Designing for Interactive and Collaborative Learning in a Web-Conferencing Environment

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This thesis was presented for the degree of Ph.D. on the 31st of July 2008.
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Abstract

This study investigated learning design in a web-conferencing environment based on three semesters of lessons conducted as part of an introductory programming subject. As well as characterizing the nature of discourse and interaction, the study focused on how the design of the interface, activity and task type affected collaboration and learning. Engeström’s (1987) Activity Theory based upon a socio-constructivist view of learning was used to frame the analysis.

Interface designs incorporated theory relating to graphical user interface design, multimedia learning, and findings from the cognitive sciences. Activity designs were differentiated based on the degree of student ownership, from teacher-centred (transmissive) approaches, to teacher-led (guided interaction) approaches, to student-centred (collaborative group-work) designs. Types of tasks were considered on the basis of their level of knowledge (declarative, procedural and conceptual), their character (authenticity, situatedness) and their domain specific nature (in the field of computer science education). The effects of the different interface, activity and task designs on collaboration and mental model formation were explored.

A mixed method approach to analysis was adopted, incorporating a design-based research study and a multimodal discourse analysis. The design-based research allowed a broader, more interpretivistic and process focused analysis to be conducted, based on the strategic redesigns that occurred between iterations of the subject. The multimodal discourse analysis enabled more detailed, objective and outcomes based measurements of the subject of discourse, the nature of interactions and the types of modalities used to mediate learning. Triangulating data from the design-based research study and the multimodal discourse analysis provided a more complete description of phenomena and promoted greater reliability.

Results include the way in which different modalities afforded different possibilities for representing, and how combinations of those modalities could be effectively integrated by applying multimedia learning principles. Student-centred learning designs increased student involvement, allowing them to take greater ownership over the content and to more fully share their mental models. Authentic, meaningful problem solving tasks promoted greater student engagement. The capacity to dynamically redesign the interface based on the collaborative and cognitive requirements of the learning episode supported more effective implementation of conversational (Laurillard, 2002) approaches to learning.

More effective interaction and collaboration resulted from prescribing patterns of engagement, managing activity and technology so that student discourse could focus on content, and providing guidance regarding semiotic representational forms so that students could concentrate on applying those representations rather than inventing them. Teacher and student virtual classroom competencies critically influenced collaboration and learning.

Based on the findings in this study, a framework of nine pedagogical patterns for teaching and learning in web-conferencing environments is proposed. The framework provides an integrated approach to learning design that relates the interface design with the activity design and the level of knowledge (task type).
Statement of Candidate

The work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. The contents are original and all reference to the work of others has been appropriately cited.

Macquarie University Human Ethics Committee approval was obtained for all aspects of this study (Ref: HE27MAY2005-DO4143, HE24FEB2006-DO4428, HE22JUN2006-DO4786).

Signed,

_________________________________
Matthew Bower
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support and inspiration of Professor Mike Johnson and Professor John Hedberg, to whose wisdom and care I will always aspire. At the same time I would like to thank a few of the other great educators in my life, my beloved Father, Mother and Sister, my 5th and 6th Grade teacher Mrs Craig, my senior high school mathematics teacher Mr Barrett, and my practical teaching supervisor Dr Joan Lawson. The positive impact of these people upon my life cannot be overstated.

To this list I can easily add others such as Dr Raymond Lister, Associate Professor John Shepherd, Barbara Stone, Associate Professor Pamela Coutts, Professor George Cooney, Associate Professor Debbie Richards, Dr Maree Gosper and a raft of other people who have serendipitously conspired to support and mentor me without thought for personal recompense. As well, to my friends and extended family who have stood by me and helped me on countless occasions, I hope that in some way I can return your goodwill.

While not wanting to turn this into the Academy Awards or exaggerate the degree of accomplishment I have achieved, it would have been remiss of me not to acknowledge the importance of all of these people in my life, and the extent of my gratitude. It is lovely to have had the opportunity to do so here.

Matt Bower