E-Learning

Engaging in Online Activities

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Abstract

This resource paper offers an explanatory note to a number of approaches to ELearning and how they translate into active engagement for the learner, providing suggested models and processes that one may apply.

Rather than creating a series of separate tasks with specific outcomes, it can often be helpful to consider a more strategic approach, where each activity builds on the previous one to achieve the learning goals.

Collis and Moonen (2001)

Approaches to ELearning

Constructivist / Instructivist approaches:

- Zone of Proximal Development (Laurillard, 2002) Vygotsky 1962
- The Conceptualisation Cycle (Mayes 1995)
- The Conversational Framework (Laurillard 2002)
- E-Moderation (Salmon 2000)
**Socio-Culturalism**

The concept of Socio-Cultural ideals springs out of Vygotsky’ (1978) concept of proximal development, whereby individual development is a casual result of social interaction. In effect the individual internalizes any processes whilst party to social interactions and brings them to light at a later date independently. Notably he goes further to state that instruction is most efficient when students engage in activities within a supportive environment and when in receipt of appropriate guidance. This is never more apparent than in an online environment where it is essential to provide an identified framework (scaffold), in the form of peer support / mentoring and clear instructional design and learning outcomes to enable a learner to engage in a learning process whereby they may attain their own personal learning objective/s.

**The Conceptualisation Cycle (Mayes 1995)**

This model provides a support frame-work to student learning by means of access to; Students resources, Activities and Feedback. It does this through the opportunities for Dialogue with teachers and peers. Within his study of the ‘interactivity’ within online programmes Mayes identifies three clear levels: primary, secondary and tertiary. His expectation was that learning would only occur at the tertiary level.

1. The primary courseware level is where one would find information being merely transmitted to the students (e.g. module outlines, online lecture notes, reading lists etc).

2. The secondary courseware level is where one would expect to find the opportunity to question students and encourage them to reflect upon their learning (e.g. online tests, learning units, quizzes etc).

3. The tertiary courseware level is where one would be able to engage in opportunities for dialogue (e.g. online discussions, simulations, collaborative documents etc).
The Conversational Framework (Laurillard 2002)

Laurillard, basing her framework on the ideas of Vygotsky was keen to demonstrate the nature of dialogue when addressing critical thinking. To this end she suggests that when working towards higher level learning there must be an interaction of practical and theoretical dialogue, it is only within this zone, that the learner has the opportunity to explicitly link the two – practice and theory. As a direct consequence the academic may be able to evaluate the process behind which the dialogue takes place and ascertain whether or not the tasks / activities match the designated learning outcomes.

The fundamental premise of the five point framework is in its ability to capture the raw and instinctual communication and interaction that happens in a real world environment and map it out as an iterative development for the online realm.

1. Narrative - teachers conceptions are made accessible to students and vice versa

2. Interactive - the teacher provides feedback to students based on the outcomes of tasks students undertake

3. Adaptive - the teacher uses this information to revise what learning has occurred and, if necessary, change the focus of dialogue

4. Communicative - the teacher supports processes where students discuss and reflect upon their learning

5. Productive - The teacher and student agree learning goals and task goals, which can be achieved using productive media, such as online presentations.

E-Moderation & E-tivities

Gilly Salmon has coined a rather pithy term to encapsulate what online engagement may embrace – the E-tivity is merely an ideal protocol that aims to address and capitalise on key functions that one may establish in an online environment, its universality makes it easily applicable in a wide range of instances and disciplines.

The E-tivity may be described as:

• motivating, engaging and purposeful
• based on interaction between learners
• designed and led by an e-moderator (see notes below)
• asynchronous
• and ideally cheap and easy to run.

In some respects this is not dissimilar to the notion of a reusable learning object, though there are many differing definitions, most tie in the element of an activity and perhaps assessment that are linked to the achievement of a particular learning objective or goal. By making use of these one can build iterative tasks, activities and discrete elements of a programme.

Salmon’s 5 Stage Model for E-Moderation

There follows an example of how one may apply Salmon’s five step model to establish a task / activity list within an online programme, having firstly provided an outline and explanation of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria, one may then:

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1 “The main idea of 'learning objects' is to break educational content down into small chunks that can be reused in various learning environments” (Wiley, D. A. 2004)

1. Invite a ‘Hello here I am message’
   - access

2. Enable learners to ‘Share experiences and expectations’
   – motivation

3. Provide opportunity to ‘Send a Postcard’ ‘Comment on someone who has a common contribution and some one who has a difference’.
   – socialisation

4. Set up time / session to ‘Brainstorm topic x’ to bring learners up to the same level – information sharing

5. Provide opportunity to ‘Challenge info presented in x, enquire how it relates to other elements (e.g. practice or literature)
   – knowledge construction

7. Offer encouragement and clarity to learners own development needs ‘Invite learners to create a Personal Development Plan or Learning Contract [identifying their needs, objectives, strategy, action & evaluation]
   - development

Establishing the group dynamic – students need to feel at ease, and be encouraged to identify with the community of learners, thus enabling higher levels of motivation leading to attainment of required LO’s.

(Wenger, 1998; Salmon, 2000)


