Mapping Local Spaces
Assignment #1B
ETEC 511
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Our group chose to look at Roxanne Wheaton’s Study Commons at SAIT and James Hanson’s analysis of BCeSIS. While on the surface the two spaces appear to be very different with one describing a physical space and the other a virtual space, we identified a fundamental commonality between the two in that both had social outcomes that might not have been originally intended by those who created the spaces.

Looking closely at the BCeSIS initiative, we agree with James Hanson’s analysis that the technology is prescriptive and “reduces whole jobs to specialized tasks.” (Hanson 2006). Furthermore, it exemplifies many of the characteristics outlined by Franklin when she states, “When work is organized as a sequence of separately executive steps, the control over the work moves to the organizer, the boss or manager.” (Franklin 1999, 16). While the Ministry’s original intention was to “standardize the computer systems used by BC schools…leaving schools more time and money to do what is really important – to work with students”, (BCeSIS iGroup 2006), the unexpected consequence has been that of enslavement and disenfranchisement amongst one of the most greatest stakeholders in the initiative, the teachers. While we can only hope that it was not the original intent of the developers of the BCeSIS system, the autonomy of individual teachers has been threatened by this top-down directive where teachers are forced to comply as a condition of employment.
When one considers the social implications of the BCeSIS initiative, James Hanson’s prediction of how this technology will inevitably reduce dialogue between parents and teachers is an excellent example of Franklin’s “technologically induced human isolation” (Franklin 1999, 46). While Hanson’s prediction may very well become the reality in the province of BC, it is hoped that there will always be a desire for face-to-face communication between parents and teachers.

In addition to the social issues examined above, our group identified another social issue with the BCeSIS initiative that we believe to be very important and that is equity of access. Effective use of the BCeSIS assumes that all parents have internet/web access. Furthermore, it does not address problems that geography creates in the province of BC in terms of the telecommunication infrastructure (mountains, remote areas without towers, communities still facing bandwidth limitations of dial-up). This may very well result in inequality when public education is supposed to be “the same for all”.

In Roxanne Wheaton’s analysis of the Study Commons at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, she describes the technological space as one that unites people instead of isolating them. The use of sofa-style chairs and coffee tables in a warm and relaxed setting promotes social interaction amongst technology users. Our group went further by noting that the existence of both hard wiring and wireless Internet points and saw this as an inclusive environment for students who may or may not have more current wireless laptops.
While we agree with Wheaton’s analysis that the original intent of this space was to encourage social interaction, our group questioned whether or not the opposite outcome could also be true. For example, we often see computers users staring at the screen and individually engaged in their own private experience. In this example one would see the availability of Internet access as a technology that actually isolates people. Rather than talking and socializing with each other, the introduction of computers into a formerly social space may be seen as something that hinders social interaction.

In comparing these two technological spaces, it is easy to identify the differences between these two spaces. One is a province-wide initiative being instituted by the government publicly while the other is a private institution that is providing a physical space to enable its students to be able to work in a comfortable setting. Both are examples of Verner’s connective technologies but SAIT would qualify also, as an example of an environmental technology.

The greatest similarity between the two spaces seems to be that the original intent of the space did not necessarily match the social outcomes. Both spaces were designed to draw humans together and act as a connective technology amongst stakeholders. The unexpected outcome however is that the even the best intended technologies have the power to drive humans further apart.
References

British Columbia Student Information System iGroup 2006.  
http://www.bcasisigroup.ca/


