening of the distinction I urged above between central and side conversations. Such a place would be both less focused on a central topic and more focused on the present moment. The technological challenge would be to create an environment with tools for interaction that encouraged a slowed-down contemplative encounter. Such places should not be too full of in-your-face design, even though the whole environment is designed. We should not assume that this could not be done. Computers are meta-tools. The computer and the Internet can morph into different forms and different kinds of interactions. They don't all have to be fast and furious, and all of their modes have educational and spiritual potential. There are never guarantees, but we can try.

It is too easy to define life and education on-line in opposition to 'real' life. As technology changes that contrast will change too. Pencils are technology, as are shoes. A generation that has grown up with computers and media won't isolate them in opposition to the real stuff they had as children. I have been arguing that we can have real and educational life on-line. The primitive huts Cline writes about involve older technologies -- carpentry, candles, lanterns, tea. Those move at a slower pace. But -- aside from using the current slowness of web connections to encourage contemplative or thoughtful pauses -- we could design in ways that push the needed speed of calculation and implementation down into the computers, leaving us free to create more tranquil spaces for learning at whatever pace we find best.

Quiet places on line are possible, and would be very valuable. But we also need busy yet educational places, and places that encourage deconstructive moves that foreground the process of inhabiting and being on-line, making this available for critical awareness and revision.

Socrates would have cautionary things to say about edutainment and much of today's on-line education. As Plato pointed out, one of the problems with the training offered by the Sophists was that it demanded nothing from you except your cash. They offered to teach you skills to achieve your goals, without ever questioning your goals or desires. Socrates would also equip you with skills, but he would challenge you to change and question yourself. I have tried to suggest some strategies for building on-line places that might renew those challenges.

NOTES:

1. Such rapid skip and scan reading tallies with Jakob Nielsen's studies of the dynamics of web use. See his 'Alertbox' essays at http://www.useit.com/alertbox/

2. For recent debates about place see phenomenological discussions such as Casey (1993 and 1997), Harries (1997), Norbert-Schulz (1984 and 1985). There are as well discussions more dependent on deconstruction and critical theory, such as Boyer (1994), Deleuze and Guattari (1986), Lippard (1997) and Tschumi (1994). Some other discussions emphasize town and city planning in a contemporary or historical context, such as Kelbaugh (1997) and Sennett (1990).

3. In speaking of places as 'our' construction I may seem to be going against Heidegger's desire for a sense in which places locate us rather than are something we manipulate in a sovereign fashion. But with the intertwining and mutual constitution of individual and social identity with each other and with context and history, place creation is no simple sovereign act on our part.

4. Some features of physical togetherness would be very difficult to re-create on-line in anything short of the ultimate virtual reality. Bodily togetherness includes getting tired together, taking comfort breaks, dealing with a sick colleague, sharing food and weather and common noise levels, all of which create a sense of connection and obligation to one another. (I owe this insight to comments by Paul Standish.) The disembodied quality of on-line communities is one reason for the inappropriate

behavior that can develop. If the community had a shared place that had more 'body' to it, standards of appropriate behavior might be easier to develop. Such thicker places on-line might seem to await new technology, but it may be more important to make the place (for instance a shared web site or simulation) sufficiently complex to reward exploration, and able to change so as to record the gradually developing shared history of the community of users/learners. We might learn methods for this by examining shared unofficial web sites that develop around celebrities or films, or examining the interaction of home pages in a shared environment such as Geocities.

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