Learning is a remarkably social process. Social groups provide the resources for their members to learn.

John Seely Brown & Paul Duguid, The Social Life of Information

This book is about learning online with other people. Its title, Teaching Crowds, is deliberately ambiguous: the book is about how to teach crowds, but it is also about how crowds teach. What interests us are the ways in which people learn from and with one another in an online context while playing the roles of both learner and teacher—not always intentionally, and not always even as individuals. As we intend to show, there are ways in which the aggregated behaviours of crowds can teach.

Between the two of us, we have several decades of experience with using and creating social software for learning, and the time seems ripe to pull together some of what we have learned about learning. More than ever before, the crowd has become the teacher of the crowd, and, more than ever before, we have new tools and new methods with which to teach the crowd. This book is about how that vast cluster of connected individuals can learn together, within the context of institutions and beyond, and can begin to make sense of the torrent of useful and useless information that surrounds us all. In the pages to come, we will describe the theoretical foundations of the use of social software for learning and, building on those foundations, explore ways that such software can be used to support and enable learners to learn.

The book begins with an unashamed trumpeting of the potential value of social software for learning. In the opening chapter, we provide an overview of this software and describe the many advantages that may be gained through its effective employment. We hope that this introduction will tempt even skeptics to
read on and learn more about the benefits, and the pitfalls, of social media as tools for learning.

In the second chapter, we present a range of theories—some mature, others still evolving—that have developed in tandem with social learning technologies over the past few decades. Our goal is to offer a theoretical foundation that both explains and predicts the value of different ways of understanding learning in a crowd. We make considerable use of our own three-generation model of distance learning pedagogies, describing the shift from early behaviourist and cognitivist models to the era of social constructivism and then on to the emerging connectivist age of distance learning. In addition, we explore a number of other theoretical constructs and approaches, such as the theory of transactional distance, complexity theory, the concept distributed cognition, and the notion of cooperative freedoms, that help to frame and illuminate many of the dynamics of social learning in both informal and formal contexts.

Having laid the theoretical groundwork for social learning and teaching, in chapter 3, we provide a framework for understanding the different ways in which people engage with one another in a learning situation. We introduce our model of social forms, which categorizes three broad and overlapping modes of social engagement used for learning: groups, networks (or nets), and sets. We also introduce the notion of collectives—emergent entities that result from social engagement in one or more of the three basic social forms. Until recently, most research into social learning in formal contexts has assumed the centrality of a traditional closed group, with hierarchies, roles, rules, and a strong sense of membership. The closed group is the social form characteristic of classrooms and tutorial groups, in schools and colleges the world over. Social media have, however, made it considerably easier to engage with people in other ways, notably through social networks (formed from direct connections between individuals) and social sets (loose communities defined by a particular interest, or by place, or by some other shared trait). As a result, the role of collective intelligence has become far more prominent than it was in pre-Internet times. Today, it is possible to learn not only from individuals but also from their collective behaviour and interactions. Our contention is that different social forms suggest and sometimes require different approaches to learning and teaching.

In chapters 4 to 7, we delve into the details of how learning and teaching happens in groups, networks, sets, and collectives. We describe methods, tools, pedagogies, and approaches that are of value in each of these four modalities, as well as their distinguishing features and points of overlaps. We also examine their
relationship to transactional distance and the kinds of freedoms they provide and demand.

In chapter 8, to illustrate how our model applies in specific learning contexts, we share some of our discoveries as users and developers of social systems for learning. We describe our work on an Elgg-based system, Athabasca Landing, and the projects that led up to it, as well as providing examples of its integration into both formal and informal learning at Athabasca University. By translating the abstract ideas and models presented in previous chapters into concrete form, this chapter illustrates how the messiness of real-life settings provokes complex, and sometimes unanticipated, responses and evolving, rather than predetermined, outcomes.

Throughout the book, we acknowledge the many pitfalls and potential dangers associated with the use of social media for learning, ranging from loss of organizational control through to risks that pertain to the security, privacy, and comfort of individual users. In chapter 9, we accordingly examine the dark side of social software—the ways in which it can undermine or even jeopardize, rather than deepen and extend, the experience of learning. We present a series of overarching issues that warrant consideration by anyone who plans to use social software for learning. These include issues surrounding privacy, disclosure, and trust, cross-cultural dissonances, problems posed by the complexities of technology and by the digital divide, unpredictable systemic effects, and risks such as mob stupidity and filter bubbles. Where possible, we suggest ways of mitigating such risks. To the extent that risks are inherent, we describe the trade-offs—the benefits against which the risks must be weighed.

An underlying theme of the book is that learning and teaching involve a complex interplay of technologies, pedagogies, organizational structures, social bonds, and individual needs, with many interdependencies and systemic consequences. Changing one part of a learning system is seldom fully beneficial if one fails to consider that each part in a system affects, and is affected by, all the other parts. If the whole is not carefully analyzed and understood, changes can lead to unexpected, and often unwanted, outcomes. As we suggest in our penultimate chapter, “Issues and Challenges in Educational Uses of Social Software,” a poorly considered strategy for using social media in learning may have calamitous consequences. At the same time, as we demonstrate throughout the book, social media have enormous potential value for learning, formal and informal. Our task is to find ways to make them work for us.
In concluding, we present our speculations on the implications of the changes wrought by the ever-increasing use of social media in distance learning and the various shifts that may or should occur across educational systems as a result. We offer a broad vision of a future in which parts that are now available might be fitted together to create a richer, more responsive, and more socially engaged culture, as well as a toolset for lifelong learning that is unfettered by path dependencies and academic structures and methods that date back to the Middle Ages. In mapping out this vision of learning, we go beyond institutional settings, although we also suggest some ways that institutions might adapt to cater to more flexible learning paths. We are under no illusions that our vision, taken as a whole, is likely to become reality any time soon, nor do we imagine that, in conceiving it, we have somehow broken free from our own backgrounds and personal and cultural orientations. We present it as one of many possible futures, in the hope that it will stimulate discussion and prompt movement toward a more human-centred, socially embedded educational system.

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Like much discourse related to education, this book has a practical focus. For this focus, we offer no apologies but rather follow the lead of the American pragmatists, including William James and the great educational philosopher John Dewey. As James observed in a lecture delivered in 1906, pragmatism celebrates “the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories,’ supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences and facts” (2000, p. 196). In the context of traditional education, these “last things” are the results of engaging in formal learning activities. In the broader setting of informal, lifelong learning, however, we have unprecedented opportunity to create new “last things” by engaging in global conversations that are, to a great extent, unmediated and uncontrolled by social and political elites. Our challenge as educators is to use this opportunity in ways that make significant differences in the lives our students, our communities, and our globe.

Social software both enables and encourages potentially disruptive patterns of social organization and interaction. Throughout the book, we highlight the manner in which these patterns of interaction support informal modes of learning—although, as a starting point, we focus on learning that occurs within the formal setting of an institution. As the book progresses, we will describe technologies and methods that apply equally in both formal and informal settings and may
in fact tend to subvert traditional, institution-based approaches to learning. As will become clear, social software opens up possibilities for learning that do not sit neatly within a traditional educational context. Such unconventional learning, which often takes place far beyond institutional walls, in turn raises critically important questions surrounding equity and accreditation—how to recognize the legitimacy of such learning.

If we sometimes seem to paint a rosy picture of the potential of social software, remember that we are often describing what is possible given state-of-the-art tools and methods of systems design. We are also aware of the irony of discussing revolutionary changes in communications cyberspace in the form of a book, even though many readers will view this text on a computer screen or on a mobile device such as a tablet. Like the subjects we explore, this book is caught in the flux of shifting paradigms, rooted at once in the past, present, and future. At the same time, because Athabasca University Press is a fully open access publisher, this book will be available not only for purchase, in both print and epub format, but also as standard PDFs that can be downloaded for free at www.aupress.ca. We wanted to ensure that the book would be disseminated as widely as possible and that no one would be prevented from reading it by financial constraints, and we thank Athabasca University Press for providing us with this opportunity. We hope that, in the spirit of open scholarship, you will blog about, tweet, and otherwise share your reactions to the text with the online sets, nets, and groups to which you belong, and thus become a part of the crowd that teaches and a teacher of the crowd. To help support such social learning we encourage you to visit http://teachingcrowds.ca, where you will find further opportunities to explore, discuss, and develop the ideas presented here, as well as other resources that we hope you will find useful.