Chapter X
Developing a Taxonomy for Learning Designs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the development of a taxonomy of learning designs based on a survey of 52 innovative ICT-using projects that formed the basis of a grounded approach to classifying high quality learning designs. The concept of learning designs has the potential to support academics in the process of offering high quality ICT supported learning settings in the higher education sector. The taxonomy is proposed as a mechanism to explore ways in which learning designs can be made accessible to academics and to help with the understanding of the goals of the learning design movement. The development of the taxonomy is described, and user review of the representation of learning designs in a Web context is discussed. Finally, the current gap in the literature about accurate and effective taxonomies describing and distinguishing between various forms of learning design is discussed in relation to future research agendas.

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, an effective educational setting is characterized by high quality teaching based on contemporary views of learning (Boud & Prosser, 2002). Whilst much of the influential research in learning has been school based, higher education has developed a significant history of research interest focused on moving what has traditionally been instructivist practices in teaching to practices based on contemporary theories of learning (Schön, 1995) or the so called "new

pedagogy." Governments worldwide are supporting this growing awareness and emphasis on high quality teaching as they implement policies within which "learning has been explicitly identified as the main catalyst for economic competitiveness and growth" (Cullen, Hadjivassiliou, Hamilton, Kelleher, Sommerlad, & Stern, 2002, p. 12). Mechanisms for quality assurance for learning in higher education sectors are being used to drive these policies. Consequently, as funding models for higher education has shifted to user-pay systems, both students and their institutions can no longer afford to tolerate high levels of student attrition or poor learning outcomes related to poor teaching (DEST, 2004).

Some countries have moved toward explicitly supporting academics in improving their teaching process. National bodies, government policies, and forums encouraging innovation in teaching practice have been established across most western countries. For example, in the United States, there is a range of support to foster high quality teaching such as The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/); the "Improving University Teaching" annual conference (http://www.iutconference.org/); the Teaching, Learning and Technology group (http://www.tltgroup.org/); and The National Teaching and Learning Forum (http://www.ntlf.com/). In the UK, there are a number of initiatives taking on different forms of dissemination, such as journals and magazines to stimulate and encourage the sharing of ideas about current practices in teaching and learning in higher education (e.g., Exchange Magazine—http://www.exchange.ac.uk/)—and Web sites such as the recently formed Higher Education Academy (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/).

In Australia, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (http://www.autc.gov.au/institute.htm) and its predecessor, the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (http://www.autc.gov.au), support these processes with government policy moving toward teacher qualifications for new academics. The Carrick Institute was launched in August 2004 to promote and advance learning and teaching in Australian higher education. Its vision is to promote long-term change through a focus on systemic change in the higher education sector in Australia. The initiative represents a significant investment in learning in the higher education sector in Australia.

Of course, even with instructional skills, academics have another set of requirements in research and development and should not be expected to have teaching as their only focus. An effective and efficient way forward would be to improve teaching in higher education and still maintain the other necessary research activities essential in academic tenure. Trends in e-learning may offer opportunities to address this strategy. The current push to reuse existing learning resources via the use of learning objects as well as efforts to describe educational strategies in consistent notational forms (referred to as design patterns and/or learning designs) are strategies that may encourage academics to implement different and innovate teaching practices. This possibility of sharing and modeling expert practice will not eliminate the need for academics to have an understanding of contemporary learning theories and their applications, but this approach would provide academics with a scaffold to help them design high quality learning environments without investment of excessive amounts of time. Additionally, this movement has the potential to be a catalyst to improve the quality of teaching in higher education generally.

Recent projects have explored many different aspects of learning designs, including the development of modeling languages (Koper & Mandeveld, 2004), representation strategies (Falconer, Beetham, Oliver, Lockyer, & Littlejohn, 2007), development strategies (Conole & Fill, 2005), strategies to facilitate the representation of best practice models as reusable, transferable, and generic entities (Hedberg, Harper, Oliver, Wills, & Agostinho, 2002), resources and tools supporting

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