Learning Activities Model

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INTRODUCTION

The design of learning is probably more accurately described as the design of learning activities as it is the activities that are designable compared to learning which is the desired outcome of the activities. While the term "instruction" may be out of favor with some commentators, as it implies a teacher-directed approach, "instructional design" has been used for some years to describe the design of the things learners and teachers or trainers do to facilitate learning.

Instruction is a set of events that affect learners in such a way that learning is facilitated. Normally we think of events as external to the learner – events embodied in the display of printed pages or the talk of a teacher. However, we also must recognize that the events that make up instruction may be partly internal when they constitute the learner activity called self-instruction. (Gagné, Briggs, & Wager, 1992, p. 3)

Courses of study, subjects, or training programs are generally too large to be matched to a particular technology or technological element of a learning management system. Distance education courses are generally characterized by a "package" of several technologies (Bates, 1995) or a "combination of media" (Rowntree, 1994), indicating clearly that more than one technology is generally used. In online learning or e-learning where a learning management system (LMS) is used for a course, subject, or program, the question remains of how to undertake the matching of each technological element of the LMS to subsections of the course, subject, or program.

The learning activities model (LAM) is based on an investigation of approaches to the categorization and classification of learning activities and reconceptualizes them in such a way as to facilitate the matching of them to learning technologies.

With a small number of notable exceptions (Gagné et al., 1992; Laurillard, 2002) there is little reference in the literature to explicit methods of classification and categorization of learning activities for the purpose of matching them to learning technologies. However, several commentators provide tacit classification as a by-product of discussions for other purposes.

BACKGROUND

The approaches to the theorization of learning activities can be grouped into four categories:

- Some commentators classify learning activities for purposes other than the selection of learning technologies.
- Others do not overtly categorize or classify, yet provide tacit conceptualizations while achieving other ends.
- Yet others simply list methods or examples of learning activities in the absence of a more detailed conceptual framework.
- A fourth approach is to provide categories of learning activities that may ultimately assist in the selection of learning technologies in a way that is appropriate for the learners, the material, the context, and the budget.

By investigating other aspects of distance education, Bates (1995), Taylor (2002), and Rowntree (1994) imply a classification of learning activities. Bates' descriptions of learning technologies as one-way or two-way implies that there are one-way and two-way learning activities and it follows that learning activities that utilize technologies in these ways can be classified as:

- Interactions with the material using the one-way technologies, and
- Interactions between people using the two-way technologies.

Taylor (2001) provides corroboration of this tacit conceptualization in the description of the generations of distance education, where technologies are

categorized as providing "highly refined materials" and/or having "advanced interactive delivery." Further, Rowntree (1994) implies a similar tacit categorization of learning activities by categorizing "media" as those for human interaction and those for interaction with materials. It is not surprising that learning activities can be categorized as interactions with materials and interactions between people as this is reflected in many learning experiences.

THE LEARNING ACTIVITIES MODEL

The learning activities model is a theoretical framework that can be used as an analytical tool and to assist designers of learning events. It is premised on the argument that categories of activities that are subdivisions of the learning process can be matched to techniques, technologies, and methods as part of the design process.

Provision of Material

Traditionally, the predominant approach to undergraduate university teaching consisted of a presentational style. Most lectures were primarily concerned with the provision of material, as learning seemed to be equated with the acquisition of knowledge as opposed to the development or construction of it by students. A similar approach occurred in human resource development and many programs have been conducted in venues where a trainer presents material to a group of trainees. The material was provided by the words the professor or trainer spoke and the words written on the board, overhead projector, screen, or handout. The material provided in traditional presentations like this resulted in notes and memories that learners took away from the training room or lecture theatre.

The first category of the learning activities model (LAM) consists of activities concerned with the provision of material and is referred to as "provision of materials." Materials may be provided in the classroom, training room, or lecture theatre where they are part of the learning process. Alternatively, in distance education, flexible learning, e-learning, or online learning materials may be provided away from designated learning venues. Materials can be provided in a number of ways, including:

- The voice of the presenter or facilitator in a training program, lecture, tutorial, seminar, laboratory, study group, or residential school
- Visual aids to the above
- Printed materials, for example, prescribed texts, references, and manuals
- Other printed materials such as training notes study guides, lecture notes, and handouts
- Other media, for example, radio and television programs, audio and video, Internet resources, Web pages, multimedia, streams, podcasts, and Web casts.

Interactions

The provision of material alone is generally not considered sufficient to produce the desired outcomes of a learning event. For learning from materials to occur learners have to interact with it and, clearly, in many learning events other types of interactions occur. These other interactions can be identified through a brief analysis of the history of distance learning and flexible learning as practiced in higher education and human resource development.

Correspondence courses represent one of the earliest forms of distance learning. In correspondence courses, learners interact with printed materials that are sent to them through the mail. Sometimes there are opportunities for limited interaction with the facilitator in the form of comments and corrections on assignments and assessments. Usually there are few, if any, opportunities for interaction between learners. When technology was added to correspondence courses, and the term "distance learning" (or "distance education") was applied to it, there was greater opportunity for interaction between learners. However, in many cases this was limited due to the high cost of conferencing technology or other communication technology.

Distance learning presents a clear comparison to face-to-face learning where there usually are many opportunities for learners to interact with facilitators and with other learners. Three discrete categories of interaction can be identified. They are:

- Interaction with materials,
- Interaction with the facilitator, and
- Interaction between learners.