Chapter 8.8
Surveillance in the Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter the author highlights some of the risks associated with universities establishing surveillance tools within virtual learning environments. Potential problems that may arise from such a move are considered at the student and managerial levels. At the student level the author argues that the adoption of the surveillance tool may result in students, especially the most gifted, feeling pressured to adopt practises that are not best suited to achieving their learning outcomes. At the managerial level the author argues that the surveillance tool provides a means by which subject design could be further influenced by market forces.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual classrooms have many advantages over traditional classrooms. One notable improvement is that they are able to quickly and clearly generate a record of learning activities. For example, forums and chat rooms can preserve the explanations, instructions and conversations of both students and teachers. Resource folders can maintain a log of materials both uploaded and downloaded. Website traffic can be monitored, and automated online assessment systems can track the progress of individuals and groups. Such technologies provide students, lecturers and educational institutes with an unprecedented level of information regarding the process of learning. Whilst the existence of such data may have numerous benefits, in this chapter I wish to explore some possible detriments. In particular, how such information provides the grounds for a degree of surveillance never before experienced within the classroom.

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BACKGROUND

What is a Virtual Classroom?

Before outlining the risks associated with the virtual classroom, it is important that we stake out exactly what is meant by the term. The prefix 'virtual' is frequently attached to computer-based activities, environments or objects. The term 'virtual classroom' is no exception, with Pankajam (2005, p. 118), describing it as "a place where on-line distributed learning is facilitated" Hiltz (1994, p. 85) as "a teaching and learning environment located within a computer-mediated communication system" and Alden (1998, p. 60) as "a software package that integrates the various functions associated with running a course". In this chapter we follow this convention and assume a virtual classroom to be a computer-based learning environment.

Virtual classrooms are fast becoming standard platforms in tertiary institutes; with such environments replacing many previous modes of distance education, and increasingly complementing on campus teaching. Also, with the flexibility of modes of delivery, such as distance (Chang, 1982) and blended learning (Thorne, 2003) (for our purposes, blended learning can be broadly construed as a mode of delivery which combines elements of both distance and internal teaching (Reay, 2001)) and the increase in the computational power and rates of ownership of the home PC, along with improvements in the speed of the internet, virtual classrooms continue to grow in popularity. Others have gone further and stated that virtual classrooms are "key elements in the education and training processes of students, since knowledge acquisition and technological skills are considered as decisive factors in learning processes and future careers" (Villamor, 2008, p. 118). Yet this point is perhaps overstated, as a career need not be the goal of education, and learning processes are varied enough to survive without computational stimulation. Nevertheless, it remains the case that virtual classrooms stand poised to either replace, or at least strongly influence, all modes of subject delivery. Examples of software platforms upon which virtual classroom have already been established include *Blackboard* ™ (Liaw, 2008), *Moodle, WebCT* (BizED, 2007), and more recently, the open source platform *Sakai*©. Such platforms share many common features. However, in this paper we need only focus on two features in order to demonstrate the possible risks present in this environment. The first feature is that of the resources folder.

The resources folder is an online space where lecturers can upload, and students can download, files relevant to their subjects (some resource folders also allow students to upload information, however we will not discuss the ramifications of this possibility here). For example, a lecturer might place a series of PowerPoint slides relating to this week's readings in the resource folder, where, in turn, students (providing they have access to the internet) can download the slides regardless of their geographical position. This type of resource folder is, in itself, simply a unidirectional means of distributing information from the lecturer to the students and is no more treacherous than a print handout (putting aside compatibility, accessibility and malicious software issues). However, it is my contention that possible risks do arise when we marry such a feature with a second – the surveillance tool. The risks I will go on to outline may apply equally to other features of virtual classrooms, such as chat rooms or automated formative online tests. However, in order not to be distracted by the sheer number of features made available by such platforms, we will limit our discussion to the resource folder.

The surveillance tool is a feature that can be attached to virtual classrooms to monitor how they are being used. The following description is taken from the latest overview of the Sakai surveillance tool, known as the 'Site Stats' feature: