

Learners in a Changing Learning Landscape: New Roles and Expectations – One Learner's Reflections

Introduction

I'd like to start my reflections by considering a question posed by our facilitator, Dr. Jan Visser: *Is the online learner a distinct subspecies among the wider species of learners in general?*

Perhaps the online learning environment brings out different aspects of a learner than in-person classroom environments do. There is evidence from psychology that people behave differently in different situations based on the roles and/or expectations assigned to them. Might this apply to online learners as well? If so, then learner expectations may be important to declare explicitly in the online environment. This leads to further questions about expectations in in-person learning environments and how those get communicated as compared with expectations in online learning environments.

This, in turn, brings to mind some ideas presented in Edward T. Hall's book *Beyond Culture* in which he discusses some differences between what he calls *high-context* and *low-context* communications (1976, p.91-93). Here's how Hall explains these differences.

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. (p.91)

It seems worth examining what might be happening in online learning environments in terms of these ideas of context. If messages are not explicit, might the learners look for or respond to implicit messages conveyed by the software design and its use by the instructor? If so, what might be being communicated via these interactions?

My questions for the workshop are centered on these very issues. They are:

- 1) *How does the design of the online software environment communicate expectations to learners? What gets communicated?*
- 2) *How does instructor use of online learning tools (e.g. the software environment and its contents) communicate expectations to learners? What gets communicated?*
- 3) *What do learners themselves expect in online environments? What role can/do those expectations play in the overall online learning experience?*

I'd like to address these questions in turn, always keeping in mind Hall's framework for understanding communications in terms of context.

Software As Context

Basic software design decisions may have a profound effect on the online learning environment, and thus, on the online learning experience. The flexibility of the environment in terms of learner input and collaboration – not just in discussion areas, but also with regard to the larger parameters of how the virtual space is organized – communicates underlying expectations of learner roles. Is it worthwhile to articulate these expectations prior to designing the software? Are instructors, students, curriculum designers, and software engineers all involved in the process of virtual environmental design? Are the issues of learner expectations in these environments being considered with respect to design features? And finally, is there an examination of the underlying philosophies and educational approaches that are implicitly embodied in the design of virtual learning environments?

My experience in online learning is limited to graduate studies. The program in which I am currently enrolled uses the D2L learning environment. This environment (at least as I've experienced it) includes the following areas or sections for each course: Course Home (with an area for posting news, links to Events – which are typically assignments, Personal Preferences, Personal Homepage, Personal Profile, Personal Schedule and Bookmarks), Chat, Checklist, Classlist, Content, Discussions, Dropbox, FAQ, Glossary, Grades, Journal, Quizzes, and Survey. Not all of these features appear for every class, the choice being apparently made by the instructor. In addition, each student has an overall Home section in which all of the online courses in which she is enrolled are listed, a central Email location to which all D2L email messages are sent, and a Locker, as well as a link to a Help page.

The student has input to Personal Preferences, which determine the characteristics of the display, and the Personal Profile, which is a form that the student may elect to complete in order to provide other students with information about herself. The student may also elect to upload files to the Locker section and may choose to keep an online Journal. The Schedule automatically enters due dates if they have been added by the instructor for a particular class, but does not consolidate the due dates for all the classes in which a student is currently enrolled. This can be done manually by the student, however.

The main point I'd like to make here is that all the rest of the sections, i.e., those that concern the substance of the course: Content, Discussion areas, Checklists, and etc. are entirely controlled by the instructor. Only the instructor can post discussion topics, establish permanent chat groups, set up surveys, make entries into a glossary or FAQ section, and so on. The instructor is always firmly and unequivocally in control of the community learning space.

What does such a context convey to the learners in terms of expectations? That depends, in part, on how the instructor uses the environment. Which leads to the next set of questions.

Instructor Use of the Online Environment

How does instructor use of online learning tools (e.g. the software environment and its contents) communicate expectations to learners? What gets communicated?

Taking into consideration that only instructors can set up discussion areas, some go one step further and set limitations on how many or how few contributions must be posted per student. One instructor of a class in which I'm currently enrolled restricts posts to one per week per student. She posts a question and each student must post one answer in response. These responses are then graded by her. Each week a new question is posted by her. Such a situation makes conversation among students in the discussion area impossible. Every post is specifically directed toward the instructor.

In another class, the instructor does not limit the number of posts per student, nor does he require a particular minimum. He posts a question based on the lecture or reading and the students are meant to post responses. In some cases, I have wanted to discuss a different point of the lecture or readings in addition to the one that is posted, so have written asking him to open a general discussion area for the readings/lecture of that week. He has responded saying that he didn't want to do that because he didn't want the discussion to become "confusing."

What kinds of messages are being conveyed by these uses of the software environment? Rather than making an attempt to broaden the parameters imposed by the software, these instructors limit them further. In this way, student interactions with one another are restricted. It is difficult to create a sense of a learning community within such restrictions. In the first instance, the social aspects of learning are all but ignored. In the second instance, while social learning interactions are enabled, construction of learning by individuals and groups is unnecessarily limited.

In combination, the software design and its use by instructors convey implicit messages to learners about their roles in the virtual environment. It is worth examining these in light of assumptions about: the capabilities of graduate students, what kinds of learning experiences are desirable in terms of preparation for further study and professional work, and the underlying purposes and processes of learning in general. An examination of the explicit messages being conveyed merits consideration as well.

Learners' Expectations

It is hard to generalize about what expectations learners bring to the online learning environment. As Deb LaPointe describes in her contribution to these proceedings, every learner brings a complex combination of "motivations, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts based on previous experiences" (10) to the online environment. I would add that these components are in a constant state of flux. Even the online learning experience itself contributes to learners' internal revisions. These various components contribute to the expectations of the learners at the outset and as the online learning experience progresses.

Can these expectations be made explicit? Should they be? If so, how?

Sometimes one's expectations aren't consciously known even to oneself until they are contradicted. Anyone who has traveled or lived in a culture much different than the one in which she typically operates has experienced the clash and confusion caused by expectations that prove to be problematic in new or unfamiliar circumstances. Even in these situations, it can be hard to identify and articulate precisely where the problem lies. Could this be analogous to the situation encountered by learners (and possibly teachers) in online environments? If so, and if making expectations explicit is considered important, then how to facilitate the process of identifying and expressing them online also bears consideration.

Whether or not learner expectations are important may depend on the goals of the online program. If the goal is to provide step-by-step instruction for a specific task, or to provide data for memorization so that the learner can pass a multiple-choice exam, then the issue of learner expectations may be insignificant. If the goals of the program are more far-reaching and include providing qualitative as well as quantitative learning environments and experiences, then the issue of learner expectations becomes quite significant.

Online Learning Environments: High-context or Low-context?

I'd like to clarify that Hall's concept of high- and low-context communications is expressed as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy (p. 91). He explains his idea in terms of cultures, but for this discussion I'd like to apply the concept to situations within cultures and then to online learning environments.

Imagine that you are with a group of your longtime friends and you are relaxing together, maybe at a party. And further, imagine that you have brought along a new friend who is unknown to the group. Typically there will be lots of phrases and innuendos in the conversation that will be undecipherable to the newcomer. The group of friends together engages in high-context communications, the context having been built up over time by mutual experience and understanding with which the newcomer is unfamiliar. In order to be included, you will have to explicitly explain to the newcomer the details that are encoded in the communications between your longtime friends.

I'd like to suggest that many online learning environments are necessarily low-context, particularly those that are entirely text-based, and that some of the problems encountered in these environments have to do with a lack of explicit communication. The participants in online classes may live in different parts of the world and be from different cultural backgrounds. They may never have an opportunity to meet in person. Further complications can arise when teachers and learners come from cultures with different context densities. These factors all contribute to the need for communication to be made explicit. In the absence of explicit communication, individuals in online environments attempt to interpret communications in terms of their own previous experiences, which may or may not lead to misunderstandings. Naturally, these kinds of interpretations occur in all kinds of environments, including in-person classes, but in computer mediated learning situations, they may be all the student has to use as a guide. Lacking the visual

and kinesthetic cues that are present in in-person learning situations can also contribute to the potential for misunderstanding. The lag time between recognizing and correcting misunderstandings in online environments seems to be longer than in in-person situations as well, due to limitations in the communication capabilities inherent in much of the software. If video conferencing is a part of the online environment, the potential for this kind of misunderstanding and the lag time needed to clarify messages might be reduced.

It seems possible that if a group of learners were to interact in an online learning environment consistently over time, the potential for moving the context toward greater density would exist. That increase in context density might result from the cumulative communications and shared experiences of the participants.

Virtual Environmental Design for Learning Communities

My experience with the D2L learning environment is that it is not conducive to student-centered or constructivist approaches. Exclusive instructor control is inherent in its design. It essentially supports the traditional lecture approach: the instructor talks and students listen, contributing only when they have permission from the instructor to do so. It would be awkward and cumbersome to use such an environment as the context for the co-creation of a learning community by its members.

But D2L and the other software products in the same category are not the only options. I have spent quite a bit of time considering questions like the one John Bransford proposed for this meeting, i.e., "How can we build environments that appeal to people who are more inquiry and action oriented than "tell me what I need to know" oriented?" I have also been influenced by questions Jan Visser has posed in our conversations about learning communities. From these conversations I've been inspired to wonder how an environment can facilitate the emergence of supportive, interactive, inclusive communities of learning.

If one were to start with the assumption that such communities are desirable and such environments ought to be created, what features would these environments have? There are so many possibilities that might work. Ideally, the environment would be designed by the learning community itself. However, this could be a kind of chicken-and-egg problem because it might be necessary to create the virtual space in order for the learning community to coalesce. So, for the sake of this discussion, imagine the task of designing such an online learning environment has been given to us.

Here are some of the features I would suggest:

Flexibility – the environment should not only have the capacity for a variety of features, such as the addition of hyperlinks, audio and video clips, Web conferencing, games, etc., but the overall organization of the environment should lend itself to change as the community's needs evolve. In addition, the environment ought to support flexibility in the roles participants play.

Accessibility – naturally, the environment needs to be accessible to the community it serves

Distributed Control – every participant ought to have the ability to contribute to and change the environment as s/he deems appropriate; thereby, all participants can share in the responsibility for the success (by whatever measures are valued by the participants) of the community (Wikipedia is an example of an environment with this feature.)

Navigability – the environment ought to be easy to navigate, and support searching and finding

Reliability –the environment ought to be technically reliable

There are innovators working on questions similar to these. One example is Chide Groenouwe's group in The Netherlands. Their project, Network Universalis, provides an environment in which the roles of teacher and learner are interchangeable and contributions are made and interconnected in ways determined by the participants as the process unfolds.

Closing Thoughts

In an environment such as the one I've described in the previous section, expectations of learners would surely be different than the expectations supported by environments like D2L. In framing our questions about learner expectations, which environment(s) should we consider? This brings me back to Jan Visser's question at the beginning of this paper, about whether the online learner should be considered a subspecies of the broader category of learners in general. Maybe instead of trying to distinguish types of learners, it would be more productive to examine learning environments and the implicit and explicit expectations they can reasonably support.

Resources

- Bransford, J. (2005). *Questions formulated by participating members*. Retrieved 10/4/2005 from <http://www.learndev.org/ibstpi-AECT2005.html>
- Groenouwe, C. *Network Universalis*. Contact: chide@few.vu.nl , +315987449, Free University Amsterdam, Room R-261, De Boelelaan 1081- 1087, 1081 HV Amsterdam
- Hall, Edward T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. NY: Doubleday.
- LaPointe, D. (2005). *Reflections on three questions I am trying to answer*. Retrieved 10/4/2005 from <http://www.learndev.org/ibstpi-AECT2005.html#anchor1673958>
- Visser, J. (2005). *Questions formulated by participating members*. Retrieved 10/4/2005 from <http://www.learndev.org/ibstpi-AECT2005.html>