The learning design collaborative space through role play glasses

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The paper describes the initial design and testing of an alternative approach to learning design classification in the form of a small-group activity for use at teaching and learning conferences and showcase events. The learner role classification approach uses small scale comparative surveys as a basis for exploratory discussion of relationships among different learning design options. 'Role-play glasses' are employed in both real and figurative senses in the observation and analysis of learning design examples. The approach aims to develop a relatively simple way of situating particular learning designs in relation to the overall field by using one specific learning aspect, the learner role, as common point of reference. The outcomes of this exploratory exercise point to the importance of including learner role descriptions in design classifications.

Keywords: learning design, taxonomies, typologies, role play, role-based learning, repositories.

Background

The lack of clear and consistent identifying terminology for different learning design types is a long-standing obstacle to the development of learning resource repositories and resource sharing practices (Goodyear, 2005; Jones & Conole, 2006; Oliver, 2007). In the Australian context the level of priority given to the issue relative to other repository and resource sharing needs has varied over time. The high point was the AUTC Learning Designs project of 2000-2002 (Oliver, Harper, Hedberg, Wills & Agostinho, 2002). Focus in the more recent ALTC Exchange project has been on broader concerns of user and contributor engagement (Philip, Parrish, Lefoe & O'Reilly, 2007). The fluctuations of interest and commitment do not mean any diminishing of the problem itself. The lack of common understanding on how to distinguish one item from another remains a formidable barrier to communication of learning ideas and the development and sharing of new learning materials across different contexts.

The learning design field as continuum and learner role as connecting element

The learner role classification method builds upon the taxonomical model of Oliver et al's (2002) Learning Designs typology, where the learning design types are broken down on a hierarchical continuum, based on relative complexity and open-endedness of the tasks given. The key difference in the learner role approach is that the learner role surrounding the task becomes the primary factor in determining the level of learning complexity, rather than the task in itself. Is the learner role rigidly or loosely defined? Is there a single generic role assumed by all learners, or are there multiple roles? Is the learner role just about being a 'learner', or something more? Is the role played out for a classroom audience alone, or on a broader stage? Entirely different levels of learning complexity may potentially arise from the same task, depending on the role or roles involved.

A learning design without a role for the learner is a very unlikely construct. The critical assumptions behind the learner role focus are that learner role is a significant feature in learning designs generally, though taking different forms in different cases, and that the pervasive presence of learner role in one form or another would make it a useful basis for comparisons across the field. The first assumption, that learner role is of general significance should not pose any particular problem in terms of underlying logic. The role may not always be explicit, but it has to be there. The second assumption is a point of departure for exploration of how useful and practical learner role comparisons might be in reality. The beginnings of that exploration are described in the remainder of this paper.

Initial steps

The learner role classification method had its beginnings in the online role play designer community, currently organised through ALTC Project EnRoLE (Wills, Rosser, Devonshire, Leigh, Russell & Shepherd, 2009) as part of its ongoing work in the development of peer support resources and mechanisms for role play designers. Developed by the University of Sydney Cluster of ALTC Project EnRoLE, the concept of learner role as an alternative classification method first emerged in a way that was very much informed by the design aspect of role play. The general thrust of the thinking was that if learner role is a significant factor distinguishing role play from other designs, then there must be something significant about learner role in the other designs, not just in role play. The difference had to be describable from two sides, not just from the role play perspective alone. This problem was addressed by borrowing the learning design continuum concept of Oliver et al's (2002) Learning Designs typology, mentioned above, and visualising the learning design field in similar terms as a continuum from simpler to more complex types, with learner role as determining factor in their complexity. Role play could thus be distinguished from other designs by having greater learner role complexity than many, and also possibly less complexity than some. The problem was to identify more precisely what these role complexities might involve.

The exploratory method

A simple method for applying learner role as an exploratory tool emerged spontaneously from chance encounters with a range of learning design ideas in the course of a previous conference (ascilite 2008). The trigger was the realisation that conferences in the learning and teaching field provide an abundant source of potential learning design cases. The opportunity could be harnessed by conducting small scale comparative surveys at such events. Using a small number of cases on each occasion would enable a progressively more detailed picture of differences existing at the level of learner role to build up over time. Each round of comparisons involved quickly marking, with pen and paper, the relevant design ideas on a learner role continuum running from simpler to more complex, with notes explaining the positions plotted. The notes and plotted positions were distilled into a general summary used to inform subsequent rounds. Two rounds were conducted in this way, the first with examples recorded by one individual and the second with recording and reviewing of examples as a group activity.

First round of comparisons: looking at the role play fringes

The material for the first spontaneous attempt in learner role classification comprised three learning designs encountered within conference presentations. Evidenced within each presentation were role play elements although the idea of role play as design was not made explicit. The three examples were a group inquiry activity where students developed different roles in research, a concept development activity where technical concepts were practiced in the context of a professional role and a business problem scenario where students assumed different roles in working through a given business problem (McAlpine, Pannan, Fitzmaurice, 2008; Muldoon, Jones Kofoed, & Beer, 2008; Williams, Brosnan, & Swan, 2008). These were selected as a practical embodiment of the problem of how to draw the line between role play and non-role play learning formats.

Among the three designs, two had some clear differences from the role play format and one design that had no significant differences from role play at all, apart from the name. The contrast among them was defined by two learner role features. The first was diversification of the learner role, meaning that there were a number of clearly different roles played among students at the same time, all entirely outside any existing student role. In the business problem scenario students took on several distinct roles and interacted with each other based on the particular professional role that each had. In the group inquiry, on the other hand, students developed and negotiated roles within the group in order to complete the group task, but did so as themselves, not other people. In the concept development exercise, students were given a role outside their normal one, but it was virtually the same role in all cases. Again there was far less

diversity. A second feature that marked the divide between the three examples was the intensive exercise of imagination required in developing the diversity seen in the business problem scenario but not the other two. Students in this design actively re-created their imagined business environment, in contrast to alternatively the group inquiry where the only environment was the real one that students were already in. This initial comparison yielded two specific elements of learner role complexity within the design of learning: firstly learner role diversification and secondly imaginative projection into a setting outside the actual learning context. These two learner role characteristics were the first illustrations of precisely how learner role made a real difference to the learning design. Drawing on these examples, the continuum of learner role complexity could now be visualised with a line across the middle. This line marks the boundary where role-play is divided from other, less elaborate, group learning formats, a boundary defined by the qualities of diversity and imagination in the learner role.

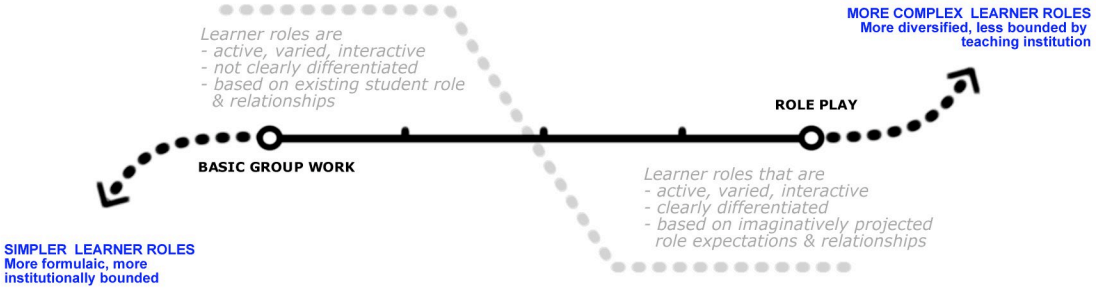

Figure 1: Learner role continuum at the role play learning threshold

If a design had clearly diversified learner roles that were clearly an exercise in role imagination, then the design belonged with the role play genre, as in the case of the business case scenario. If the roles were diverse but still within the student role, or if there was no real diversification at all, then designs clearly belonged with simpler formats as in the other two cases.

Second round of comparisons: the role play glasses activity

Following the first conference, the learner role continuum was refined [see Figure 2] and a data collection and analysis method devised. Using this the second round of design comparisons was conducted at HERDSA 2009. The small scale comparative survey technique from the first round was expanded into a more structured and socially interactive format, the Role Play Glasses activity, which provided a more extensive process of reflection and a wider range of participation at the same time. A small group of observers attended presentations, preselected on the basis of the conference abstracts. The activity itself was a part of the formal program. The observers were clearly identified by wearing extravagantly novel role play glasses. Post observation observer discussion was a programmed conference session for audience participation. The activity comprised several steps: [1] Potential learning design sources were identified from the conference program and divided them among the observers who then attended the selected sessions. [2] The observer's task was to record the main learning design idea and its position in the field using a 'spotters sheet' using the refined version of the learner role continuum (Figure 2 below). This would be accompanied by a short explanation of the observer's decision in terms of the learner role features found in the particular case. [3] Between sessions the observers met to pool and analyse examples and prepare an overview of the findings for the formal conference presentation. The reflective aspect of this evidence-based discussion increased conceptual clarity by testing for consistency in interpretation between observers. Three of the observed examples were chosen as best showing the range in design and the broadest diversity and contrast along the learner role scale. [4] The findings were presented in the programmed conference session for comment and discussion.

The refined learner role continuum used in the Role Play Glasses activity (below Figure 2) differed from the earlier version in two aspects. Firstly, it was much longer and without the earlier focus on role play and its immediate vicinity. Where the first round of learning design comparisons was about trying to distinguish closely related forms of learning design, the second round was looking for the widest possible range. A second difference was the inclusion of an external dimension of design description: availability for re-use. This dimension was incorporated partly to register varying levels of certainty about the nature of different learning designs, due to varying levels of access and transparency, and partly because

Figure 2: Refined schema on role play glasses spotters sheet

accessibility is itself an important part of design with critical implications for its use and dissemination. Higher up the availability scale signified greater design transparency and potential for re-use whereas lower down the scale indicated that the design would be difficult to pursue.

Findings of role play glasses experience

This second round of learning design comparisons produced a much wider range of examples and confirmed that the learner role method could be applied across a very broad spectrum. Furthest up the scale of learner role complexity was a reflective learning activity around professional competency standards, conducted as part of the formulation of the standards themselves in collaboration with an external professional body. Students were no longer simply candidates preparing to enter the professional community but actively involved in shaping it. The design was a good example of a 'beyond role play' role situation, where the external role taken up by students was real, not just imagined. Furthest down the scale of learner role complexity was an online tutorial website, where the learner role was a simple matter of responding to prompts and completing exercises. The learning design lowest on the scale for learner role complexity (the online tutorial) was highest for availability. It could be directly accessed on an open website. The design highest up the learner role scale (the professional standards activity) was similarly the least available to an outside audience, with only a brief verbal description to go by (Butler, 2009; Corbin, Brooks, & Salisbury, 2009; Owen, Stupans, McKauge, Ryan & Woulfe, 2009).

Problems with the availability of evidence for various designs raise a hard question about the validity and usefulness of conclusions reached in these circumstances. What is the use of having design classification made ‘on the fly’ with limited knowledge of the target and little chance of finding more? Perhaps energies would be better spent on an in-depth study of specific designs that are readily available for investigation. However, it is precisely because many learning designs are complex and difficult to penetrate that there is a need for navigation tools, such as the learner role continuum that can operate in conditions of low information availability. Navigation tools of this nature enable relationships between different learning designs to be located without getting too stuck on the individual cases themselves: it is about scanning rather than drilling.

Within the scope of the small number of learning design examples considered so far, the learner role based classification method has demonstrated three essential capabilities for effective classification. These are (1) ability to find differences - seen in the first round (2) ability to encompass a broad range - seen in the second and (3) ability to produce transferable interpretations within a group of people - also seen in the second round. In addition to these capabilities, two other useful properties also emerged. One of these was the ability of the learning design comparisons to open up unexpected lines of inquiry. The inverse relationship between learner role complexity and design availability in the second round examples raised a potentially far-reaching question regarding the way learner role complexity may or may not become a constraint on the sharing and re-use of learning resources. Another useful property was the capacity to generate interaction and social engagement by bringing a role dimension into the practical performance of the design classification process, with the creation of the 'spotter' persona in the role play glasses activity. The learner role approach is still far from ‘solving’ the challenge of design sharing on a large scale, but has demonstrated considerable potential in tapping collaborative energy to drive an ongoing search. In addressing what is at its root a problem of language and communication, an effective conversation starter is always a useful asset.

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