Chapter VII

Using Characters in Online Simulated Environments to Guide Authentic Tasks

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Abstract

The use of characters to present tasks and critical information in a simulated environment has proven to be a useful strategy in the creation of more authentic learning environments online. Such characters can not only perform the role of setting and structuring tasks within the fictitious scenario, but also that of providing useful and realistic guidance. This chapter describes a learning environment designed to create an authentic context for learning evaluation skills and strategies appropriate to technology-based learning settings. The subject in which this approach was adopted was a masters-level course in evaluation of technology-based learning environments. The chapter focuses on the use of a fictitious CEO (chief executive officer) who requests certain evaluation tasks of...
“employees.” Students are given realistic jobs with realistic parameters, and in this way the subject is dealt with in a much more authentic manner than if presented in a more decontextualised way. The rationale for adopting the approach is described together with a description of how it was implemented and summary findings of an evaluation of the approach.

Context of the Learning Environment

The postgraduate subject *Implementation and Evaluation of Technology-Based Learning* is designed to expose learners to the key concepts and issues in a complex and evolving content domain. Its set objectives mix practical skills development with theoretical perspectives, and the underlying pedagogical approach is to facilitate students’ building of their own understanding of the processes and techniques of evaluation, particularly within the context of technology-based products and learning environments. The subject had been offered in on-campus mode for many years, and when it was decided to offer the subject in a fully online mode, a new approach was adopted (cf., Meek & Agostinho, 2003).

In a major revision of the subject, the underpinning constructivist philosophy adopted into the design included such principles as: learning is a process of construction; learning occurs through social construction of meaning; learning is contextually mediated; and reflective thinking is an ultimate goal (e.g., Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Jonassen, Mayes, & McAleese, 1993).

Focus of the New Approach

The focus of the new approach was to adopt a design that was task-based rather than centred on a pre-determined scope and sequence of content related to evaluation. The subject was presented within a course management environment (WebCT), and many of the inbuilt features of the courseware were utilised, such as the discussion board and chat facilities. A new set of resource material was gathered and structured within the WebCT environment. Activities in all but the first phase led to production of an assessable product. A summary of each phase together with its rationale and the artefact produced by students is presented in Table 1.
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