Essay Inspired by H800 TMA-02

Robin Taylor

Week 8-9, Design for Learning

A7: A learning-centred view:

The Ulster University 'Hybrid Learning Model' (HLM), is an semi-structured way of asking the designer of teaching/learning materials how they structure their learning tasks (Masson et al., 2008). Like other schemas on the learning design process (eg. Compendium or the Pyramidal-4 Facets of Learning), HLM provides a framework around which a teacher can start to consider what it is that they are trying to teach by deconstructing their teaching/ learning aims according to 8 learning activities. HLM therefore has a focus that is learner-centric.

HLM's original purpose was to help instructors deconstruct their learning tasks. It does this by asking instructors to consider their learning task according to eight basic learning events that occur (experimenting, creating, imitation, debating, receiving, exploring, practising and self-reflection) along with appropriate action verbs that are appropriate for both the teachers and the learner's perspective. HLM's approach is a way of articulating to other instructors, what is it that is trying to be taught, so that teaching skills maybe more easily transferred to other instructors.

A by-product of HLM however has been the ability to help designers of learning materials because, like the other schemas in learning design, it asks for more reflection by the designer as to what they are trying to achieve.

The authors of HLM are modest about the usefulness of HLM:

> The Model, in itself, does not transform teaching practice but provides a framework for academic practitioners and students to examine teaching and learning scenarios in a novel way. (Masson et al., 2008, p.16)

One thing that was unusual about HLM was in providing physical flash cards for the designer to use. They call this a 'tactile' environment'. Their justification was not supported by any significant empirical evidence. They suggest though that this lo-tech tactile environment lends itself well to collaboration with colleagues in an informal setting such as around a coffee table. The two sided physical cards give textual and graphic prompts to kick start ideas or discussions or reflections on the teaching learning process with an emphasis for both the teaching and the learning side of the task.

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Whilst reviewing the HLM model I was struck by the comparison of deconstructing a teaching/learning task to that of a relatively modern project management approach called 'Getting Things Done' or 'GTD' (Allen, 2002), in which the focus in on actions that need to

be taken; actions are single step activities such as 'ring the boss'. If one takes more than two steps then this is now a 'project' and not a single action. 'Getting Things Done' emphases thinking of the next actionable step and thereby completing projects one step at a time. Rather than trying to plan the complete set of steps anticipated and possibly being paralysed into inaction throughout this analysis.

I used HLM to deconstruct a teaching approach I have used to teach students about type I errors in statistics (the so called 'p-value'). Many students find this a hard concept to understand because it is a counter-intuitive concept. However, when I tried to deconstruct this logic, I realised that I needed more of a particular type of learning activity card (*Receives* & *Debates*). This in turn made me realise that I was teaching a number of different concepts and the HLM helped me to recognise this. Although there were no instructions to not repeat one of the eight learning activities from HLM, this process reminds me of the 'GTD' approach that if simply 'feels' right that doing a learning activity task more than once suggests that the task needs to be dissected into more manageable chunks. In other words, HLM helped me identify discrete learning steps, whereas previously I had thought of this one task as simply that – one task.

The 'Tools' column in the matrix that is used to help deconstruct the learning process, appears to be the place where one is prompted to come up with more than just 'handouts' or 'slides' in a conventional face to face didactic approach. In that sense the activity helped me to start thinking about how technology could be incorporated to support the themes that I was trying to develop; for instance the use of slideshows that might be part of a web site that could dynamically reveal how to interpret a type I error expressed as a percentage.

It is not immediately apparent how an HLM approach helps learners to make choices about their learning. However, Masson et al (2008), conducted an survey of students who were undertaking a first year tertiary class designed specifically using HLM. The students were shown the deconstructed learning task, which includes verbs for both the educators and the students. In other words expectations of the learning task were made explicit. Not surprisingly, the students were overall positive in stating that they felt that they knew more of what was expected of them. This makes perfect sense in how HLM can help students understand the micro-steps that educators are expecting their students to go through in order to learn a concept.

Week 10, Social Networking in Learning

A5: Blogs and blogging

One cannot, in my opinion, really talk about the impact of blogging from an educational stand point without mentioning other 'Web 2.0' technologies such as 'RSS' feeds and 'social tagging' (such as on *Delicious)*. Isolated, these technologies seem mildly interesting but could be perceived as variations of Web 1.0 technologies such as static web pages, and electronic newsletters. It's only by working synergistically that these technologies morph into something new and different – hence 'Web 2.0'.

Blogging 'seems' to have the potential to bring about a new kind of online sociality (Williams and Jacobs, 2004), but whether there is a significant efficacious teaching or learning effect from using the blogs is not clear (Kerawalla et al., 2008).

Understanding Choices for Practitioners & Learners

As a preface to this section, it may be useful to reflect that blogging seemed to make no sense to me as a web technology on it's own. I have tried to visit a number of different blogs since about 2000, but I never spent more than a few minutes on one, and never felt inspired to revisit these sites. I realise now that is because I was not utilising other web technologies that make 'blogs' suddenly become my 'latest find'. Specifically social tagging of web sites (Actvity 3 – Del•icio•us) and an 'Atom' or an 'RSS' feed that can summarise subscribed to blogs and display the title and a certain (or all) of the submitted blog. The ability to quickly scan whether a blog has been added to, or commented on in one place, is critical. Otherwise one would be forced to visit every single blog on a recurring basis. The social web-site tagging can also be subscribed to as a feed, such that new web sites that are tagged (say with this course's code 'H800') can also be quickly surveyed and scanned - again all from one location (or application).

The promise of a virtual university might become reality with modern Information-Communication-Technologies (ICTs) (Crook, 2002) but it is acknowledged that such a learning environment misses out particularly on a social elements that students appear to want in their own studying (Wegerif, 1998). Blogging may offer a partial solution to achieve this through ICTs.

Specifically, the blogs of my fellow student in my tutorial group have shown yet another facet of them which were not conveyed in the 'virtual learning environment' (VLE) bulletin boards set up for the tutorial group. Their blogs seem more personal and include choices such as the font that the blog is written in, the pictures or multi-media used to accompany the blogs as well as an easier to use commenting system. This is particularly so for some of the students who have already started a blog, and who are giving blog entries beyond what is required in the course. Attempts to bring about this kind of socialisation in the OU VLE such as a course 'café' do not give the same intimacy or apparent ease of access.

My own experience of blogging for H800 fits in well with the research reported by Kerawalla et al (2008), suggesting that students tend to use blogs in a number of different ways but of interest are those students who reported that they used it to build up a resource network, or to establish a small community of like minded bloggers.

What is not clear though is how blogs can be used in a structured learning task (other than learning about blogs *per se*). However, the individuality of blogging suggests that both educators and learners can gain because:

- Blogs act as a personal repository of information resources that can be accessed by others (Tekinarslan, 2008).

- They act as a motivator to take extra care with submitting opinions (Kerawalla et al., 2008) or even submitting their assignments (Tekinarslan, 2008).
- They may act as a vehicle that encourages reflective journal writing as an important component in learning (Williams and Jacobs, 2004).

Despite modern younger tertiary students belonging increasingly to the 'Google Generation' (Rowlands et al., 2008), research by Kennedy et al (2008) is suggestive that such students are in fact heterogeneous in their use of specialised technologies (such as those associated with Web 2.0 technologies). With respect to desiring to use blogs as part of their learning environment, it was only those students who were already conversant and had published their own blogs, who wanted blogs to be part of their tertiary learning environment. These researchers suggested that it would be,

> … difficult to expect students to have the expertise to judge how to best use emerging technologies for educational purposes (Kennedy et al., 2008, p.8).

Week 12: E-Debates

A3: Reading Price et al. (2007)

Price et al (2007), conducted 3 studies to ascertain the perceived differences for students who took the same academic course but who could receive either online tutor support, or a more traditional 'face to face' tutor. The first two studies are quantitative and the last one is a qualitative study. Both quantitative studies must be dismissed on the grounds that the authors have used the wrong kind of statistical analysis. The principle error was to calculate parametric statistical tests using ordinal data. This error is at its maximum when effect sizes are being calculated. The idea of the effect size is that it pre-supposes that there is a real difference between the ordinal points (ratings on the scale) when in fact other than it's relative position on the scale, this cannot be made (Robson, 1993). There are other significant methodological flaws with this study such as self selection of students into the comparative groups which may introduce a a confounding variable that has nothing to do with the mode of tutorial support. Another being that students receiving 'face to face' tutor support may have had this supplemented with telephone and/or email support. This begs the question whether there is not some overlap with the two modes of tutor support. Email is still considered to be part of the 'online' domain and telephoning may be considered by some to be part of an online technology (the 'C' in ICT standing for *communication*).

However, in fairness to Richardson he is open to debate and asks us to consider whether we agree with these studies, '*… you should be wary of accepting my account as 'true''* (Richardson, 2008), and the point of this weeks learning is on the nature of debate, particularly in education and/or technology and education. This is of course the nature of scientific debate. What is not clear however, is how this debate is supposed to be furthered or exploited under the use of modern technologies such as ICTs, except through the use of posting to our respective blogs. Only one of my peers, Richard Parker, appears to have posted a blog on this activity (Parker, 2009) with nothing being posted on the tutorial groups forum either. Certainly my own post would under normal conditions, be unlikely to

come to the attention of any of the authors. So the standard form of debate would require me to write a letter to the editors of the journal pointing out their [in my opinion] analytical and methodological errors.

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However, there is considerable merit in this paper with the final study which was a qualitative study looking at the expectations of what it meant to be tutored in a learning experience (as opposed to receiving tuition). One of the questions asked in this study asked if some expectations in the tutoring activity was best given in an online format, or via traditional face to face tutor support. Certainly all the comments had something to say about how to design a distance or flexible course with tutor support by taking these comments into account and trying to provide a solution to at least partially match the expectations of the tutor's support.

Expectations were as one would expect: helping to understand a topic; or to broaden the topic under study into a wider context; or to provide a joint learning experience with tutor and students 'journeying' together on a learning experience. However, the final conception did surprise me because I had never thought of this, namely to allow students to express themselves as a professional would in the domain they are studying. However, it does suggest that an online environment such as a virtual learning environment (VLE) forum or student blogs may indeed provide exactly the kind of environment which would be hard to provide unless one was actually doing it. In other words, a student can 'publish' a paper which has a potentially large viewership (see Tekinarslan, 2008), and it can be commented on publicly just as would be the case in publishing a study the *Studies in Higher Education* journal; except of course it is far quicker and faster in an online environment compared to a traditional printed peer reviewed journal. In fact Williams & Jacobs (2004) suggest that in many ways there is anything but a 'soft' simulation. Publish to a blog and the potential readership leads them to conclude that …

> …For this reason, academic bloggers, if they are true to their ideals, may be more concerned about spreading their message in the blogosphere than in the 'Journal of Obscure Facts'! (Williams and Jacobs, 2004, p.3)

I do not agree with the conclusions of this paper that face to face is actually what the students want compared to online interaction in tutor support – aside from the methodological and associated confounding errors as flaws – what does spring out from the quotes of the students in the study is that they want to feel that they are more than '*just another ID number*' (Price et al., 2007, p.16). One way to achieve this is of course through face to face contact with ones tutor. However, it might be possible to achieve the same effect through 'smart' use of ICTs. Indeed the technology has advanced considerably since 2002 & 2003 when the studies were conducted.

For instance, a pioneering physician Jay Parkinson based out of Brooklyn, took a innovative approach to being a physician by including medical consultations and diagnoses that were 'on-line', as well as having face to face consultations. Parkinson sold his services as a

physician and supported his patients through email, instant messaging, 'sms' mobile text, and video conferencing; whatever is most convenient for the patient. The result was a fast responsive service. Patients appear not to feel that this is an inhuman or depersonalised service; quite the opposite, where the philosophy is to bring back the personal touch of physicians by using the technology combined with traditional face to face visits (Health, 2009).

One would have thought that patients would be more sensitive and discerning of feeling like 'another ID number', so clearly this approach is not dehumanising. If a doctor can provide such a service in a big cosmopolitan city, it would seem that there will be ways and means of using ICT to counter the negative feelings that students had for online tutor support (Price et al., 2007).

Weeks 13 and 14: Listening to the student voice

A1: The learner experience

This activity was split into three parts. The first was to review a video produced by Mike Wesch and his students (2007a) outlining what kind of students are entering into the US tertiary institutions. As before (Wesch, 2007b), the style is engaging and informative. The use of placards by the students with a camera that is reminiscent of the current reportage movement in many television dramas, gives it a current and edgy feel, with an emotional tone suggesting a foreboding that as educators we may be missing the whole point of what we are supposed to be teaching our students. For instance their survey from 200 students suggest that they will write 42 pages of assignment material for any course for the year, but in the same time period they will write 500 pages of email. Or a statement that read '*when I graduate, I will probably have a job that doesn't exist today*'.

Kennedy et al (2007; 2008), have convincingly shown that despite most first year students entering university today being '*Digital natives*', or '*Net Generation*' most are not conversant on current Web 2.0 technologies that could be fruitfully employed for their learning. There is a sense that these students are comfortable with technologies such as the use of computers, and mobile telephones, but in the main the usage appears to be mainly for using email, writing assignments and also searching for source material from the web. The main point of these studies is summarised as follows:

> When commentators such as Barnes et al. (2007) say that blogs have "long [been] a staple of the Net Geners' lives", there is a real danger that such commentary will create a vague but pervasive feeling among tertiary educators that every student who enters the higher education system is a blogger (Kennedy et al., 2007, p.522) .

In contrast Salaway et al (2008) show statistics of tertiary students using ICT for their learning but this is an ongoing annual survey. Their study is more akin to a 'digital epidimiology'. What is most striking about their study is the rapid change in social networking sites (SNS) from about 33% in 2006 to 59% in 2007 saying that they accessed an SNS daily. The contrast is that Kennedy et al's study showed that 11% of the sample used an SNS. However, if the change is as dramatic as Salaway et al suggest, then the

concerns raised by Kennedy maybe moot by the time that wider academic community has accepted their premise that the *NetGen* or *GoogleGen* may (i) not be homogenous with respect to the technologies that they use and (ii) may not be particularly well versed in using Web 2.0 technologies.

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The presentations by Wesch (2007a) Kennedy et al (2008) and Salawar *et al* (2008) all suggest that the use of ICT on a daily basis is a fact of life for the current crop of students entering into tertiary education, at least in Australia and the United States. Wesch's video suggests that we may not be teaching things that are adequate to the current needs of the student. Kennedy *et al* (2007; 2008) does not say that the wrong things maybe taught to our students but rather that we maybe seriously over-estimating the technological know how to use Web 2.0 technology. Both reports therefore suggest that a re-think or at least a more considered evaluation is required of the relevant course design.

Discussion

The learner's experience that link the previous four sections are the combinations of everything that the learner experiences during the teaching/learning process, which is important in order to consider in the design and subsequent implementation of the course, so that the intentions of the course designer are realised – that is students are successfully taught. With respect to the use of technology as a component of the learner's experience:

Ability to use the technology: There are two versions of this. The first is that the technology is too complicated (such as designing, coding, running and maintaining a database to support a web site), or that the technology is not readily available, either because the infrastructure is not there, it is expensive to run. Either way, if there is no ability to use the technology then it simply will not be used.

Perception of ease of use: Similarly if student's have a perception that the technology is hard to use, or is not worth the bother, then they will not use it. Students for the most part appear to still employ a strategy that is devoted to passing the minimum grades to obtain a course credit with the minimum of effort. In that sense, the course designer has to focus on what the technology brings to the student learner that they cannot get as easily, or efficiently through other more traditional means.

Expectations of their learning experience: Students of today may have expectations of how they should be taught (not what they should be taught). Educators may resist this as a their perogative as to the pedagogy that they 'know' works best. However, it would seem unlikely that the students from the Price *et al* study (Price *et al*., 2007) were markedly different from the rest of the world. This research suggested that 'convenience' that an digital learning environment provided was something that they appreciated. An extension of this idea is provided for by Castronova (2008), who suggests that as the online virtual world becomes more sophisticated, they will become more 'fun'. This element of 'fun' will start to

impact on real world policies including education otherwise there will start to be an exodus from the real to the virtual world; as in more time spent in front of the virtual world display, rather than and interacting with people and places in the real world. Education will be no different:

> Students will spend most of their time in the virtual environments and will have to be lured back to the real world to learn. To get them back, learning will … have to become more fun (Castronova, 2008, p.182).

Efficacy of learning: None of the literature mentioned above, or indeed any significant large scale research appears to have been done on the efficacy of the learning undertaken when there are technology inputs such as the use of Web 2.0 technologies.

The main way that these expectations have been researched has been to conduct surveys on the student population and subsequent focus groups, but the level of analysis has always been to garner evaluations from students on their perceptions of technology usage in the learning environment rather than ascertain how students might use the technology or even ascertain if it is contributing to the students overall learning (Conole *et al*., 2008, p.512).

Wesch has indirectly addressed this by using an embedded 'participant observer' ethnographic approach. In observing the use of modern media, his students are required to use it and participate as active agents. There is an irony in the way Wesch and his students do this, because it seems as if (for the moment) they are less commentators on the technology and instead pioneers, particularly in the learning/teaching realm. Wesch recently posted a blog (2009) documenting the Web 2.0 tools used to conduct the class, including: blogging, social tagging, synchronous and asynchronous group work, Podcasts and Vpodcasts, digital composition and editing all of which count towards the class assessment. Reading through many of Wesch's students blogs, there is a distinct sense apprehensive about engaging and using this technology, but they quickly appear to take it on board and are posting regularly on their progress.

Conclusion

Four activities from Block 2 from H800 have shown a variety of ways that the design of a course or programme including the technology that it uses or showcases, can have a perceived, and presumably real effect on the learning/teaching task. What is lacking from all these approaches however, is any empirical evidence that ultimately the technology significantly improves the learning opportunities and subsequent learning performance of students. HLM as a way of both deconstructing and constructing learning tasks, remains a schema on which to do such an exercise but it remains to be seen whether there are not others that might be equally good or better in helping both instructors and learners to grasp any learning task. Whilst research appears to have shown that students are more capable of utilising technology, it does not follow that they can use it effectively in a learning environment. As Kennedy *et al* (2008) point out:

> More research is needed to determine the specific circumstances under which students would like their 'living technologies' to be adapted as 'learning technologies' (Kennedy *et al*., 2008).

Despite the pessimism of this research, there are longitudinal signs that the Web 2.0 literacy is, or has already grown exponentially (Salaway *et al*., 2008), with a massive uptake in students in US tertiary institutions using social networking sites. The younger generational students appearing to be homogenous in their daily usage of such a site (95%). Certainly reading around the blogs of at least one inspirational educator, it seems that the successful adoption of Web 2.0 technologies is no longer a pipe dream but a reality (Wesch, 2009). One has the distinct impression that his senior students are engaged, self motivated, self-starters & learners who find the course useful and practical. One could do no worse that try to learn from Mike Wesch in order to try and design a course that effectively incorporates the technology in appropriate and effective means.

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