



Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 1: Beyond the LMS

MARCH 5, 2013 / [SEAN MICHAEL MORRIS](#)

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We are not ready to teach online. In a recent conversation with a friend, I found myself puzzled, and a bit troubled, when he expressed confusion about digital pedagogy. He said something to the extent of, “What’s the difference between digital pedagogy and teaching online? Aren’t all online teachers digital pedagogues?” Being a contemplative guy, I didn’t just tip over his drink and walk away. Instead, I pondered the source of his question. Digital pedagogy is largely misunderstood in higher education. The advent of online learning and instructional design brought the classroom onto the web, and with it all manner of teaching: good and bad, coherent and incoherent, networked and

disconnected. Whatever pedagogy any given teacher employed in his classroom became digitized. If I teach history by reading from my twenty-year-old notes, or if I lead workshops in creative writing, or if I teach literature through movies, I bring that online and — boom! — I'm a digital pedagogue. Right?

But that's not right. For starters, not every teacher is a pedagogue. Pedagogy is a scholarship unto itself, a study of learning and the many ways it is fueled — in classrooms, in workshops, in studios, in writing centers — wherever learning is poised to occur. Pedagogy is also different from the study of education. Those with backgrounds in education understand the institution, and its relationship to students, in ways I expect I never will. Pedagogy has at its core timeliness, mindfulness, and improvisation. Pedagogy concerns itself with the instantaneous, momentary, vital exchange that takes place in order for learning to happen. That exchange may be between teacher and student, or between student and student; it can also occur between teacher and teacher, administrator and CEO, journalist and educator. The etymology of pedagogy reveals that leadership is at its core; and thus it is not limited to classroom practice in the same way that it is not limited to institutions of learning.

Pedagogy experiments relentlessly, honoring a learning that's lifelong. A pedagogy of writing, for example, recognizes that a teacher is not trying to pull essays like pulling teeth for fifteen weeks; instead, she is cultivating a desire to write that will last well beyond the end of the semester, well beyond graduation. And there are few limits to what can be attempted in the interests of meaningful, sustained learning. If it works to blindfold students and walk them around campus to add dimension to their sensory writing, or if it works to play hopscotch in order to stir memories in new writers, then the pedagogue will try it.

As Jesse says in his article, "[Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 2: \(Un\)Mapping the Terrain](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping_the)" ([http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping the](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping_the)

Pedagogy is not synonymous with teaching or talking about teaching, nor is it entirely abstracted from the acts of teaching and learning. It is ... “the place where philosophy and practice meet (aka ‘praxis’).” It’s a surprisingly difficult line to toe, or wall to teeter upon: meta-cognitive reflection on, and investigation of learning, which is by its nature emergent.

TOP

Not all teaching happens like this. Not all teachers are pedagogues, nor need they be. There is a place for all styles of classroom practice, I think, just as there is a place for learners of all capabilities and approaches. I am not here arguing for a particular teaching philosophy. What is important is seeing the difference — a difference that becomes much more acute when learning goes online.

The Relic of the LMS

The invention of the LMS (Learning Management System) was a mistake. And here I’m not going to make the same frustrated argument made numerous times before now that LMSs are limiting structures, that their interface and functionalities control how teachers teach online ([although those things are true](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/hack-the-lms-getting-progressive/) (<http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/journal/hack-the-lms-getting-progressive/>)). The LMS was a mistake because it was premature. In a world that was just waking up to the Internet and the possibility of widely-networked culture, the LMS played to the lowest common denominator, creating a “classroom” that allowed learning — or something like learning — to happen behind tabs, in threaded discussions, and through automated quizzes. The LMS was not a creative decision, it was not pushing the capabilities of the Internet, it was settling for the least innovative classroom practice and repositioning that digitally. As a result classes taught within

its structure generally land with a dull thud. No matter how creative and inspired the teacher or pedagogue behind the wheel, the LMS is no match for the wideness of the Internet. It was born a relic — at its launch utterly irrelevant to its environment and its user.

And worse, the LMS convinced us that teaching online was not only possible, it was easy — that digital pedagogy was a mere work of relocation. Take your lectures and your assignments, create a slideshow or a video or a piece of audio, load it all up, and there you have it: online learning. Many early instructional designers believed that if we employed interactive Flash exercises and [scaffolded learning](#)

[\(http://www.samplereality.com/2012/12/18/intrusive-scaffolding-obstructed-learning-and-moocs/\)](http://www.samplereality.com/2012/12/18/intrusive-scaffolding-obstructed-learning-and-moocs/) according to Bloom's taxonomy, we'd end up with robust learning that engaged students in a way duplicate to classroom interaction. (I was once one of these instructional designers. Mea culpa.) Sure, it took a little longer to set up your course, but once you did, it practically ran itself. Plus, you could reuse the content again and again! Design the course once, teach it *ad infinitum*. (Only a benefit when the instructor is not compensated well for course design, or not compensated at all.) The LMS largely erased mindfully aware teaching, and made excuses for unconscionable practice.

The real problem here is not that quality suffered, but that people mistook what they were doing within the LMS as pedagogical. It may be teaching — in the same way that reading from a handout is teaching — but simply slotting your pre-written materials into an online framework and calling it a class is not interesting or sound pedagogy.

The persistence of the onerous LMS, and the ways learners have already adopted the patterns and habits of the learning within it, indicates that we are not ready to teach online. Many talented instructors complain about the limitations of LMS-based teaching, and yet in the same breath discard all their best, most innovative pedagogies. Very few are using

the approach of the digital to innovate *further* instead of innovate less. But just as the pedagogue will enter a room and rearrange the tables and chairs to suit his purpose, so too will the digital pedagogue happily [hack the LMS](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Canvas_and_LM) ([http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Canvas and LM](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Canvas_and_LM)) opening it to the wider web, or using it as a portal to a more expanded learning environment.

Pioneers on the Digital Plain

Digital pedagogy is important because it is willing to improvise, to respond to a new environment, to experiment. The digital pedagogue is not the same as an online teacher. The digital pedagogue looks at the options, refuses the limitations of the LMS, invites her students to participate in — indeed, create — networked learning. Her practice is mindful of the landscape.

Questions that the digital pedagogue asks regularly include:

- What tools are available for me and my students to play with?
- How can improvisation occur online to reinforce learning?
- Does digital learning end when the course ends, or is it sustained perpetually by the online learning environment (aka, the Internet)?
- Who are my students, and where can they be found? What are my students' URLs? What is mine?
- Do disciplines matter online? Do canons exist? What is the point of rote memorization when everything is available online all the time?
- Where is my authority now that all authority is a Google search away?
- And most importantly: What happens when learning is removed from the classroom and exposed to the entirety of the digital landscape?

For some, teaching begins with authority and expertise. For the digital pedagogue, teaching begins with inquiry. And that's why digital pedagogy is so important. It reminds us that the new landscape of learning is mysterious and worth exploring. The techniques of on-ground learning do not translate well. The LMS fails. Only an attitude of pioneering

exploration will make heads or tails of the potential for online learning; and it is the digital pedagogue who will lead that charge.

Read the second part: “[Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 2: \(Un\)Mapping the Terrain](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping_the_Terrain)
([http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping the](http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/files/Unmapping_the_Terrain)

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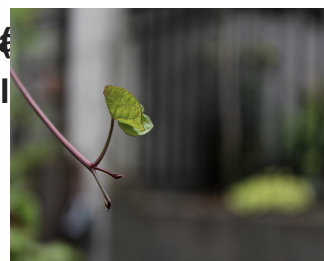
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(<http://blog.mahabali.me/blog/pedagogy/dominant-sub-discourses-of-dissent/>) on April 26, 2014 at 10:54 am

[...] Fair enough. I do have one colleague who is also dissatisfied with LMSs. Then I read Sean Michael Morris write about everything that's wrong with LMSs, watched Jim

Groom's keynote for Sloan-C, and realized I am not alone. I tweeted about it [...]

By Pedagogy in a New Light | hdjackson

(<http://hdjackson.wordpress.com/2014/10/21/pedagogy-in-a-new-light/>) on October 21, 2014 at 10:42 pm

[...] feel as though I may be thinking somewhat in parallel to Sean Michael Morris in his post regarding Digital Pedagogy.

Helping someone to understand, to grasp, to learn something so that they can continue to build [...]

By Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 1: Beyond the LMS – Hybrid Pedagogy | Digital Technologies

(<http://studentportfolio.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/decoding-digital-pedagogy-pt-1-beyond-the-lms-hybrid-pedagogy/>) on October 29, 2014 at 7:11 am

[...] Source: <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com>

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By Questions for Digital Pedagogues | The City Lab

(<http://cwecitylab.wordpress.com/2014/10/29/questions-for-digital-pedagogues/>) on October 29, 2014 at 4:38 pm

[...] I particularly like the first question, which asks us to investigate new platforms, spaces, and tools and to be curious to play– both on our own and with our students. Digital pedagogy is grounded in experimentation... and the fun (and frustration) of learning new things. Please read the full post here: <http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/decoding-digital-pedagogy-pt-1-beyond-the-lms/>
(<http://www.hybridpedagogy.com/Journal/decoding-digital-pedagogy-pt-1-beyond-the-lms/>) [...]

By El maestro ignorante: el que quiere puede | co.labora.red

(<https://carlosmagro.wordpress.com/2015/01/13/el-maestro-ignorante-el-que-quiere-puede/>) on January 13, 2015 at 7:14 am

[...] El maestro ignorante de Jacotot/Rancière nos recuerda, a pesar de las diferencias, las pedagogías progresistas de principios de siglo XX y también las pedagogías constructivistas y centradas en el alumno. Nos invita a leer la experiencia de Jacotot con la mirada de Jean Piaget (constructivismo) o de Jerome Bruner (Discovery Learning). A confrontarlo con la pedagogía crítica. A buscar puntos de encuentro con quienes empezaron a pensar en las pedagogías mediadas por lo digital como Seymour Papert

(construccionismo) y Alan Kay. Y, sobre todo, es un libro que parece cobrar nueva vida en nuestro actual contexto digital. Un contexto y una cultura que han cuestionado la idea de autoridad, el quién y el cómo se produce y transmite el conocimiento. Qué nos ha hecho preguntarnos sobre el significado y el alcance del saber experto. Un contexto en el que se están constantemente redefiniendo los roles, rediseñando los procesos y los actores de la intermediación. Su lectura nos remite también a las pedagogía líquida. A las pedagogías participativas de Rheingold, a las pedagogías mínimamente invasivas de Sugata Mitra, a las escuelas libres, al homeschooling, al unschooling, al aprendizaje invisible, a la educación expandida, a las pedagogías del procomún. Y desde luego parece que puede ayudarnos a pensar en las pedagogías digitales. [...]

By InterLink Headline News 2.0 — Interlink Headline News N° 7287 del Jueves 15 de Enero de 2015

(<http://www.ilhn.com/blog/2015/01/16/interlink-headline-news-no-7287-del-jueves-15-de-enero-de-2015/>) on January 16, 2015 at 12:14 am

[...] El maestro ignorante de Jacotot/Rancière nos recuerda, a pesar de las diferencias, las pedagogías progresistas de principios de siglo XX y también las pedagogías constructivistas y centradas en el alumno. Nos invita a leer la experiencia de Jacotot con la mirada de Jean Piaget (constructivismo) o de Jerome Bruner (Discovery Learning). A confrontarlo con la pedagogía crítica. A buscar puntos de encuentro con quienes empezaron a pensar en las pedagogías mediadas por lo digital como Seymour Papert (construccionismo) y Alan Kay. Y, sobre todo, es un libro que parece cobrar nueva vida en nuestro actual contexto digital. Un contexto y una cultura que han cuestionado la idea de autoridad, el quién y el cómo se produce y transmite el conocimiento. Qué nos ha hecho preguntarnos sobre el significado y el alcance del saber experto. Un contexto en el que se están constantemente redefiniendo los roles, rediseñando los procesos y los actores de la intermediación. Su lectura nos remite también a las pedagogía líquida. A las pedagogías participativas de Rheingold, a las pedagogías mínimamente invasivas de Sugata Mitra, a las escuelas libres,

al homeschooling, al unschooling, al aprendizaje invisible, a la educación expandida, a las pedagogías del procomún.

También, como bien dice mi amiga Vera Rexach al Michel Serres de Pulgarcita. Y desde luego parece que puede ayudarnos a pensar en las pedagogías digitales. [...]

By [Digital Pedagogy: A Case of Open or Shut](http://www.seanmichaelmorris.com/digital-pedagogy-a-case-of-open-or-shut/) | Sean Michael Morris
(<http://www.seanmichaelmorris.com/digital-pedagogy-a-case-of-open-or-shut/>) on June 30, 2015 at 8:34 pm

[...] is, not as we'd like to it to be for the 50 minutes of class that we control. As I've said elsewhere, "Pedagogy has at its core timeliness, mindfulness, and improvisation. Pedagogy concerns itself [...]"

By [Pre-Institute Reading | 21st Century Skills](http://humanities.lib.rochester.edu/institute/pre-institute-reading/)
(<http://humanities.lib.rochester.edu/institute/pre-institute-reading/>) on July 7, 2015 at 4:04 pm

[...] "Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 1: Beyond the LMS" by Sean Michael Morris and "Decoding Digital Pedagogy, pt. 2: (Un)Mapping the Terrain" by Jesse Stommel [...]"

By [I, For One, Welcome Our New Robot Overlords](http://www.grandviewcetl.org/?p=132)
(<http://www.grandviewcetl.org/?p=132>) on September 11, 2015 at 4:12 am

[...] article with the rather startling claim that "we are not ready to teach online." Why? Well, for Morris, we're trapped by our LMSs. That's right: Blackboard is eating us all. It's a provocative argument, but one that [...]"

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