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AN ONLINE SUBJECT DELIVERED WITH HELP FROM AN “ABSENT CEO”

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Abstract

This paper examines recent modifications to a masters-level subject in the area of technology-based learning. It shows how a scenario built around a fictitious consultancy company was joined to a new content set. Particular attention is given to a structuring device aimed at strengthening motivation in the addition of an unseen Chief Executive Officer (CEO) character. This device, coupled with reconfiguration of the lecturer as a company adviser, has become a primary driver of subject activity.

We explain the rationale for adopting our approach and describe how it was implemented. Preliminary reflections are considered and the paper concludes by outlining some issues requiring further investigation in an ongoing work-in-progress.

Keywords

Scenario, character, learning design, online learning

Context

The postgraduate subject *Implementation and Evaluation of Technology-Based Learning* required redevelopment. The lecturer who had devised the subject and taught it over several years had left the institution. The main text previously used was no longer available. The next offering was to be run for a mainly off-shore student cohort. It was to commence with a face-to-face workshop conducted over a few days, followed by a schedule of online activities and electronic submission of individual assessable work. There was a sudden change in plans, however, as session approached, with face-to-face teaching ruled-out by the University due to health concerns generated by the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) virus.

The lost opportunity to build the initial rapport face-to-face with the students posed a significant challenge. The new teaching team (the authors) realised that a greater emphasis on the online presence of the lecturer would be needed. Additional supports were also indicated, in order to help stimulate and maintain student interest in the now fully online learning environment.

The subject aim was to expose learners to the key concepts and issues in a complex and evolving content domain. Its set objectives mixed practical skills development with theoretical perspectives, and the underlying pedagogical approach was to facilitate students' building of their own understanding of the content. The underpinning philosophy we wanted to adopt into our design included such principles as that: *Learning is a process of construction; learning occurs through social construction of meaning; learning is contextually mediated; and reflective thinking is an ultimate goal.* (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Jonassen, Mayes & McAleese, 1993.)

Thus, two immediate challenges faced the new teaching team:

- The development of a rich resource repository that represented multiple perspectives of the content for students to explore; and

- The creation of activities and their appropriate sequencing in order to operationalise the adopted constructivist learning principles.

Content, structure, influences

A new set of stimulus material was gathered and structured. Activities in all but the first phase led to production of an assessable work item. Below is the plan for sequencing student activity:

Activity Phase/ Learning Focus	Rationale
1. Orientate	Explain subject objectives, assessment requirements, content, and delivery strategy; ensure technology (ie, online access and tools) works; and explore initial knowledge perceptions about implementation and evaluation of technology-based learning.
2. Do (usability evaluation)	Conduct a small usability evaluation (instrument supplied) to foster “learning by doing” in order to anchor thinking about evaluation issues.
3. Explore (evaluation)	Delve into the literature to examine other perspectives about evaluation; and report findings.
4. Apply (evaluation)	Transfer “theory” into “practice” by developing an evaluation proposal.
5. Reflect	Reflect and assess overall understanding of content by constructing a concept map, considering initial perceptions; and review a peer’s evaluation proposal.

Table 1. Five phase delivery plan

The teaching team had recently been involved in a project that examined a wide range of high-quality learning designs and had produced a number of useful generic learning models (Oliver et al., 2002). Two elements of this project had particular influence on the subject design:

- The ‘Explore, Describe, Apply’ model influenced the ordering of activities; and
- Online Role Play discussions reinforced a choice to bolster what had previously been only limited use of scenario, and encouraged ideas of limited use of roles, if not actual role play.

Implementation

To anchor the activities in an authentic environment, students were introduced to the subject thus:

was involved, the CEO identified educational evaluation as the "next big thing". Now, with the help of some venture capital he needs to build a team to get into a marketplace where there is significant opportunity.

The CEO is looking for highly motivated and enthusiastic people to join the team. He is not concerned if they don't have extensive experience in evaluation because he is prepared to "groom" them as evaluation consultants. They need to demonstrate that they are keen and prepared to put in the hard work in order to make the company viable.

The CEO has many contacts worldwide and has found out from your degree coordinator in Wollongong about a group of "up and coming" evaluation experts - you!

The CEO is a great believer in teamwork and he expects you to work together, to share your knowledge and discoveries cement your collective future. He has placed a "carrot" in front of you all - if you work hard to win the business, there is an opportunity to buy into the company.

The CEO has recruited your lecturer of this subject in the role of "Academic Advisor". Her role has been delineated as follows:

- Delegate tasks to you based on the CEO's directions;
- Assist you to build-up your knowledge base - your evaluator's toolkit; and
- Verify your credentials for the Company.

(You will notice a similarity with the activities associated with the scenario and those detailed in the Subject Outline. When you have successfully finished the activities associated with the scenario, you will also have successfully completed the subject EDG1933/4)

The CEO has stated that his preferred working arrangement is to meet regularly with the Academic Advisor to discuss current world trends, business opportunities and actions to be taken. The minutes from these meetings will outline the actions required from you. These minutes will be distributed to you via the "Company Web Site" (which is the EDG1933 subject web site).

The first action required is to come up with a name and motto for the company that reflects the ambitious nature of its te

Figure 1. Introduction to scenario and delivery strategy.

The creation of low-key character devices to organise phases of student work, a CEO and a ‘company adviser’, was a key strategy adopted to motivate and maintain student engagement. After the orientation to the subject, each phase of substantive activity was initiated by distribution of an agenda set by the CEO. Unfortunately the CEO was ‘unable’ to present this in person. He was somehow always absent in Rio, London, or Paris, lining-up various deals. Instead, direction came in the form of minutes to a strategic meeting held between the CEO and the company recruited academic adviser. This mechanism drove the scenario and gave an imperative for action. The minutes also contained advice in the form of a study guide provided by the company’s academic adviser. A feeling of greater ‘presence’ via the involvement of seemingly more than the usual one lecturer was part of the intention.

The CEO has been busy marketing the potential of the company over the past few weeks and as a result, has managed to secure the company's first job. The CEO has been contacted for assistance by the developers of a prototype web site. You may find some interest in its contents. It is called "Learning Designs" and the prototype site is accessible at:

<http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/beta5>

This web site provides access to the outcomes of a higher education research project recently conducted in Australia from funding by a government body known as the "Australian Universities Teaching Committee, (AUTC).

The developers have acknowledged that the site has some "issues". They are in need of advice regarding its usability before progressing further with its development.

They would like frank and honest feedback from you and have thus stated that you need not be concerned about "offending" them with any of your advice.

The CEO acknowledges that there may be more to "usability" than this form of investigation implies however, this is what the client wants. He also realises that you are new to evaluation. But he is convinced that by leaping straight in and doing an evaluation, you will be able to learn from it.

To help you, he has instructed the Academic Advisor to provide you with some guidance by introducing you to the topic of evaluation and directing you to some initial readings on usability. This guidance is provided below.

Figure 2. Excerpt from initial strategic planning meeting minutes.

Students were expected to adopted pseudo-roles only in response. Online interaction by students was ‘as themselves’, though their final assessable submission in each phase was cast as a business deliverable and this was expected to be written ‘in role’. When all assessable tasks were ‘in’, the adviser was able to summarise and then trigger the next phase of student activity.


<p>EDGI933/4 Implementation and Evaluation of Technology-Based Learning Week 12 of 13</p>	
<p style="text-align: right;">Company Procedures</p> <p>21 July 2003: The CEO realises you have all worked very hard! He wants us to take some "time out" for reflection and consolidation. See "Announcements" for the company plan for the next (and last) 3 weeks! Shirley Agostinho, Academic Advisor</p>	

Figure 3. The trigger to begin the final phase of study.

Emergent issues, discussion points

The first delivery of the reworked subject has been completed as we write. Formal evaluation, including direct polling of student reactions to the CEO and the scenario, is underway. A second implementation using the same content shape and drivers has begun, largely under the control of a previously uninvolved lecturer who is scheduled to take-over running of the subject in the new year. Her comments in the handover process are being collected as those of a peer-evaluator.

The teaching team’s perception of the level of student engagement (observed in terms of online activity and quality of assessable work) suggests that the *total* delivery strategy in this first implementation was well received. Whether the CEO and associated devices are the key to this, or indeed whether such elements in the total environment are a help or a hindrance to any learning is currently being investigated via an end-of-subject survey and student interviews.

The CEO and associated devices may, indeed, not be the critical factor at all. At this point there is no formal measure proving 'better' results, and no effort has been made to rule-out a simple wish to pass the subject as the primary motivator for the students involved. A combination of factors might be at play, including those previously identified and others including manner of lecturer communication, all activity *having* to be online, isolation enforced by the active presence of SARS in the city where many of the students lived and specific features of the cohort of students in implementation one.

In the meantime, observations and the general tenor of informal feedback indicates students generally at least responded well to the imagined CEO and company driving their activities. They appear to feel that activities seem more realistic, and this adds to their 'purpose'. Most student work was written in-role and was judged richer, and of a higher quality, than that provided in response to the previous subject design by the marker who worked on both.

One student said the CEO and scenario were "OK", but indicated he really didn't need that kind of support since he was "already strongly motivated". He was readily able to transfer ideas explored into his current work situation. Another initially had trouble distinguishing between the lecturer and the fictional adviser of the scenario. (She appeared a little confused when first contacted directly by the subject lecturer, rather than by the alternative 'voice' of the adviser persona.)

What else? The conscious choice to employ no graphical cues for the characters and to keep descriptions and the scenario to a minimum kept costs down in the current implementation. This may also have yielded benefits in the scope provided to students to imagine their own CEO. Alternatively, it may have allowed them to save such energy for other aspects of their study.

Evidence is massing to suggest that the specific function and placement of the various 'voices' in the implementation requires greater care. A more coherent implementation platform than that which this offering was able to furnish would also be helpful. (E.g. there was interaction both in and outside a learning management system; we used two separate web sites; and there were complications with placement of certain electronic resources.) Prospects for repackaging the entire content for use without a lecturer in a self-paced individual study mode are being considered, as is the potential to separate each of the four major phases as an independent learning object. And what about the impact of structuring a subject with use of more than one 'voice' on the lecturer herself? By the time of the conference more information will be to hand.

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