Positioning Learning Design: Learner Experience and the challenges of transforming teaching practice

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Abstract

Whilst effective design of reproducible learning experiences is perceived to be strategically important for educational institutions and many tools to assist in the processes of design and coordination have been developed, evidence suggests that these tools have had little success in gaining traction within the broad user base of teachers and learners.

Using a case-study of the international expansion of a UK university, we show how an examination of the design of reproducible learner experiences which facilitates the separation of design from delivery has been necessitated. In order to effect a transition, widespread change in teaching practice has to occur. As part of the journey of encouraging staff to change their practice, we describe an international computer-coordinated learning activity which has been designed to simulate the situation of international delivery and highlight communicational practice. In using computer-coordination of the learning activities, the exercise also models the practices of online activity design and its efficacy in cross-cultural situations.

Through an analysis both of the problem of the University and the activity to develop staff, we create a model of the conditions for the more widespread adoption of LD technology in the sector. To produce this model, we draw on the findings of the JISC SPLICE project, which aimed to change practice with social software, and on the Positioning Theory of Harré. We argue that with the redescription of the case-study using these distinctions, the priority to maximise the effectiveness of communications in the institution, the provision of good teaching and the coordination of a multi-national educational operation can be linked. Given these priorities, the model shows LD technology presenting a natural solution both for teachers and educational managers.

Introduction

The University of Bolton in the UK has been engaged in a programme of international expansion where the teaching of one teacher must be reproduced by others in a different country. In addressing issues of globalisation in this way, the university has started a conversation within itself on the need for renewed approaches to learning design. The international engagement was
born of a desire to expand the university provision and tap into an international market for UK accredited degrees, whilst giving UK-based staff and students opportunities to engage in the global educational environment. A remote campus has been established which mirrors practice in the UK. In requiring the reproduction of teaching practice overseas, it has made demands on relationships between UK-based teachers and teachers in an unfamiliar context, and learners on a wide scale across the university.

Bolton’s experience in taking measures to meet the challenges of global expansion throw the spotlight on the broader issues concerning the take-up of Learning Design (LD) technology: primarily the technology which supports the IMS-LD standard, which in turn developed from Koper’s Educational Modelling Language (2002). Across the sector as a whole, despite the pressures and the rationale for Learning Design, the uptake of the technologies has not been great. In this paper we consider why this is, drawing conclusions from the events at Bolton.

The uptake of any technology involves changes to the practice of teachers and learners, and this change in any practice is often difficult to establish. To understand the changes that are necessary for the adoption of LD, we draw on models derived from the JISC-funded SPLICE project (JISC, 2009). The SPLICE project focused on modelling ways of changing technological and teaching practice, focusing on attempts to instil technological habits with social software. We use the SPLICE models here to identify possible conditions for widespread adoption of LD technology.

**An International Experiment**

Prior to the international initiative, many modules in the University were conducted by teachers on a relatively small-scale in classroom settings. Despite the provision of documentation indicating syllabus content, learner experiences depended largely on the interpretation of syllabus content by individual teachers. With teacher-led assessment practices, this effectively meant that learner experience was deeply dependent on the teacher-learner relationship, where these relationships were managed through face-to-face classroom engagement. The demand to reproduce these learner experiences overseas through the delivery by teachers in other countries naturally meant that challenges in communication made the probability of misinterpretation between teachers and learners in different cultural contexts was high. The result was the creation of a disruption for many teachers in the UK campus for whom teaching practice had previously been unproblematic.

To deal with the disruption the University engaged staff in a conversation about their teaching practice and its fitness for the global challenges that the University was facing. The conversation concerned cross-cultural teaching collaboration and globalisation. In particular it focused on teacher-learner and teacher-teacher relationships. It is into this conversation that the Learning Design agenda fitted well. For it could be seen that the problem related to the ways learning experiences were designed and executed, and in particular how understanding is revealed by a teacher, not only to their learners but to other teachers who must implement the same assessments, and the challenges for revealing understanding in situations where face-to-face contact could not be established on a regular basis.
An Activity to explore the challenges of International Engagement

As a way of introducing the topic of designing learning experiences and the challenges of communication, a computer-coordinated staff development activity sequence has been designed. The sequence of activities is intended to form a simulation involving 3 ‘campuses’, whose intention is to expose the problems overseas learners have in studying in a context where their teachers rely on communication from teachers elsewhere as to how and what to teach and assess.

In the execution of this activity, the three campuses were created by dividing UK staff into two groups (in separate rooms) and a third group comprising teachers in the overseas campus. The activity, which is intended to be discipline-neutral, involves the creation of an ‘animal’ sculpture from tin foil. Each ‘campus’ elects a ‘teacher’ who is instructed on how to guide the ‘learners’ through the activity. Each ‘campus’ is instructed in different ways on how to conduct the activity, with one campus receiving video instruction, another paper-based instruction and the third email support. The sequence of activities is:

1. Choose a teacher
2. Teacher receives instructions
3. Teacher teaches ‘lesson’
4. Teacher assesses ‘results’
5. Results are ‘moderated’ by a ‘central examining authority’
6. Plenary discussion

Since the activity is delivered synchronously, the sequence can be coordinated using a video which is played simultaneously on each of the ‘campuses’. The plenary discussion uses Twitter as a medium for capturing the reflections of participants at the end of the session.

In running the activity with a group of 30 staff (20 in the UK), participants found this to be an amusing and (sometimes) frustrating experience. For those groups who received support in the form of paper instructions, or email (which was sometimes unreliable!), both the ‘teacher’ and the ‘students’ were left feeling bewildered by what was expected of them. The group with the video instructions (unsurprisingly) felt most supported.

These first impressions were supported by Twitter discussions in the plenary stage of the activity. Typical comments highlight that “transparency of assessment and the design of learning materials” and “feedback to correct mistakes” is of crucial importance for the success of the activity. The use of video was seen as particularly important. A complaint that “the central ‘assessor’ had a different idea of what the criteria were from the students” or “we didn’t know what the end product was meant to be” reflect the difficulties experienced at the ‘campuses’ where the teacher received their instructions via text (either paper or email). Talk of transparency of assessment and communicative media for revealing an understanding naturally led to a broader discussion of how this might be achieved. Overall, through the activity, staff are given an insight into the challenges of international delivery, and also an insight into the importance of engaging in communication practices which reveal their understanding. The exercise has run with positive evaluations with staff reporting that they not only enjoyed the activity, but that the result of their engagement would help change their practice. For the purpose of this paper, we
consider the extent to which the potential for changing practice was due to the way the learning activity was constructed and coordinated.

**What’s in an activity?**

Case studies within the SPLICE project have shown that the modelling of technological practices by those who ‘lived’ those practices (either enthusiastic teachers or practitioners from outside education) is an important element in changing the practice of others. In SPLICE much modelling of practice took the form of ‘activities’ where learners would be invited to engage in ‘situations’ created by the person modelling the practice. Sometimes these ‘situations’ were simple thought experiments or questions (“how likely do you think a prospective employer might be to Google you?.. here’s my ‘Google search’ results.. how about yours?”), or giving examples of “what worked for me”. Sometimes there were more formal activities (“here’s some collaborative research I’ve been doing using social bookmarks”). What was noted was the fact that in essence, the message from those modelling practice in this way was no different to the message they were receiving in other ways (e.g. “raise your online presence through blogging, etc”, “use social bookmarking”), but the way it was communicated was different. Rather than just ‘exhorting’ (or even ‘coercing’) a particular practice, an activity allowed for the ‘disruption’ of learners as they were enticed into new situations. This is not to say that the relationships between learners and those who modelled new practice didn’t also involve some exhortation, or even coercion at times, but that the activity (and the modeller) allowed for a natural balance between disruption, coercion and exhortation of new practice which was highly effective.

The learning activity for Bolton’s international project could have been presented to staff as an ‘exhortation’ to use video to communicate with. The activity, however, provides a way of saying this through balancing disruption (throwing participants into strange situations) with elements of exhortation and coercion as the activity progresses. It creates a situation where participants can experience the challenges of international engagement and reach their own conclusions. In addition to this, it also serves to introduce teachers to the idea of coordinating group activities with technology.

The importance of sophisticated methods for changing practice which don’t solely rely on exhortation or coercion is underpinned by the politics of the institution and the real situation that teachers found themselves in in trying to cope with the demands of the overseas operation. Participants on the activity are all practicing teachers, many of whom have experienced difficulties in trying to manage modules with teachers overseas. As with all dedicated professionals, exhorting or coercing a change in practice could be seen as a criticism of the practices which they have developed and invested considerable effort in over many years. The activity was a way of addressing these serious issues without asserting authority, but instead allowing for the emergence of an understanding between staff that under the conditions of the exercise (and consequently the conditions of the international campus), certain practices were more effective than others.

In studying similar situations, the SPLICE project outcomes suggested that the effect of learning activities is one of changing the ‘positioning’ between the teacher and the learner. From positioning the teacher as ‘sage on the stage’ (King, 1993), where exhortation and coercion can
dominate, to the teacher as “guide on the side” or even as a “co-learner”, where a finer balance between exhortation, coercion and disruption is possible. However, the issue of widespread changes in practice is more involved than the interaction between teachers and learners in a learning activity. However inspiring a particular activity is, real change requires a reorganisation of daily practice and personal priorities. In understanding the possible conditions for adoption of LD technology, we have to consider the conditions where:

a. Teachers see that there’s ‘something in it for them’ to engage in learning design practices-

b. Institutions create teaching and learning policies which promote activity design and coordination technologies over those technologies which predominantly deliver content.

**Social Context and Individual Practice**

The relationship between individual practice and social context (or social structure) has been the topic of much debate in sociology for many years, with varying descriptions ranging from Giddens’s Structuration theory (1984) to Bhaskar’s Transformational Model of Social Activity (1977). Within these models, the transformation of technological practice is a form of social transformation which must consider aspects relating both to individual agency and social structure. In SPLICE, this was interpreted through creating a model whereby individual technological practice transforms the social context within which the individual operates, leading to the transformed social context conditioning further individual technological practice (Johnson and Sherlock, 2009). If new technological practice did not transform the social context, then the practice tended not to be sustained. Put more simply, the structure-agency distinction helps to describe more formally that people change their practice when they see there’s something “in it for them” to change.

Bearing this in mind, widespread adoption of LD technology similarly requires that teachers see that there’s something ‘in it for them’ to turn into online activity designers. Where the social context of teachers promotes and recognises the value of the technology, it is more likely to happen. However, in traditional institutions with a face-to-face history, this transformation of context is difficult to establish.

The structure-agency distinction features to a limited extent in Rogers work on the diffusion of innovation. In particular, the distinction between ‘optional innovation decisions’, ‘collective innovation decisions’ and ‘authority innovation decisions’ (Rogers and Everett, 1964), reflect the different balances between individual agency and the social structures within which individuals operate. However, Johnson and Davies (2007) have argued that Roger’s view of adoption tends to be from an outside observer’s perspective, and can be less useful in understanding the real causal mechanisms of change from the perspective of stakeholders directly involved in it. The metaphor of disruption, coercion and exhortation specifically attempts to identify the causal mechanisms of change in practice. Disruption, in particular, has been recognised to play a major role in the diffusion of innovation (Christensen et al, 2006). For example, the internet and mobile phones disrupted communicative practice in a way which left few untouched across many different communities of practice. New practices emerged in many aspects of personal life as a result of this disruption, often resulting in new policies within business practice which embraced
technology (coercion), together with exhortations of the ‘dot.com’ era. The university’s response to the changing context was the VLE. Given the importance that this suggests for the disruption of communities of practice, this raises an important question concerning the adoption of LD: “Is there a disruption to daily practice where the solution is Learning Design technology?”

However, the disruption of many communities of practice at once – which was the effect of the internet – may not be easy to effect with a technological disruption at the end of the first decade of the 21st century as it was in the last decade of the 20th. Since the technological disruptions of the 1990s and early 2000s, a process of technological personalisation has taken place which has given individuals enormous (and sometimes bewildering) choice about the technologies they might use for their teaching (Wilson, 2006). This has prompted many to cite the ‘death’ of the VLE (Styles, 2007), as personal technology takes over. Irrespective of whether the VLE is ‘dead’ or not, the upshot of personalisation is the fragmentation of the technology community where a single technology cannot disrupt everyone in the same way. Innovations instead tend to target particular interest groups: for example, users of Facebook, iPhones, Twitter, etc. Thus, unlike the 1990s, a technological intervention on its own is unlikely to provide a universal disruption of practice across a number of communities. Therefore, it is likely that if ‘a disruption to which the solution is LD technology’ is possible, this disruption will be caused by something other than technology itself.

**Understanding and Communication in a Globalised World**

Globalisation, although a phenomenon that predates the technological explosion of the late 20th century (Osterhammel, 2003), has clearly been accelerated by technology in recent years. Without the communicative potential of the internet, the coordination of multi-national organisations would be impossible. Universities are increasingly subject to the forces of globalisation, as many seek to expand international provision, and some private institutions in the UK are being bought-up by multinational corporate concerns. As the example of the international expansion of the UK university shows, these challenges present fundamental communicative problems, as the coordination of activities takes place by proxy and at a distance. Globalisation, therefore, might provide a possible breeding ground for a disruption which will affect many communities of practice in the coming years. If this is the case, to what extent might LD technology be seen as a solution to these challenges in education?

As the Bolton experience has demonstrated, the communicative challenges of a global educational operation relate to finding ways of exploring understanding across different cultural contexts, where each participant can take ownership of the understanding that they reach, whilst mutual understanding of each party can be attained. The alternatives to activity design for creating mutual understanding are the traditional methods of teaching, which inevitably position the teacher as an authority where understanding is either coerced or a view exhorted. For staff on the overseas campus of Bolton who were on the receiving end of this traditional approach, the experience was reported as being ‘alienating’. They felt they had no say and no control in what they were being asked to do, and yet they were skilled and knowledgeable professionals.
themselves. Similar feelings of alienation were also reported by overseas learners who were also at the receiving end of coercive practices which they felt they could not engage with properly.

The small-scale Bolton staff development activity could be seen as demonstrating the possibility for finding a different ‘way’ of helping stakeholders reach shared understandings. Given this, a focus on designing learning activities for creating shared understanding across different cultural contexts might deliver greater coordination between stakeholders in those different contexts. However, despite being able to say that activities might allow for a richer mix of disruption, coercion and exhortation may not go far enough to convince practitioners that there’s something ‘in it for them’ to change their practice. To make this argument more powerfully, a deeper understanding of how learning - activities can affect the relationships between teachers, learners and other stakeholders, and which relates these relationships to ‘good teaching’ is required.

Theoretical work on relations and on the ways in which communications can contribute to feelings of alienation or empowerment has a long history. R.D. Laing’s (1964) work on family therapy drew on the cybernetic anthropology of Gregory Bateson (2000). Paul Watslawick also drew on Bateson’s distinction of ‘double-bind’ and ‘schizmogenesis’ to create his ‘pragmatics of human communication’ (1967). Rom Harré has more recently synthesized Laing’s work with Searle’s Speech act theory into his ‘Positioning Theory’ (1999). This work has been applied to the treatment of Alzheimer’s patients (Sabat, 2001), and on change management (Boxer, 2001).

Positioning theory situates communicative action as part of a mechanism of ‘selfhood’ between communicating parties. This mechanism divides the ‘self’ into three layers which Harré calls ‘self 1’, ‘self 2’ and ‘self 3’. Self 1 designates the ‘intentional’ self – the ‘I’ within one’s head (Sabat, 2003). Self 2 represents the ‘embodied’ self – the person who can do practical things in the physical world. Self 3 represents the self as it is realised through social interaction. Harré uses these distinctions to examine the effects that the circumstances and nature of communication can have on participants. In using this idea to research the treatment of Alzheimer’s patients, Sabat argues that much of the medical care that Alzheimer’s patients receive treats them as passive recipients, and doesn’t allow them to express themselves. Using Harré’s distinctions, Sabat argues that this amounts to a ‘supressing’ of Self-3 and consequent feelings of alienation which can contribute to making the medical symptoms appear worse. Sabat shows that by communicating in a different way with sufferers (or ‘positioning’ them more effectively), and allowing them to take a more active role in conversations and in their treatment, patients can still feel their social actions to be meaningful.

This provision of opportunity for empowerment that positioning theory articulates is closely associated with creation of opportunities for individual social action. Seen in this way, the creation of learning activities also creates opportunities for meaningful social action by participants, where the positioning involved in the ‘sage on the stage’ model might otherwise not, particularly if understanding is ‘coerced’ or the medium of communication is inadequate. In Harré’s language, such a situation can lead to suppression of Self-3 – a similar mechanism to that identified by Sabat in healthcare.
Modelling the Conditions for the adoption of Learning Design

Given these theoretical distinctions, we can begin to articulate a model of the conditions for the adoption of LD technology. The first element, as it is with all widespread adoption of new practice is a ‘common disruption’ – something which affects many communities of practice, and which demands that changes in practice are required. We have argued that the increasing globalisation of education could be such a disruption, and the experiences at Bolton have demonstrated the extent to which the questions raised by globalisation highlight current problems and demand new answers.

We have argued that the challenges of globalisation are communicative, concerning the ways in which shared understanding might be established across different cultural contexts. Through using the distinctions about the different ways in which education seeks to disseminate understanding we argue that the designing of activities may provide opportunities for teachers to position themselves in a way which allows for understanding to be discovered by participants, avoiding the need for coercing or exhorting a particular view of the world. The staff development activity at the University of Bolton demonstrated how this might be achieved.

Given a shared understanding of the problems caused by the disruption and the nature of the solution to dealing with it, policy formation on the design of learning activities based on a renewed pedagogical foundation within Universities could follow, with the associated technological support of LD technology. We have argued that work on human communication could provide the foundation for this renewed thinking, and that the natural consequence of this view is the design of learning activities. In the challenge to provide flexible curricula, personalised learning and the employment of personal technologies, LD technology presents new ways to approach the organisation of education such that it increases the probability that meaningful relationships between teachers and learners might develop.

Conclusion

Bolton’s international development has created a disruption within the institution which has affected many communities of practice, from teachers to administrators. This has forced the issue of teaching practice and globalisation into the spotlight. The challenges that this raises for the University relate to communication and the reproduction of learning experiences in different parts of the world. In the culturally diverse situation of the global university, we have argued that LD technology can provide an effective solution to these problems, by creating situations where understanding between stakeholders can emerge and be shared, rather than being coerced.

Communication, we have argued, is at the heart of some of the challenges of teaching and learning in a technological age. It demands richer theoretical understanding of the ways in which understanding is conveyed. We have presented Positioning Theory as a way of making distinctions about inter-personal communication. We have argued that this paradigm can not only provide explanatory frameworks for communicational problems, but point the way to solutions which address not only the immediate needs of teachers in overseas campuses, but also the needs
of domestic teachers and learners struggling to cope with an increasingly instrumentalised, complex and fast-changing educational environment.

The contrast between the adoption of the VLE and the apparent lack of adoption of Learning Design technology tells us something about the ways in which practices change in the University. In modelling the possible conditions for the uptake of LD, we have made distinctions concerning the nature of the interventions that are made which can change practice (coercion, disruption and exhortation), and the motivation of stakeholders for sustaining new practices (structure and agency). Using these distinctions, we have argued that a priority for educational institutions is to create contexts within which the formation of meaningful learning conversations between learners and teachers becomes more probable. Given this, in changing the positioning between individuals, the design and coordination of activities may be seen to be more than merely desirable.

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