

Elements of expectancy: Incorporating the Student Voice in the Online Design Process

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ABSTRACT

Designing learning technologies, however interactive they are, is a front-loaded activity with limited opportunity for adapting to the student response in their design. This paper explores the involvement of the student voice in the design of learning objects, and explores the issues involved in collaborative working in the process.

Keywords

Reusable learning objects, communities of practice, student voice

INTRODUCTION

“I think some students would find it hard to spend this amount of time with lecturers. There is also an element of expectancy of performances on students ... and you all referred to us as “the students” and to each other by name.” Extract from student interview, July 2005.

This paper will explore issues around the design process for developing reusable learning objects for use in the classroom either as a stand-alone learning resource, or for incorporation within a set of resources. Our Reusable Learning Objects Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (RLO-CETL, see <http://www.rlo-cetl.ac.uk/>) has set out as one of its main aims the desire to include and incorporate the student voice when developing these resources, particularly through their involvement in design workshops. However, as the extract above indicates, the desire for best practice and its implementation can be very different. The students involved, Andy and Cevrem are collaborators in writing this paper, and we developed our writing as part of a collaborative website, where we shared ideas and drafts.

In January 2005 the UK's Higher Education Funding Council for England announced the outcome of competitive bidding for Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs). £315 million pounds were awarded to 74 CETLs. One successful bid was for £3.3 million over five years to create a CETL in Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs). London Metropolitan University is the lead site, in partnership with the Universities of Cambridge and Nottingham. RLO-CETL is being funded by HEFCE to develop a range of multimedia learning objects that can be stored in repositories, accessed over the Web, and integrated into course delivery. The CETL in RLOs defines reusable learning objects as web-based interactive chunks of e-learning designed to explain a stand-alone learning objective. The fact that the learning object has been broken down to a low level of granularity facilitates its reuse in different learning and teaching situations. The overarching concept of this CETL, which started in April 2005, is to develop a learning object economy, initially between partner sites, where lecturers and learning facilitators can reuse and repurpose learning objects, and hence potentially make savings in costly e-learning developments. Thus the learner centered design; implementation, embedding, evaluation and reuse of high quality multimedia RLOs are important goals for the CETL.

A major challenge for the CETL in RLOs for 2005-2007 is to build communities for reuse; that is to say students, tutors, multimedia developers etc who are at the heart of the RLO design approach. In order to build a cross-institutional community of reuse an innovative and extensive staff reward programme has been designed to harness expert knowledge, the student voice and to help transform these perspectives on various learning needs into engaging interactive shareable RLOs. Central to the functioning of the CETLs is the collaboration between partner institutions in this CETL this is more complex with the involvement of a number of different roles from each institution. Our institution came to the CETL 'new', in that we did not have a prior model for working together, unlike Cambridge and Nottingham who had a history of developing RLOs within the University Collaboration on e-learning project, (see www.ucel.ac.uk).

Building communities involving people with different roles and institutional identities is a complex issue and this paper arises out of one development team's reflexive research on this. The team was one project team, from one of the partner institutions, developing study skills RLO's for business students. Our team includes CETL staff (The director and Manager), a senior lecturer, a lecturer from the Centre for Academic and Professional Development, two students and a multimedia developer (who joined the team in October). This paper explores the issues that arose out of interviews with the students involved and reflective discussions within the team and focuses primarily on the student voice in the project.

The Wolfson Programme.

At the heart of the working of the CETL is working time spent at Wolfson College in Cambridge. The first stage development projects had a week in Wolfson in June 2005 followed by a shorter period in December. These residential periods allowed periods of intensive work and socialising within and between the development project teams. Away from our home institution the team developed its own identity and ways of working together.

The development of a RLO is an iterative process that develops over time and the team's work therefore continued between the Wolfson sessions, and one of the themes that emerged in our reflexive research was the pressures that the team faced when back in the institutional context. The value of the networks which we were able to draw on for the work of the team, in exploring the implementation and testing of the teams work, led to pressures and tensions.

METHODOLOGY

During the first Wolfson week it became clear to us that there were issues in the way which we were beginning to work together that would benefit from reflexive research. We therefore started to gather our various reflections, and started to share ideas on the discussion forum set up to support the work of the CETL (a tikiwiki structure - tikiwiki is a content management system which includes wiki, weblogs and forums and is used for internal communication within the CETL).

A major consideration in inviting students to participate in this project centred on issues as to who to invite. The CETL manager made it very clear that excellence in the student was the main requirement, but how was this to be measured or otherwise judged? There were many students that would benefit from participation in the project, but finally it was decided that two students would be approached, one male, one female, both of whom the tutors felt would be able to 'hold their own' in terms of acting as student advisors to the project.

A methodological issue was definitely the tutor-as-researcher role in terms of power relations. Rowland (2000) explores this role, and his work acknowledges that however hard a teacher may try, it is impossible to disentangle the authority figure in the classroom from the figure of an empathetic researcher without causing tension for both student and tutor. Rowland suggests that very often, when teaching face-to-face, the underlying assumption is that, too often, the teacher sets out the ground rules for their own teaching and research, and persuades the students to agree.

Rowland (2000) discusses the concept of an "ideal speech community" where a learner cannot be empowered until conditions are created in which each is free to communicate sincerely and honestly undistorted by the influences of power. A model to develop the resources for learning is suggested, in which each have a part to play:

The public context (knowledge from different disciplines)

The personal context (knowledge from different teaching experiences)

The shared context (knowledge of the present process)

Thinking through some of the issues of power relations within the classroom, the ideal situation where the student will be able to communicate to the lecturer, on an equal basis seems unlikely as "contributions as tutor were inevitably given special value" (Rowland 2000:66). And if Rowland, writing about teaching and researching with small groups of adult educators undertaking Master level study at an 'old' University has such difficulties with power relations, what might it be like designing an empirical study with an undergraduate group of students at a 'new' University? As Rowland acknowledges, "education is value laden" (op.cit.45). The

relationship of a tutor undertaking research with his/her own students will require careful structuring and there will be implications for the research design of the empirical work for the thesis, and the methodological stance, as both reflective (private practice) and reflexive practice (practice shared with one's community) will have to be considered.

Tenni et al (2003:5), talking about the researcher as autobiographer, suggest that a willingness "to see, confront and discover oneself in one's practice and to learn from this is at the core of this work and central to the creation of good data". This proved to be excellent advice, as our two students were extremely vocal and critical about the role of the tutors on the project. It was also rather difficult to hear that despite ones' best efforts, one was patronising - as this extract shows:

"There was an element of expectancy of performances on students...and you all referred to us as "the students" and to each other by name." Extract from interview with A 17/06/05

Another example of power relations was the issues that cropped up with student bursaries – the tutors suggested that students be paid £50 a day, roughly equivalent to a days pay on the minimum wage, plus all incidental expenses. However, it quickly became apparent that our students were in a very difficult financial position in terms of ability to pay, for example the paying of train fares on credit card and reclaiming money in line with University financial practices. Also, one student didn't possess a jacket and tie, and the reward programme clearly included some formal occasions, and we wanted the students to be able to take full advantage of all the facilities offered by the programme. A similar issue arose at Cambridge – the students had expected 'cash on the day' to enable them to fund a drink in the bar and so on, and we had no way of enabling this to happen other than a tutor paying out cash in advance from her bank account and claiming this back – which proved quite onerous through the University finance system. How can students be expected to contribute effectively with financial worries about taking part in the project?

The student view

Our core team consisted of Andy and Cevrem (student advisors) Debbie and David (tutors) with contributions from John (RLO manager) and Tom (RLO director). The initial data gathering was done by one-to-one student interviews on the train back from the first Wolfson week. The main themes that emerged from these interviews can be categorised into structural and planning issues, different roles within the team and team dynamics.

Structural and planning issues were clearly flagged up as crucial aspects of team development.

"The team/group needs to be better planned – more fluidity in our group – in pairs, sometimes individually would give different combination of ideas." Extract from interview C 17/06/05

We started off with a brainstorming exercise, and quickly agreed that referencing was a key issue for tutor and students alike. The whole approach to the RLO we mapped out was based on a significant student observation,

'Students don't reference "because they [the students] think that tutors will think they don't know enough ... and it will lower their grades..." Student C

This idea led the design process, and the referencing RLO was drafted out as a storyboard over the next couple of days. The prototype can be viewed online at: <http://learning.londonmet.ac.uk/bssmstudy/p540.htm>

By mid-week, we were ready to think through another RLO, and at this point it was far more difficult to get a consensus. A general agreement around developing a RLO around multiple intelligences was emerging, but as can be seen from the extracts below, there were too many people entering into the development, and also key people not available.

The role of Tom and John coming in and out of the group was a weakness, according to the two student interviews.

" they should come in at the beginning and at the end, not in the middle. Tom was good at summarising role – maybe he could be present at summary of creative ideas stage and Sush [the graphic artist] too" extract from interview with C.

We also found that changing the group dynamic had a beneficial effect on some aspects of our design process:

“During the day Tom, Debbie and John were away – it was nice for us to be dominant - 2 students and David (Lecturer) It was a different kind of research and we had time to think.” Extract from interview with C.

However, time needs to be given to incorporation of others within the core team, as the extract below indicates:

“I think we all found Thursday frustrating in the morning. Debbie didn’t have a clear idea of exactly what was needed; Tom was too constraining, the Cambridge students were working with us for the first time and they didn’t seem comfortable. But the group pulled together and the afternoon was better – although Debbie went off to the walk, for me it felt that there was ‘something missing’ i.e. your [Debbie’s] kind of input to the process. Friday morning was unclear – we were all hanging around with no clear idea of what and when was happening – I would like it better if had a later start (that day) say 10.00 with a clear brief that groups would present at 11.00” Extract from interview with A.

An ongoing reflexive process.

The core team of lecturers and students met again in January 2006 to continue our reflections, separately and together. The themes that emerged were issues of equality, the ongoing student involvement, and a more general CETL-wide issue of the developing nature of the community.

Equality

Both students said they got involved in the project because they believed in the principle of the student voice and the project as a whole. It is often hard to deconstruct what lies behind rhetoric of student involvement, student centeredness etc, and how it can be achieved and what is involved. In the initial draft of the proposal for this paper the term equality was used but then removed. One of the students is now very clear that “ They [the tutors] just want students to be themselves – but they don’t need equality for that”. There are aspects of the structure and process where there are clear conflicts between equality and enabling the student voice. For example, the students would have benefited from more information prior to joining the team. A clear contrast was made between the student attending a totally new project compared to the lecturers who are familiar with attending staff development and other types of session that are relatively unstructured.

The communities of practice literature that we will discuss below, refers to symmetry of ignorance - “Real world design problems transcend the knowledge of individuals and specific groups. All participants who have a stake in the design activity should be able to contribute their knowledge.” (enTWIne 2006). Difference is therefore crucial to social learning and its denial is problematic.

Aspects of language developed as an equality sub-theme. Issues identified included the remoteness of some project staff from the daily teaching and involvement with students. This led to misunderstandings about how some RLOs would be used in practice. Another example was the language used by the different groups; despite the mixture of people involved in the project both the joining instructions and web-based information are written with an academic audience in mind. Tutors at different institutions had different ideas about how students would engage with RLOs. One tutor took the approach of, “if they don’t use it – tough” in response to a question raised, and one of our students later commented that if other institutions want to work with London Met students and take this attitude the students won’t want to work with them.

Student Involvement

In our discussions it emerged that there are a number of potential rationales for the involvement of students. On a minimum level students are useful as consumer representatives in the design process, a very passive role. At the other extreme the students could be seen as democratic representatives of the student population ensuring that the CETL responds to students. The differences become clear in issues such as which students are invited to be involved. Our project team was looking for students who would be confident in acting as ‘student advisors’ and confident in being critical of the development process. They also are fairly representative of the University’s profile, being mature, non-standard entry students. Their role is still emerging but they are playing an active role in the testing and implementation of the RLO’s that is beyond the initial brief. The student involvement provided so useful to all the teaching teams developing RLOs, that there was a call for more students to be invited to take part in this project.

While mostly working on the referencing RLO the students also acted as consultants to other groups in the design workshop. “It was good working with your colleagues and students last week - it was very productive

and inspiring I think we all learned a lot from each other." - comment from a colleague from one of the other Universities involved in the workshop.

As lecturing staff, we hadn't fully realised the full potential contribution that the students would make, and we have had to re-negotiate with the CETL management team to extend the boundaries and have longer term student participation, for example in piloting and testing RLOs through to participating as full members of an academic community by enabling them to attend conferences and dissemination activities.

The nature of the community

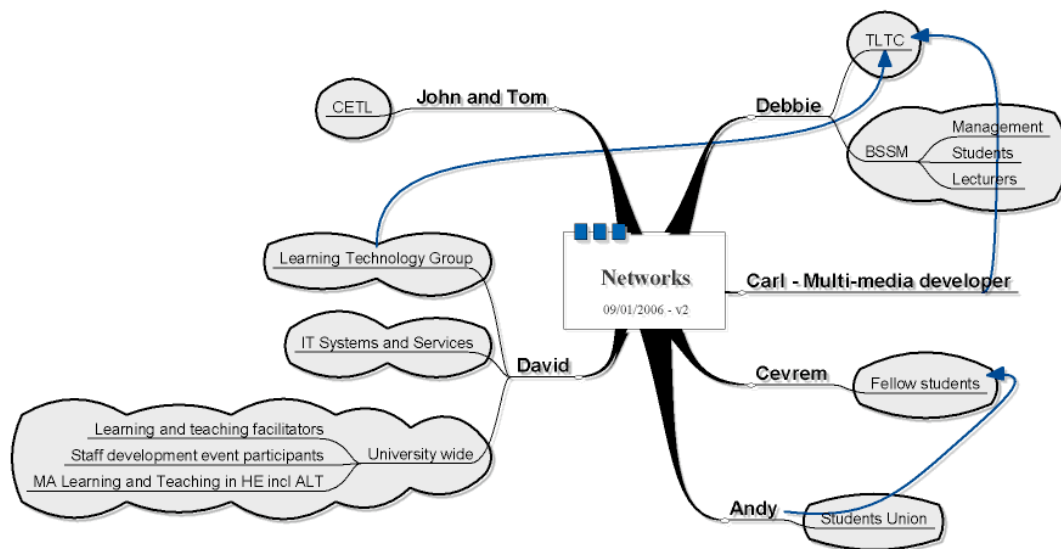
The CETL community is composed of various groups. This raises the issue about the structures and ways of working. At the second of the Wolfson events it appeared to us that there were conflicts in interests between the CETL management team, the team involved in evaluating the project, lecturers and developers, with the different groups having different aims for the event. Another aspect of community has been the integration of the students as 'full development partners' within the CETL. Certainly it gives a whole new dimension to the design process, but on occasions this is not what the academics working on the RLOS want to hear. One suggestion we would make is to have an independent chair/facilitator for the events to ensure that the conflicts are managed productively.

Developing communities of practice

In this section we present an analysis of the data collected in relation to the Communities of Practice (CoP) framework and discuss the issues for this form of collaboration. We are not claiming here that we will create a new CoP within the CETL; for Wenger CoPs already exist and can rarely be created. However, the paper will conclude by claiming that the students' function in the design process can also be seen as a broker within the developing community of developers and users of the learning objects. Furthermore, we propose that the RLOs are artefacts that function as boundary objects.

Our discussion of the process began as personal reflections without any clear theoretical framework but as our discussions developed some theoretical concepts began to be usefully applied. We spent some time discussing our various roles using traditional social psychology concepts, which were useful to some extent, and the idea of role conflict was helpful in exploring the tensions that arose when we returned to our various roles in the institution. We then began to explore some of the conceptual tools that are emerging within the Communities of Practice model developed by Etienne Wenger and colleagues (Wenger 1998).

While the choice of student members had been made on the basis of the criteria of excellence it was fortunate for the development of our project that one of the students was involved in the Student's Union (SU). This meant that not only did we have the students' experience together with their study peer groups, we also access to a number of other students through their SU contacts. David brought a range of contacts from his university wide role in academic development, the development of learning technologies and academic programmes for staff (including an Applying Learning Technologies (ALT)) module. Debbie's role was embedded in an academic department, Business and Service Sector Management (BSSM) with strong links to staff and students in that department. Both David and Debbie work closely with the Teaching and Learning Technology Centre staff. The result is an interesting social network that contains most of the links that we think are useful for a learning technologies development project team. One gap that is obvious is any direct link to the senior management team of the University.



While such a wide-ranging network is useful it brings tensions to the team, in terms of role conflicts and role demands. When we returned from the initial Wolfson residential Debbie was under immediate pressure to produce some results for her department and also wanted the multimedia developer who had joined the team after the first sessions to get on with some work. She therefore decided to push ahead with a modified version of the initial RLO. Because of other pressures the team did not meet and communication was minimal during this period so the other team members were not involved in these discussions. Communication with the central CETL team was also not strong during this period so that there was no influence from them. The result was some disappointment with the initial pilot RLO and the feeling that some of the development work done had been ignored. A community of practice was emerging in the Wolfson programme but was now challenged by the pressure of our existing roles and demands. The community could have split apart at this stage, but was maintained, partly through the amount of bonding that had occurred, but also assisted by the continuing reflexive research we were engaged in for this paper, and the timing of the second Wolfson event in December.

The communities of practice approach is developing some useful concepts to explore these issues. The first is the concept of boundary objects. Boundary objects are elements of a network that enable the community to develop understanding across boundaries. The networks that we are part of do not understand each other and the presence of the RLO as an unfamiliar object enables dialogue to take place which reduces our mutual ignorance. It enabled the lecturers to understand the students' issues with referencing, it enabled students to see what we as lecturers were trying to achieve. It also functions across the gaps between multimedia developers, lecturers and IT Service providers. There was an interesting moment in a staff development session which David organised in which one of the IT Systems and Services staff saw an RLO and saw for the first time what the CETL was trying to achieve. The problem of course, was when for a time the RLO that David and Andy were talking about was different from the one being developed by Debbie and the multimedia developer! At times it appears that the role of the RLO as a boundary object is more important than its role as a learning object.

If a learning object is reused across institutions and academic subjects how do they affect the community that uses them, designers, lecturers and students? Do the learning objects function as boundary objects within that community and if so how can we design them such that their role in community building can be maximised. All communities have objects that connect their practice to the world. A boundary object in Wenger's sense is not necessarily an artefact, it can, for instance, be a forest for conservationists or hikers.

The relationship between lecturer and student communities in higher education can be explored using the concepts of the asymmetry of knowledge and the symmetry of ignorance (enTWIne). While the lecturers may 'know' more about Higher Education we are still ignorant about aspects of the students' experience, as they are

that of the lecturers. The RLO design process provided an opportunity to get beyond the asymmetry of knowledge to develop the dialogue to enable the development of a community across the boundaries.

The other useful concept is that of 'brokering', developed by Eckert and Wenger.

“the broker personifies the ability to transfer certain elements of one practice to another, to understand and appreciate the differences in perspective between one community and another, and authorization to influence the practices of one or more communities” (Gherardi and Nicolini 2002)

Each of the team members acts as a broker between the various communities of the University and through the RLO as boundary object is developing the ability to broker more effectively. Again the process has more wide reaching effects than might have been envisaged in the design of the project, and the explicit recognition of this role we believe will assist us to develop this aspect of the work of the CETL project.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

From our discussions a number of themes have emerged which we think are useful for the CETL and for the networked learning community as a whole.

Firstly we think that the involvement of students in the design of learning technologies is extremely useful, but that it needs to be thought through clearly before the start of the process. Unclear concepts such as 'equality' are not useful in establishing the student voice in the process, and that concepts such as brokering and the symmetry of ignorance provide a more useful framework for planning student involvement. On a practical level the contractual and payment issues need to be clear from the outset.

The work of the CETL so far supports the view that we need to move away from a designer driven model of the development of learning technologies. A sharper focus needs to be taken from the outset to the use of learning technologies in the communities for which they are designed. We suggest that this could be at macro level, where RLOs are designing for tutor reuse across different institutions, as well as at micro level, where RLOs are primarily designed for use and reuse within the smaller scale CETL project.

The workshop element of the process needs a clear structure in order for the students and other brokers who are less familiar with educational/staff development activities to take part in the sharing of experiences across the symmetry of ignorance.

In an organisation such as the CETL where different communities are developing at different speeds with different needs and interests as a result, a structure needs to be in place to ensure that the needs of the different communities are taken into account, both in the design of the formal and informal, social aspects of the programme. The management group is only one community amongst others.

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