

WDW236 Assignment 2: Digital Infrastructures; BB Collaborate as Virtual World

Objectives

- Familiarity with scholarly literature on the cultural implications and potential harms of digital infrastructures (datasets, algorithms, search engines, other digital platforms);
- Ability to analyze a digital platform's interface and discuss the implications of its user roles and affordances.

Overview

- In this assignment, you are invited to think about digital infrastructures in general and one digital infrastructure, BB Collaborate, in particular. You will summarize an article studied in this unit; observe and analyze BB Collaborate; perform a mini usability test; and consider “the values and ethical principles,” in Susan Leigh Star’s words, inscribed in BB Collaborate’s affordances.

Details

- 1) Drawing on our class readings, please explain in your own words how one particular digital artifact – a dataset, an application of an algorithm, a search engine, a social media platform, or a controlled vocabulary – is inscribed with the values, prejudices, and inequalities of our society. Be as specific as possible. You do not need to do research for this question, but you need to **summarize** and **cite** detailed evidence from at least one of our readings. You may draw on/copy and paste material you’ve written for homework quizzes. (300 words)
- 2) Turn to BB Collaborate, a digital platform that functions as our virtual classroom for the term.
 - a) On the course website, you can access BB Collaborate as a student (BB Collaborate course room). You can also view an instructor’s perspective video of BB Collaborate usage. Using the following chart, take detailed notes on the affordances of BB Collaborate between student mode and instructor mode. Please record at least 4 observations in each table cell. You may use point-form. (500 words)

	Students	Instructors
Live Classroom		
BB Collaborate		

How do the affordances of the platform compare across the two user roles? How do the affordances of the platform compare with those of a live university classroom? What is lost and what is gained, in each mode?

b) What ideas about university students, professors, classrooms, and power structures do the affordances of BB Collaborate reflect? Remember our usability workshop; be as specific as possible in referring to observable aspects of BB Collaborate; use as many screenshots as you need; and describe specific details. (500 words)

Two useful quotes here:

“What values and ethical principles do we inscribe in the inner depths of the built information environment?” (Susan Leigh Star, [“Ethnography of Infrastructure”](#))

“[E]ven doorknobs have politics in that they may be round, requiring a human hand to turn them, or shaped as levers, such that a person with a prosthetic limb or an armload of groceries with one free elbow can still successfully use them. This is more than simply a matter of utility. Both designs are political in that they presume and construct different kinds of worlds, with the round doorknob presuming a world in which everyone’s bodies are the same, and in which hands with opposable thumbs and sufficient grip strength are always available.” (Galey, Alan, and Stan Ruecker. “How a Prototype Argues.” *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 25.4 (2010): 405-24. Web. 6 Feb. 2017).

Notes:

I am grateful to Miriam Posner for sharing her assignment, “Digital Storytelling,” <http://miriamposner.com/classes/is270w18/digital-storytelling/>, on which Question 2b) is based.