Re: Designing Social Infrastructures

Ask anyone who has turned down a one-way street; reading takes much more cognitive effort than observing. Perhaps they were in a hurry. The street most probably lacked anyone coming the other way. Other headlights closing in would indeed serve as a sufficient deterrent.

A one-way street serves as an analogue for a doorway; the angrily one-directional ray as an “Open Door Slowly” sign. In this analogy, traffic (that is, the movement of others) would serve as an appropriate social cue warning of a one-way street. Similarly, observing people through a window in the door aids in deciding how quickly to open it. The idea being that from our evolutionary history, people process movement and faces with a minimum of effort.

The observation that people project cues in some situations and ignore them in others lends support to the idea of translucence as opposed to transparency. This makes sense for a few reasons. First and foremost, while people are social creatures we value privacy highly. With more transparency there is necessarily less privacy. Secondly, full transparency may lead to information overload. Translucence allows us to have detailed accounts only of what we are immediately interacting with. On the other hand, we can grasp just enough information about outside events to decide whether more details are desired.

Babble is an interesting experiment, but lacks the structure found in the lecture proxy. Babble clearly shows who is active in the discussion, but this is not terribly useful by itself. Many dots may be in the middle, but are they all discussing the same thing? Are there two discussions? Three? This is addressed in the lecture proxy example. The cone shape models a lecture hall, and sets a norm for the mode of interaction. If many people are speaking at once, the point of the cone will become very crowded. If one person begins to speak, that person is likely asking a question. If multiple people other than the primary begin to speak, perhaps the lecture has become boring. Of primary importance is the structure lent by the shape.

Compare the shape of lecture hall or classroom to that of a coffee shop. A coffee shop is small and intimate, perhaps with couches and small end tables around a fireplace. This shape encourages informal discussion. All the desks or tables in a classroom face in one direction, with perhaps one desk facing the other way. This clearly encourages a formal one-to-many style interaction. As another example, take the idea of Socratic Circles. The inside circle is meant to hold a discussion, while the outside circle is meant to listen. The separation presented by the shape helps to set this expectation. The voting booth and its knee-length curtain is another wonderful example.

Re: Designing Systems

Expanding on the idea of using social cues to guide decision-making the facets of visibility, awareness and accountability are taken into account. If social cues are not visible, then they cannot be of any use. Awareness of the cues allows them to be used to make better informed choices. Accountability is essentially awareness of awareness. If others know that an individual is aware of the cues, then they expect that person to conform to the relevant norms.

Constraints are another important subject related to translucence. They are described as an application of translucence. That is, degree of access to information is a
measure of translucence. The constraints imposed upon us by physics (gravity, for example) are very well understood because they are always in effect. Our understanding of physical space is natural; communication between out-of-earshot people isn’t initiated because this is recognized. The physical presence of all parties in a conversation helps to prevent a breakdown in communication - it is immediately obvious if one person leaves for coffee.

Applying the idea of social translucence to knowledge management yields interesting results. Adding an additional degree of visibility - social knowledge - makes knowledge bases much more useful. The idea that the intangibles not in the reports were the most valuable parts of a knowledge base is extremely insightful. Using the framework that creates the content as an additional resource should be obvious, but apparently has not been. Past merely giving credit where it is due, citing a source allows the reader access to an even deeper discussion of the subject matter. It is then natural that the source of the paper (the author) could provide the deepest discussion.

Taking the discussion of social cues even further, consider the application in online retail. When browsing items for sale, Amazon offers a list of items “others bought” - those others having also considered the current item. Tapping into the “crowd effect”, they rank similar items by the frequency they are purchased by others. This goes above and beyond the default of user reviews of particular products. A large number of reviews would indicate interest in a particular item, but is not as accurate a measure of popularity as the number of purchases.

The authors ask: “why should those who produce and use knowledge take the time to [share it]”? This seems obvious. It is simply human nature to be social and to share information. From an evolutionary standpoint, this is a very useful predilection - more information allows for better decision-making. Better decision-making is directly related to staying alive longer. Staying alive longer allows for a greater chance to reproduce.

Capturing a conversation, then structuring it for ease of retrieval facilitates information gathering. The ‘debugging’ of a conversation is useful information in itself. A conversation exposes the thought process the participants have; a valuable resource for someone learning about a topic for the first time. It is partially for this reason that attending a lecture is much more useful than reading a text. If the professor is good, he or she will not only teach the material but also how best to think about it. For this reason, some professors are beginning to videotape lectures instead of simply posting slides. This way, their interactions with students are captured. Professors speak to a well-defined audience, but an audience is present in any conversation. Capturing a conversation also captures knowledge tailored to a particular audience.

Truly, a conversation is like live annotation of a subject. This speaks to the failure of attempting to exactly duplicate reality in CMC. Duplicating reality is very costly, and if it cannot be done perfectly it creates a sense of unease - unfulfilled expectancy. Mimicking social cues yields a similar result. It simply isn’t a good enough substitute. This is where abstraction shines; it is cheap, and not bound by physical conventions. Abstraction can serve as simply the annotation of reality. Define a few simple abstractions well, and they will become a permanent fixture. How disconcerting is it to hear the Mail.app “new mail” tone in the middle of a favorite track?