

Chapter 2.5

Ambient Pedagogies, Meaningful Learning and Social Software

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will present a new approach to designing learning interactions and experiences that reconciles relatively stable learning processes with relatively new digital practices in the context of social software and Web 2.0. It will begin with a brief position on current educational articulations of social software before offering some theoretical pointers and methodological perspectives for research and development in this area. The authors will then explain how an ongoing initiative in advanced learning design has developed notions of “ambient learning design” and “experience design” to address these issues and describe a new methodology for developing digital tools that incorporate these con-

cepts. This approach is exemplified through ongoing work within an initiative in Digital Dialogue Games and the InterLoc tool that realises them. Finally, the implications this work has for future trends in designing for inclusive, highly communicative and engaging learning interactions and practices for the digital age are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

One of the problems with recent educational articulations of social software and Web 2.0 is the misalignment of social practices that are ostensibly oriented towards and motivated by ‘interest’ with those that are oriented towards and motivated by ‘learning’. This has been demonstrated in many ongoing projects, such as those supported by the UK JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee),

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although there is little mature research in this area as yet. Whilst these purposes and the practices they entail are not mutually exclusive, they often involve different processes of meaning making. In learning situations there is usually a defined or identifiable context, that may be organised or emergent, which involves some management, structure or scaffolding. This operates as an ‘interaction narrative’, and is usually required to promote suitable sorts of thinking, collaborative meaning making and content assimilation and generation that corresponds to learning. In other words, whilst specific practices such as personal content creation and expression, communication, media sharing, multimodal dialogue and social networking are relevant to communities of interest and learning, these will usually be orchestrated differently in both. And furthermore, understanding these differences is important if we want to harmonise interest driven informal learning with more formal learning activities, given that all these activities are now increasingly performed within the same digital landscape. So a question we are tackling in this Chapter is: What forms of contextualisation and support are needed with more open and social software to stimulate, catalyse and realise meaning making that corresponds with attested notions of learning through social interaction and dialogue?

Based on substantial previous work emphasising the centrality of dialogue in learning (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer, 2000; Ravenscroft, 2001, Wegerif, 2007) and particularly in the context of promoting productive conceptual change (e.g. Hartley, 1998; Ravenscroft and Pilkington, 2000) we hold that a key component in social networking and communication for learning will be the quality, educational efficacy and general value of the dialogue and media-rich interaction between digital interlocutors. Indeed, it may be the case that the degree of learning that occurs with open and social software corresponds to the quality of the

multimodal dialogues that are being performed. But how can we design for these inclusive and valuable multimodal learning dialogues? Or more generally: how can we embrace and exploit the opportunities offered by open digital technologies to support contemporary approaches to dialogue, thinking and meaning making in ways that support new and relevant learning practices? When we start to unpack these questions we have to address some additional emphases that characterise contemporary digital practices, such as participation and collaboration, and the production of shared and yet more provisional knowledge representations.

The remainder of this Chapter will present theoretical pointers, a research and development perspective, and a specific approach and methodology to design that aims to address these questions. This work is based on the notion that we will typically need to introduce some appropriate organisation and structure to direct learning whilst ‘working with’ students developing digital literacies. Or for learning we will usually need some pedagogically derived and ‘managed openness’ to support meaningful learning practices. We will then show how this approach is realised through an ongoing initiative in Digital Dialogue Games.

BACKGROUND

Before launching into contemporary approaches to designing learning interaction for the digital age it is useful to consider what fundamental learning processes and practices at which we are looking to emphasise and foster meaningful learning experiences. In considering this challenge Ravenscroft, Wegerif and Hartley (2007) have recently argued for a re-conceptualisation of ‘learning dialogue’ through developing and synthesising notions of dialectic and dialogic. Their arguments that are relevant to this article are summarised below.

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