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Panoptic Variations: Surveillance and Discipline in Web Courses

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Abstract: Disciplinary surveillance nested in some Web courses violates principles of adult education. Using Foucault's notion of panopticism, the authors present a model that can be used to determine levels of disciplinary surveillance.

Problem

The World Wide Web is hailed as the answer to fiscal crises in education evoked by neo-liberal restructuring and ascendancy of the "free market." It is seen as the harbinger of a new age in globally-accessible lifelong learning. In the chorus of enthusiasm for Web courses, apart from a few exceptions, both the left and the right sing in the same choir. However, adult educators are curiously silent on the subject. Apart from one paper presented last year, the Web has been a notable omission from the Adult Education Research Conference. Web courses are largely constructed by people who have never considered principles of adult education and while analyzing the architecture of 127 of them (Boshier, et. al, 1997) we noticed many replicate the worst features of face-to-face education. As adult educators we were particularly alarmed by the level of surveillance and discipline.

Adult educators foreground power relations and attempt to create optimal environments for learning. The experience of learners is respected and heavy surveillance and discipline avoided. Adult learners occupy the social roles of adulthood and may attend classes only when circumstances permit. Even in universities and colleges, they can miss the occasional class without penalty. But in Web-based courses the intermittent participant has no such flexibility. The instructor now has, and often uses, technology to monitor every instance of participation or lack thereof. The instructor can keep a full textual record of a learner's contributions, while remaining invisible themselves.

Conceptual Approach

At the centre of this study was Foucault's panopticon, which looms large in Discipline and Punish. The panopticon was based on Jeremy Bentham's plans for a medieval prison, where a central tower was surrounded by a circular cell block. Inmates could not see each other, nor could they see the keepers in the tower. Those in the tower could observe the inmates at any time

For Foucault the panopticon was a "striking emblem of everything he detested about modern society" (Miller, 1993, p. 220). The hapless inmates, lunatics or learners are illuminated by light from inside and outside windows corresponding to those in the central tower. Because of backlighting the captives stand out like a silhouette in the cells of the periphery. "They are like many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201-202).

The panopticon is an architectural idea, suggested as a design for schools and factories as well as prisons but, more importantly, is a metaphor for power relations in contemporary society.

In the architectural panopticon, the process is overt. In contemporary society surveillance and discipline is a subtle matter of files and record-keeping. The powerless are not told what is in the files, only that they exist. Senator McCarthy intimidated actors, unionists and activists in the 1950s with this technique. Hundreds of agencies conduct surveillance in the 1990s. In Web courses, surveillance requires little effort and discipline is easy to administer.

Web course surveillance is insidious because it is discreet and invisible. As Foucault described it, surveillance "dissociates power from the body" leaving it "compliant and normalized" ready to take orders from above like a soldier in a modern army (Miller, 1993). This bleak vision is contrary to the best principles of adult education which stress reciprocity, authenticity and open-ness. In Foucault's words, under a panoptic system of surveillance "there is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze upon which each individual under its weight will end by internalizing to the point that he is his own supervisor, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself" (Gordon, 1980, p. 155)

Discipline per se is not panoptic. Moreover, adroit course management need not involve disciplinary surveillance. For example, courses may have requirements that assignments be submitted by a deadline date, with consequences for lateness clearly stated. By contrast, panoptic discipline and surveillance is often vague and ill-defined. The overall effect of panoptic surveillance is to give learners the uncomfortable feeling they are being watched, their every move measured against an unknown standard. Participation may be required and marks awarded for it, with no published criteria telling learners how it will be judged. Learners may be warned they will experience repercussions for "inappropriate" behaviour but no one knows what constitutes "inappropriate." Sometimes, such as in a case cited below, it is almost inadvertent because those in power see their behaviour as merely helpful and not disciplinary. In the remainder of this paper our task is to:

1. *Present a conceptual model for detecting panopticism in Web courses.*
2. *Deploy the model by locating different kinds of courses along and within its axes.*
3. *Discuss issues pertaining to panopticism in Web courses.*

The Model

Panopticism arises from an interaction between two variables - Amount of Disciplinary Surveillance (Present Absent) and the Primary Locus of Control (Institution Learner). Fig. 1 shows the hypothesized relationship between these two variables. Hence, very panoptic courses are those where there's a high level of disciplinary surveillance and the institution is the locus of control. Those in the middle of Fig. 1 have merit but, in our view, still contain excessive amounts of disciplinary surveillance and insufficient learner control. The ideal (or best) courses are those on the left where the locus of control resides in the learner and there is an absence of disciplinary surveillance.

In a highly panoptic course where there is maximum surveillance/discipline, the instructor has access to all student work and interactions, sets the objectives, controls the coursework and administers punishments for failing to follow the preset plan. In some cases, surveillance is covert and creepy because learners are not aware of it. In a face-to-face class, radical or of-the-wall statements quickly dissipate with the passage of time. But, in an online environment a written record is created and, years later, a politician or other public figure, as well as ordinary citizens, could find themselves defending statements made years earlier and dutifully filed by an over-zealous instructor or classmate. The locus of control is entirely with the institution offering the course.

[Figure 1 not available]

Deploying the Model

Courses were examined with reference to each axis in Fig. 1. The level of disciplinary surveillance was observed by a two step process:

1. *Potential channels of communication and the role of the instructor (observer, participant, not involved) in each was noted .*
2. *Course materials, especially syllabi and instructions to students, were scanned and participation requirements, disciplinary procedures and related matters recorded.*

Discussion

A. Concerning Disciplinary Surveillance: About 100 enrollees from Mexico, Asia and Canada and Europe were accessing an online course based in Canada and required to post 1000 word essays which others in the class were obliged to read and respond too. Not a bad idea except the volume of work was formidable and, because of the excessive size of discussion groups, a rebellion occurred. After Canadian women students complained to local designers they were surprised when the following message was posted by a "hired gun" - a "noted" male "expert" located in the USA. "Your initial reactions to online learning are about the same as most people: "Whew this is a lot of work"What's happening is that you are encountering real learning in the context of a university course (perhaps for the first time) ... You have to learn some information management strategies to cope with the amount of material ... and get used to being constantly over-stimulated." In other words "hang in there dear, you'll get used it because doctor knows best ..." It was apparent that there had been some maneuvering in the observation tower because the attempt to subdue the restless inmates was made by an "authority" from afar, not from the immediate vicinity.

In the case just discussed the discipline was inappropriate but overt and posted in a public space. Other times it is covert and muted - "Students are required to submit at least one contribution to class discussion each week in addition to their responses to specific questions" [<http://www.indiana.edu/~hperf558/>] or "All students will participate in weekly online seminars" [<http://sol.slcc.edu/b10/mgt202/mgt202courseinfo.html>]. Other times it was foregrounded in an ominous fashion - "Do not abuse this conferencing system. We will take steps to filter out the culprits" [<http://129.215.101.50/arch/arch1/a1home.html>]. Even in exemplary Web courses the possibilities for surveillance are satirically noted. Hence "our club wielding Pinkerton agents, who keep us informed about the daily activities of suspicious History 102 students, inform us that quite a few rebels decided to postpone viewing Lecture 21 for a few days" [<http://hum.lss.wisc.edu/hist102/new.html>]. In this case malcreants were told to view a videotaped lecture. But, in other courses, surveillance and discipline is not a joke but an integral part of the teaching/learning environment. In some cases serious penalties are involved. Many institutions reinforce their authority by prominently displaying the portions of their ethical codes that relate to student behaviour. In others, penalties are not made explicit, but hinted at. It is the possibility of swift, undefined punishment that gives the panopticon its power.

B. Concerning Locus of Control: There are few Web courses where the locus of control resides with learners. These are usually non-credit courses, sometimes offered outside of institutions. For instance, a course designed to help people develop their artistic vision encouraged learners to set their own schedules and treat the course listserve as a support group, with the facilitator as "the group's glue" [<http://ww.waterw.com/~lucia/aw.html>]. Because of the historic stigma attached to distance education, Web course architects often have to answer to authorities who must be assured the online History 101 entirely replicates the face-to-face version. Instructors often warn learners that online courses are "even more work" than the face-to-face version. Web course architects that take this stigma on board sometimes expect too much reading and attempt to exert control over students to show they are as "good as" on-campus operations, and to insure that the outcomes they have promised can be delivered (Boshier & Pratt, 1997). This frequently takes the form of restrictive student assignments with answers based on "the textbook."

Doing Hard Time

In the second phase of this study the authors created a three-part typology and tentatively classified courses known to involve surveillance/discipline. Once the typology was refined the search for cases was extended beyond the courses previously examined by Boshier, et.al. (1997). To illustrate how the model works, the authors deliberately chose cases from different spaces nested in Fig. 1. Prisons vary according to their level of "security" (for the authorities, not the inmates.) Maximum security is for the "worst" offenders. Medium security (often reserved for smalltime crooks and property offenders) occupies a middle space and, at the other end of the continuum, there are minimum security prisons where inmates can work outside or interact with the local community. This metaphor describes Web courses with considerable accuracy.

Type 1: Maximum Security: In a fully panoptic Web course the instructor sits in the tower and enjoys an unobstructed view of all student actions and interactions. Listserves and conferences are continuously monitored. Interventions by the instructor are aimed at learner correction. Student evaluation is based on participation, but it may not be clear whether content, frequency or other factors are being evaluated. There are penalties (most often, poor marks, being tossed from the course and "black marks" on records) for transgression. Even in the "exercise

yard" (chatroom) the learner is monitored and, in the Canadian case cited above, prison yard gossips and complaints can attract a response from the guards (designers, teachers, hired guns).

Example: In a college writing course the threat to deduct marks was used to ensure punctuality and attendance. Questions for an interview to be conducted by students were to be submitted in advance to the instructor. More marks were to be deducted if these were late. There was no suggestion that the instructor might help the learners revise or improve the questions. Assignments and requirements in this course were pre-specified [<http://www.english.ttu.edu/skid-tech/index.html>].

Type 2: Medium security. In this category are courses where the level and nature of the surveillance/discipline is not as blatant or offensive as in the first, but is, nevertheless, incongruent with widely accepted principles of adult education. Learners may have some opportunity to interact without observation. Instructor interventions are less frequent, and more contact with the outside world (via links to external sites) is allowed. However, unescorted roaming is not encouraged. Where links are used they directly pertain to the structure and purposes of the "home" course. The learner in this kind of course is akin to a prisoner on day parole attached to an electronic transmitter/sensor.

Example: In a computer problem-solving course, the schedule was fixed and the professor monitored the listserv discussion. The clearest instruction to students was, "Don't cheat." Assignments consisted of answering textbook questions. It was not made clear what form of student discussion would constitute "cheating" [<http://www.ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/jmtaylor/courses.htm>]

Type 3: Minimum security. Courses in this category most approximate, but still violate, principles of adult education. Learners may be able to participate in group discussions that are password protected so the instructor cannot observe, but must also interact in other, instructor-monitored settings. Learners may be encouraged to participate in listserves and chatrooms outside the class, but required to provide a log of their participation to the instructor. In this type the learners are akin to prisoners on probation. They roam freely but their learning is still continuously monitored by the instructor.

Example: A *Human Issues in Computing* course required learners to participate in off-line activities and provide a report to the instructor of what they had done. The report had to be signed by others involved. The instructor participated in listserv discussions, and no disciplinary consequences flowed from "inappropriate" behaviour [<http://www.science.cqu.edu.au/index.html>].

Beyond the Prison Walls

Because of the stigma attached to distance education or open learning there is a continuing preoccupation with making Web courses resemble face-to-face courses. Unfortunately, many designers succeed. What results are courses that replicate the worst features of face-to-face education. The teacher is in charge. It is his or her experience that counts. Learners are minions who should shut up, ingest the valuable information offered and regurgitate it on exams. The tone is punitive.

Many courses on the World Wide Web are offered by higher education institutions and marketed to adult learners. Non-credit courses, more traditionally the province of adult educators, are also appearing on the Web in large numbers. All of these courses would, in our view, benefit from the insights of our field. Exemplary Web courses can be designed according to the principles of adult education. Such courses do not involve disciplinary surveillance and are attractive, accessible and involve high levels of and varied kinds of interaction (Boshier, et. al, 1997; Wilson, 1998). Thus far, though, adult education has had little impact on Web courses. The situation resembles that of the early 1980's when adult educators had to decide whether to "get involved" with HIV/AIDS education. Are we in or out? The Web has the capacity to nurture many and different kinds of interaction. In that and other respects it is "adult educational." Do we now grab the reins of this bandwagon or act as spectators who bemoan the efforts of technologists, multi-media "experts" and systems analysts? If adult educators don't get involved, others will.

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