The digital tutor: accepting to lose control and make mistakes

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Pilot studies using online social networks within a French University postgraduate course were conducted over a five-year period in order to explore and evaluate the relative advantages and challenges of such tools for tertiary education. Students were following a curriculum as part of a second-year predominantly off-campus Master's degree. In this paper, after having defined pedagogical *eLearning exchange networks* (*eLEN*s), and how they can be implemented by using *social learning objects*, the latest case study analysis is focused on providing solutions for effective tutoring in the digital era.

Keywords: educational paradigms, social networks, collaborative learning, mediated discourse.

Introduction

Seven pilot studies using online social networking tools within a French University postgraduate course were conducted over a five-year period (2007-2012), in order to explore and evaluate their relative advantages and challenges for tertiary education. Students were enrolled in a second-year Master's degree ("Knowledge Management, training and digital mediation", Linguistics Department, Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 University: http://www.univ-montp3.fr). The year-long curriculum was predominantly off-campus, with a compulsory one-week intensive on-campus session between semesters (in December or January), and was the first of its kind to be introduced in the French higher education system in 2004.

A collaborative learning environment and an online community were established and students were invited to use them to discuss pedagogical issues related to eLearning practice, and, in the more recent second-generation case studies (Panckhurst & Marsh, 2009), to organise completion of structured role-play projects. Over the five-year period, three different social networking tools were used: Ning (www.ning.com), grou.ps (http://grou.ps) and, most recently, Google+ (https://plus.google.com).

In this paper, after having defined pedagogical *eLearning exchange networks* (*eLEN*, Marsh & Panckhurst, 2007) (§ 1), and how they can be implemented with "social learning objects" (Weller, 2008) (§ 2), the latest case study, which took place from October 2011 to January 2012, is discussed (§ 3) in order to provide insight and sustainable solutions for effective learning and tutoring online (§ 4).

Social networks, pedagogical networks

An *eLearning exchange network* (*eLEN*) corresponds to the idea of formatting online social networks for pedagogical practice (Panckhurst & Marsh, 2011). In order to differentiate clearly between social and pedagogical networks, *Facebook* was excluded from the initial case studies, and *Ning*, which had just developed its public networking system at that time, was chosen not for novelty, but because it already had a French interface in 2007. Private group (and subgroup) networks requiring enrolment could also easily be set up using this tool on the open Web, hence setting aside any institutional VLE/LMS issues (Panckhurst & Marsh, 2008). In the first eLENs, online forums in which students were required to engage and discuss pedagogical issues related to eLearning practice were initiated, and a student-centred 2 or 3-phase period was adopted (Panckhurst & Marsh, 2011):

1. preliminary getting-to-know-each-other phase (initiated and conducted by the tutors);
2. compulsory discussion threads phase (designed and led by individual students with peer-group student participation);
3. an optional final third tutor-led phase.

Even though the initial functioning was highly appreciated by the students, two years down the track, by 2009, a significant shift in student attitude and perceptions of the place and value of eLENs in their learning was noted. With the increase in student private use of such tools as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, it was clear that students began to expect more from a social network being used as a tool for learning.

Imposed projects as social learning objects

The tutors decided to introduce "social learning objects" (Weller, 2008) in order to "facilitate conversation, and thus social interaction" and therefore moved from peer-driven discussion thread moderation to structured imposed role-play projects (the contents of which they hoped would act as 'social object' stimulation), accompanied with support information and weblinks, to be completed within a strict timeframe. An initial concern was that this apparently 'dramatic' shift in approach could result in a loss of learner independence/autonomy (*cf.* Downes 2008, and his key concepts for network usage: *diversity, autonomy, openness, interaction*). Not so. Students appreciated not wasting organisational time, and yet still feeling they had space to create original and interactive work:

> Paradoxically, I appreciated the fact that the groups were formed authoritatively, because this avoided people aggregating with others sharing similar interests, and we just had to "make do". (In actual fact, all of the work I was involved with took place in a perfectly calm and respectful atmosphere.) (Student A is also a teacher; author's translation).

A second issue was related to the concern that students might slip back into a teacher/tutor-centric pattern, regularly requesting advice. This was obviously not a problem either, judging by a clearly identifiable tutor-learner "form of trust":

> The almost total autonomy we had for completing the activities […] helped us learn how to organise directives in groups, to confront our ideas and our doubts, without having a teacher to guide us. I think that the tutors established a form of trust with the students and this was perceivable in our work outcome. (Student B; Author's translation).

The role-play imposed projects were divided into four phases:

1. work within imposed sub-group on imposed project (2-week period, in order to read, analyse, share, exchange and compile a preliminary summary on the topic to be submitted to peers and tutors);
2. peer-led online discussion with whole group on same imposed topic (2 weeks);
3. final write-up within sub-group and hand-in (8 days, submitted both to tutors and peers);
4. subsequent peer and auto-evaluation of work submitted.

This organisation was appreciated owing to its diversity:

> Dividing the work into stages means that it's not a "monotonous" activity amounting to researching and writing-up. The diversity allows us to see the work evolve and means we can adapt to each stage. (Student C; author's translation).

The final productions used a wide variety of tools (traditional word-processing documents, pdf and html documents, online documents and presentation tools, e.g., Google Documents, Prezi, Opale-Scenari, mindmaps, word clusters, questionnaires, spreadsheets, slideshows, audios, videos, etc.) The peer and auto-evaluation was also considered a highlight by the students, since in French tertiary education this still remains an uncommon approach: "[…] the fact that we had access to the work produced by each group is rare, and very beneficial." (Student D; Author's translation).

Key criteria for learning with eLearning exchange networks (eLENs)

Siemens (2010) stipulates that learners need to experience a certain amount of "confusion and chaos in the learning process" and that "clarifying this chaos is the heart of learning". It is paramount that they be in "control of their own learning" since "meaningful learning requires learner-driven activity". After a five-year period conducting this sort of tutor-learner-peer collaborative work, it has become apparent that eLENS can be used successfully in tertiary education, as long as a certain number of prerequisites are clearly established. The main criteria are summarised in Figure 1 below.
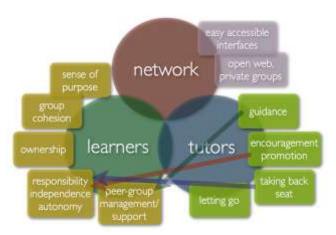
Figure 1: Our key criteria for effective learning and tutoring in eLENs

How can tutors adjust successfully?

In our experience, starting out from Marsh and Panckhurst (2006), through assessment of students' needs and recognition that more flexibility should be introduced into the curriculum, learners have been gradually taking *responsibility* for their own *autonomous/independent learning*, *sharing*, *peer-support, creation,* and they are in fact surfing the digital waves quite readily now. Weller (2011) focuses on "the digital scholar":

> Digital scholarship is more than just using information and communication technologies to research, teach and collaborate; it also includes embracing the open values, ideology and potential of technologies born of peer-to-peer networking and wiki ways of working in order to benefit both the academy and society. (Weller, 2011).

But how can "digital tutors" adjust? What positions, attitudes and roles do they need to adopt? As we know, "besides being experts in their respective academic disciplines, [Web] 2.0 lecturers have to be equipped with the necessary professional competencies (cognitive, teaching, technology, communicative, emotional, etc.) to successfully rise to the challenge of their duties in the 2.0 era." (Del Moral & Villalustre, 2012). But to succeed fully in the digital age, tutors also need to make sure the 6 steps indicated in Table 1 are carefully followed when organising online eLENs.

Table 1: Our 6 important steps for successful digital tutoring in eLENs

1.	Spend initial time carefully setting up and structuring the eLEN.
2.	Initiate ice-breaking activities (including surprise activities that create suspense) so that students can gain confidence, take ownership and feel trusted.
3.	Introduce structured imposed activities and stringent timelines.
4.	Make sure two tutors work together on each online course; this is important, so that they can provide support for each other and decide whether they should or should not intervene at precise moments.
5.	Let go of control — sit back and trust that learners, after initial tutor support and guidance, will progressively learn autonomously providing peer-support for each other.
6.	Accept and expect to make mistakes.

The most difficult lesson to learn for academics is to appreciate "the theoretical shift from instructor or institution-controlled teaching to one of greater control by the learner." (Siemens, 2008). Tutors need to take the back seat, but if they succeed in doing so, the effort is rewarded:

> This was a new, enriching experience but also disconcerting. Previously, I "reigned" [as a teacher], leaving little autonomy for students to lead their own discussions. My mere authoritative presence tended to hinder student communication. Here, a new perspective opened up. I realised that facilitating a group didn't mean imposing one's ideas, but remaining open-minded and leading skilfully. During the […] experience, I learnt to step back and delegate, so that others could readily participate. (Student E is also a teacher; Author's translation).

In our most recent case study (October 2011-January 2012), a new issue arose, related to virtual identity: several

students refused to add a photo to their profile, perhaps because they felt that the shift to Google+ made them feel too virtually vulnerable. This was a novel aspect for the tutors, but they accepted this stance. However, several weeks later, one student group, who were working on multiuser virtual environments (MUVE), set up an appointment for the whole group with a person/avatar in a Second Life environment. This time the tutors, who nevertheless felt responsible for the group, were worried about the true identity of the real-life person, given that their website credentials and online information did not appear to be trustworthy. In this particular instance, the tutors sent a 'warning message' to the rest of the group. In hindsight, this was probably a mistake, and when the on-campus intensive session took place several students explained that they had felt that their autonomy, trust and responsibility had been slightly undermined on this particular occasion. The question that had arisen was nevertheless fascinating: for the tutors, identifying oneself over the Web with a photo was insignificant compared to trusting a total stranger, albeit a virtual one; for some of the students, the situation was the complete opposite.

Conclusion

Digital tutors/educators/facilitators are currently living in an era of *unease*. The paradigm shift has happened. A junior colleague who recently joined me on the second-year distance-education Master's course I run online, expressed the following: "I feel that my presence is totally unnecessary in this course; I don't know what position to adopt and it makes me uncomfortable." He subsequently suggested another colleague take his place next year, while I urged him to stay on. After hesitating for one or two months, he finally decided to stop co-tutoring the course. Notwithstanding, it is highly important to persevere. As digital tutors, we may well feel *uncomfortable*, as if we are doing very little when behind the scenes instead of being centre stage. But in *learning for the future,* less leadership and control from teachers and more ownership, responsibility and autonomy for students are crucial for learners. As digital tutors, we will gradually adjust and accept being able *to lose control and make mistakes*, learning both *with* and *from* our students — the true *future makers*.

Acknowledgements

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