

Cabinets of Curiosity: Fear and Metaphor in Cyberspace

Judith Harding

Middlesex University

j.harding@mdx.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Drawing on current debates on embodiment, uses of networked learning, dialogical strategies in higher education teaching, and the force of metaphor and visual analogy, this paper will explore some diverse critical discussions of emotional responses to the internet. These may suggest some possible new approaches to conceptualising the role of networked learning in the landscape of higher education academic practice.

The paper will also track the journey of one academic from entrenched sceptic to committed enthusiast through recognition of the imaginative possibilities of internet-based connection. This worked chiefly through being introduced to the extensive theoretical and philosophical literature related to internet use, and the development of new forms of writing that take advantage of the new opportunities the web offers to make imaginative metaphorical connections and explore personal histories. These new forms are informed by historical antecedents of the use of visual mnemonic and embodied learning.

Keywords

Fear, metaphor, cyberspace, embodiment, teaching, visual, loss, curiosity

CABINETS OF CURIOSITY: FEAR AND METAPHOR IN CYBERSPACE

Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings

and some are treasured for their markings –

They cause the eyes to melt

Or the body to shriek without pain.

I have never seen one fly, but

Sometimes they perch on the hand.

---From Craig Raine, *A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*

<http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~rbushnell/Raine.htm>

What might Craig Raine's Martian have made of the scene familiar in many university libraries today? Rows of regimented geometrical infants, each attended by a diligent nurse who gazes unwaveringly into the single bright rectangular eye? The carers gently stroke the infants' bodies, occasionally tickling the toes with both hands though rarely releasing the one visible long-armed hand, tapping it frequently for reassurance. A touching scene.

Grotesque? Perhaps. But the image captures some sense of the very different kind of concentration that marks contemporary 'learning resource centres'; young people who have grown up watching screens, absorbed by computer games, riveted by the very presence of these technological devices that offer effortless access to other worlds. By contrast, books must seem dead things, cold and unresponsive. It is a very different world from the one familiar to those of us who can remember pre-digital times, to whom typewriters and television still seemed technical magic. We, too, are Martians, aliens on the planet of the young and wired.

Networked Learning 2006

This sense of alienation may be at the heart of the unease that some feel at the whole notion of the internet. It seems a dangerous space, random, unpredictable, out of control, and not only for those who've not grown up with it. While the capacity of e-mail for instant, informal communication seems misleadingly private, luring us into a seemingly intimate safe space, as Colleen McKenna has pointed out, it has the potential for bill-board announcements to the world; its privacy is an illusion. (McKenna, 2005)

VISUAL ANALOGY AS METAPHORICAL EXPLORATION



A favourite comparison juxtaposes Vermeer's *Woman Pouring Milk* with a photograph of a baby being fed with a spoon. The pedagogical connection with the notion of learning as transfer (which I am keen that they recognise and question) soon emerges, but I learn a great deal along the way about participants' preconceptions and stereotypes.

Introducing a third image, Duane Hanson's *Shopper*, contrasts the notion of learning as a constructive (but potentially risky depending on selection of ingredients and cooking expertise!) activity. This establishes a comparative way of working with a mix of images, metaphors and variable connections, while eliciting important notions of cultural difference in a social, collective act of seeing. In general, the strategy of offering the visual ingredients for connection, without engineering them, seems to 'work' in encouraging groups to make, through discussion, their own connections. It also establishes a mode of questioning and connecting, highlighting a valuing of dialogic response rather than information transfer as the means of linking tutor and student.

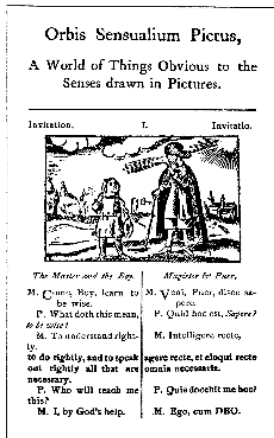
Using alternative reconnections of fragments of text or ordering visual images, or treating text itself as an image can also be helpful. Explicitly visual approaches, stressing metaphorical connection, are productive, but especially so in a social setting; shared visual dialogic experiences transform groups into communities.

PRECURSORS AND ANTICIPATIONS:

PICTORIAL LEARNING AND VISUAL MNEMONIC

But these approaches have ancestors. Socrates, of course, knew the value of diagrams as well as verbal images (though this may seem contradictory in his suspicion of poets, artists and writing, especially writing as a destroyer of memory.) In the *Meno*, he draws out a picture of the geometrical problem in the dust with a stick, leading the slave boy step by step to a solution which he had not known that he 'knew'. The Republic's allegory, Plato's flickering shadows on the cave wall, uses a visual, (almost filmic) moving image to explain and fix in the memory. <http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/projects/digitexts/plato/meno/meno.html>

Much later, we see Comenius, understanding that visual illustrations could formally reinforce retention of concepts, creating in the 16th century *Orbis Pictis Sensualium* the first printed instructional picture book for children. (An early copy boasted a movable sundial--- involving not only vision but touch.)



Page From the English Edition of
Sensualium Orbis Pictus



<http://imaginarymuseum.org/OPR/OPRWAAGE.HTM>

There were, of course, much earlier series of instructional images in manuscripts and pictorial decorative cycles in churches, where the architectural structure 'becomes' the book, the space which must be physically navigated. Visual perception moves from the individual eye to a social space of collected, mobile, connected observers.

But the most intriguing collective example, and the most apt in its parallel to the function and language of digital environment, is the 11th century Exultet Roll. As the officiant read the text to the congregation, the pictorial roll was gradually unfurled over the lecturn, so that the corresponding images could be seen in a moving picture display as the words were read and heard. A necessary adjustment, showing how deliberately multiple visual and bodily positions were taken into account, was that the text needed to be inverted in relation to the images! <http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/scripts/history4.htm>



<http://pages.slc.edu/~ebj/waxtablets01/>

These anticipations of digital scrolling, through gradual revelation and disappearance of images, functioned as devices to associate audible texts with specific images; the process reinforced the connection of image and text so that one might trigger the other. In a similar way, the whole gamut of medieval mnemonic images depended on visual association with real or imagined structures. Camillo's elaborate 16th century memory theatre is a just one late and developed example of this late antique device. (Carruthers and Zielkowski, 2003)

<http://www.id.iit.edu/visiblelanguage/Feature%20Articles/ArtofMemory/ArtofMemoryPt4.html>

www.finearts.uvic.ca/historyinart/faculty/cat

TEXT AS PICTURE: BOOK AS BODY



Images become text; text becomes image. Our web-pages' marrying of text and image, though graphically familiar, is nothing new. In many surviving examples, particularly of the 8th and 9th centuries, images not only dominated, but 'literally' fused with the words, spilling in elaborate verbal profusion over the manuscript pages, emulating the decorative richness of jewelled metal book covers. The book itself was precious, unique; an object to hold and touch. Images were instructive, but often also playfully decorative, meant for visual delight. Often, they were both: deliberate puzzles, where meaning was not explained, but like Anglo-Saxon riddles, challenged the viewer to link the meaning with a particular text and its associated (but not necessarily obvious) thoughts and images.

<http://www.stavacademy.co.uk/mimir/riddles.htm>

Learning was, of course, 'embodied' in quite another way: the substance of the book was itself composed of fragments of a body; gatherings were made of the scraped, pumiced and sewn skins of once-living animals. The books carried visible and tangible signs of that life. One of the startling pleasures of handling manuscripts is the need to distinguish between the porous hair and smooth flesh sides of folios, to observe the signs of wear from fingerprints, patched torn areas, scrubbed out words, censored lewd images, marginal notes and corrections. It is a way of touching time and imaginative thought, a kind of tactile literacy of use, and a physical record of tangible engagement with text, that is unavailable in a digital culture.

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/ttp/digitisation3.html>

BODY AS BOOK: THE GUIDONIAN HAND



Guido d'Arezzo's 'hand' shows more intimate fusion of these ideas of visuality, embodiment and learning. This 11th century monk devised a method of teaching relationships of the musical scale in chant, identifying each division of the hand with a particular scale interval. In concentrated, 'interactive group learning', monks learned to sing the chant by relating by following positions pointed to on the hand. The scheme enabled musical notation by physical fusion of text and body. (It also gives us the expression 'gamut' as signifying the whole range of possibilities from 'ut' (now the 'do' of do-re-mi) to 'gamma', the last note in the scale.)

http://ieee.uwaterloo.ca/praetzel/mp3_/info/raybro/solmization.html

<http://www.fulltable.com/VTS/h/hand/h.htm>

This isolation of the hand as a graphic mnemonic recalls the ways in which physical fragments of the body served as organising features of medieval life. Relics, often of hands, displayed in elaborate sculptural shrines, shaped visitation paths of pilgrims through churches (responsible for the proliferation of radiating chapels of the 'bodies' of gothic cathedrals) and across continents through their establishment of pilgrimage routes.

<http://www.the-orb.net/encyclop/religion/hagiography/cult.htm>

http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth212/introduction_2002.html

http://www.coco.cc.az/us/apetersen/_ART201/romanesque_arch.htm

This hasty survey of examples from our visual cabinet of curiosities suggests that visually embodied learning is, and has always been, pervasive. Eyes are the primary means by which we connect with the world. We touch text with our eyes, if no longer our hands. Braille substitutes touch for the eye; sign substitutes vision and the hand for the ear. Our connection to text is, for all of us, intensely embodied by means of the linked sensory experience. It's ironic that the fact that online learning, based on text, is primarily visual seems often not to be recognised by our institutions.

AFFECTIVE CONNECTION: FEAR AND LOSS IN CYBERSPACE

My own conflicting emotional responses to this experience of a digital environment have surprised me. I was quite thrown by the chat-room experience on the residential week; I found it disorienting, since the words seemed less important than speed of typed 'speech'. The second time, I saw possible value of having some synchronous mode, like a documented phone conversation, though the discontinuity of this group-which-is-not-a-group conversation still felt odd.

Other occasions were frustrating. I was never in the right 'place'. Posting to the wrong 'room' brought a physical response of blushing embarrassment; but the weblog felt like a safe cave-like space of refuge. The fact that I anticipated missing it suggested a sense of dependency on that 'attachment'. There was also the slight sense of wariness that many students feel, not about lack of connection, but paradoxically, about the possibility of being listened to seriously. The fact that an on-line tutorial connection that could feel as strong and supportive as a face-to-face link I found a revelation. This is, of course, far less about the tool, than about who is using it. As an artist friend used to say, 'it's not what you do, it's how you do it.'

Cognitive scientist Tim Rohrer explored the effects of desktop design in a survey of use of the Mac icon of desktop trashcan for disk ejection. What he found reinforced what I often have felt --- that there is considerable unease in using an icon fusing an image of disposal with one of saving. (Rohrer, 1998) New versions now change visually to a computer ejection slot image! Removing the visually mixed metaphor did disturb less, but it is striking that a minor graphic detail can have unsettling effects.

The literature on emotional response to on-line environments seems mixed. Some point to the ways in which genuine on-line friendships are developed, while others suggest that it may increase senses of isolation. Lack of subtler clues of expression, tone of voice, or body language can on the one hand be perceived as deprivation, reducing communication to a one-dimensional level of visually undifferentiated typed text, but can, on the other, offer the safety of visual anonymity and the possibility of playful experiment with alternative personas. (Burbules, 2002). There are clearly dangers as well as benefits in this deliberate abandonment of persona, though the two may be closely related. While these devices of anonymity may usefully counter threats of on-line surveillance, this may diminish tutor-student connection.

Dreyfus' point about the tutor's own loss of learning from the face-to-face social environment raises the disturbing issue of loss in a larger sense. (Dreyfus 2001). All education, I would argue, involves loss, perhaps more than gain. It means coming to terms with giving up long-held simplistic, dualistic views and recognising that things are messier, more complex and provisional than they seem.

In face-to-face classes I often see attempts to maintain some sense of physical security in the establishment of simple repetitions---sitting in the same seat, using the same notebook, carrying the same cup, ritual grasping for predictable handouts and assessment details. Bowlbyesque themes of attachment, need for connection, and fear of loss seem equally present in electronic spaces; it's perhaps telling that much of the language of the internet emphasises precisely those ideas: 'attachment', 'link', 'save'. Imposed mantras of the language of learning outcomes reinforce this need for measurable predictability. (Cousin 2005)

But fear also evokes excitement. Risky random encounters in a boundless space offer infinite possibility, and with it, the threat of being overwhelmed. The anxiety of having no boundaries, of skating in the Deleuzian 'smooth' rather than 'striated' spaces can feel threatening. (Bayne 2004). Academic tradition is also under threat; what happens to argument when new forms of non-linear writing become possible and even acceptable? As psychoanalysis recognises, freedom is both desirable and disturbing.

How do we visualise this dangerous, exciting and fearful space? Its metaphors are telling. A tactile language of textiles informs much of it: criss-crossings of nets, of accidental connections suggesting the randomness of cross-hatched tangling rather than orderly weave. (This is, of course, the structure of 'felt'.) It's been described also as an escalating mesh of single threads crossing to become a fabric billowing like waves. Is it a labyrinth? A spaceless space of dreaming? An ocean voyage with no navigation? An open parachute? Do we see ourselves swimming, drowning, or being pulled vertiginously into an abyss? The risk suggested in these metaphors seems itself an image for learning as loss of certainty and preconception. The imagery of the internet stresses the necessity of living on the edge. Learning is far from reassuring; it is dangerous. It always has been; cyberspace makes us confront that discomfort directly.

The misleading tendency to separate mind or brain and body reminds us of other simplistic dualisms that characterise much educational development discourse. Do we encourage 'deep or 'surface' learning? Is it 'right' or 'left' brain activity? Are there four 'styles' or eight 'intelligences? We need, as Haggis and others argue, a more complex and nuanced language for describing what goes on. (Haggis 2002).

Though potentially disturbing, interactions in cyberspace also offer us ways to relish randomness, cherish playfulness and nourish curiosity. Ironically, those devices that have been imposed as ways of taking advantage of the burgeoning possible connections of the internet, the VLE's, seem designed as means of control or surveillance, of predictable and unremitting dullness, based on the least inspiring but most measurable, bits of traditional classroom practice. (Cousin 2005). There is promise, however, in the possibility of reversing the influence. Face to face settings can be infused with the freedom, inventiveness, and imaginative potential offered by the boundless interconnective possibilities of the net.

This paper argues that it is, above all the one-to-one imaginative dialogic connection of tutor and student, whether on-line or in the same room, that counts. And the challenge will be to persuade our institutions that the real value of on-line learning lies not in the capacity to distribute courseware cheaply, but in this (expensive) intensity of expert human connection. As we move from face-to-face to typeface-to-typeface conversations, it is crucial to remember that it is the exchange and, centrally, the listening that counts, not the medium.

REFERENCES

Arnone, M., (2002) 'Philosopher's Critique of Online Learning Cites Existentialists (Mostly Dead)', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 03/15/2002

<http://chronicle.com/free/2002/03/2002031501u.htm>

Atkinson, M., (2003). 'The Role of Emotion in Learning,' *Teaching & Learning Bridges*, University of Saskatchewan, February, 2003, Vol.1No.4

http://www.usask.ca/tlc/bridges_journal/v1n4_feb_03/v1n4_emotion.html

Bayne, S., (2004). 'Smoothness and Striation in Digital learning Spaces,' *E-Learning*, Volume 1, Number 2
Networked Learning 2006

- Blake, N., (2002). 'Hubert Dreyfus on Distance Education: relays of educational embodiment,' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol.34, No.4
- Bolter, J. D., (2001). *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext and the Remediation of Print*, (Second Edition), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ
- Burkitt, I., (1999). *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity*, Sage, London
- Burbules, N. C., (2002). 'Like a Version: playing with online identities,' *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol.34, No.4
- Carruthers, M., and Ziolkowski, J.M., Eds, (2003). *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, University of Pennsylvania Press
- Champion, E. M., (2004). The Digital Society and Its Enemies: A Critique of 'On the Internet', *Computers and Society Magazine*, Volume 32 – Issue 8(June)
- http://www.computersandsociety.org/sigcas/ofthefuture2/sigcas/subpage/sub_page.cfm?article905&page_number_nb=1
- Cousin, G. (2005). *Learning from Cyberspace*, in Ray Land and Sian Bayne, eds, *Education in Cyberspace*, London, Routledge-Falmer
- Dickey, M.D., (2004). 'The impact of web-logs (blogs) on student perceptions of isolation and alienation in a web-based distance-learning environment,' *Open Learning*, Vol. 19, No.3, November
- Dreyfus, H., (2001). *On the Internet: Thinking in Action*. New York: Routledge
- Dreyfus, H., Dreyfus, S.E. (). *From Socrates to Expert Systems: The Limits and Dangers of Calculative Rationality*,
- http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus/html/paper_socrates.html
- Dwight J., (2004).. Review Essay: 'On the Internet, H. Dreyfus,' *E-learning*, Volume 1, Number 1
- Feenberg, A., (). *Distance Learning: Promise or Threat?*
- <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/feenberg/TELE3.HTM>
- Goodyear, P., (2004). 'Patterns, pattern languages and educational design', In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer & R. Phillips (Eds), *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference* (pp.339-347), Perth, 5-8 December.
<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/perth04/procs/goodyear.html>
- Haggis, T., (2003). 'Constructing images of ourselves? A critical investigation into 'approaches to learning' research in higher education,' *British Educational Research Journal*, 29, no.1
- Haggis, T., (2004). 'Meaning, Identity and Motivation: Expanding what matters in understanding learning in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 29, 3
- Johnson, M., (1998). 'Metaphor,' *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, New York: Garland Publishing,
- Landow, G. P. ed., (1994). *Hyper/Text/Theory*, Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London,
- McKenna, C., (2005). Words, bridges and dialogue: issues of audience and addressivity in online communication, in Ray Land, R. and Bayne, S *Education in Cyberspace*, London, Routledge Falmer,
- Ong, W. J., (1998). 'Digitization Ancient and Modern: Beginnings of Writing and Today's Computers,' in Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup, (2002) *An Ong Reader: Challenges for Further Inquiry*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ,

- Rennie, F. and Mason, R., (2004) *The Connecticon: Learning for the Connected Generation*, Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, Ct,
- Rohrer, T., (2005). 'Embodiment and Experientialism,' in *The Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, Dirk Geeraerts and Herbert Cuyckens, eds., Oxford University Press
- Rohrer, T., (2005). 'The Body in Space: Embodiment, Experientialism and Linguistic Conceptualization,' in *Body, Language and Mind*, vol.2, Zlatev, Jordan; Ziemke, Tom; Frank, Roz, Dirven, Rene (eds), Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2005
- Rohrer, T., (1998). Metaphors we compute by: bringing magic into interface design ('Feeling Stuck in a GUI web: metaphors, image-schemas, and designing the human computer interface'), <http://philosophy.uoregon.edu/metaphor/gui4web.htm>
- Rohrer, T., The cognitive science of metaphor from philosophy to neuropsychology, <https://philosophy.uoregon.edu/metaphor/neurophl.htm>
- Saatchi&Saatchi, 'Emotion on the Web,' *Think Tank Report*, http://www.saatchikevin.com/workingit/Emotion_onweb.html
- Stafford, B.M., and Terpak, F. (2001)k *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Getty Research Institute, Getty Publications, Los Angeles,
- Stafford, B.M., (1998)k *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA; London,
- Stafford, B.M., (1996)k *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA; London
- Vela, E., 'Emotion in the Classroom,' *Essays on Teaching Excellence*, Teaching & Learning Resources, The Center for Teaching Excellence, Lansing Community College
- http://www.lcc.edu/cte/resources/teachingexcellence/packets/packet8/emotion_in_the_classroom.html