

Roles and Identity in Scenario-Based Learning Online

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the introduction of Scenario-based Learning (SBL) online and its impact on the roles and identity of the learners and academic staff involved in its adoption, as well those like myself who are in transition from 'pedagogical developer' to 'pedagogical researchers' with a focus on this pedagogy. The many issues involved are considered and their analysis presented as an ordered situational map (Clarke, 2005). A key factor that has become apparent through this reflective process is the recognition that pedagogical research is essentially individual and competitive, and that the collegiate approach so successful in pedagogical development is no longer always appropriate. A parallel is drawn with the collaborative strategies now being adopted by commercial freelance workers through such emerging online communities as Ecademy.com and OpenBC.com. These provide both a model for future pedagogical research collaboration and an example of the kind of entrepreneurial endeavor which SBL is expected to inspire in students. Universities in the UK are tasked by the UK Higher Education Funding Council to "enable people to develop their capabilities and fulfil their potential, both personally and at work" (HEFCE, 2005). The challenge to a university such as Coventry is to provide a learning experience that anticipates the needs and expectations of potential employers while satisfying the academic requirements of subject benchmarks and programmes of study. Inevitably, the emphasis on employability will create tensions for those academic staff who see this as a change in their role and/or identity. SBL also challenges learners since it requires them to adopt roles within a pre-defined situation and hence to alter their perception of the subject matter, their identity as a potential member of a community of practice and to re-frame their understanding of the boundaries of study, work and leisure.

Keywords

Academic identities, academic values, balanced scorecard, community of practice, e-research, realistic work environments, situational analysis

INTRODUCTION

When Coventry University took the strategic step to create a Teaching, Learning and Assessment Taskforce back in 1997, it did so largely in response to rapidly increasing student numbers, adverse staff to student ratios and the growing heterogeneity of its student intake (King, 2003a). Its subsequent institution-wide implementation of a virtual learning environment (VLE) sought to harness the perceived potential of learning technology to address these and other issues (King, 2003b). Laurillard's *Rethinking University Teaching* (1993) was so strongly influential on the original Taskforce community to which I belonged that it almost became our 'set text', as is apparent in much of our pedagogical development (PedD) discourse over the years.

As the Research Fellow responsible for the wider introduction and inquiry into Scenario-based Learning, I find no such shared text to bond the new iPED network. Laurillard's 2002 revised edition has much to offer myself and others concerned with online learning, but less for colleagues focusing on research-led learning, work-based learning or academic writing research. Instead, the discourse of changing academic identities provides a loose connection between us as we strive to establish ourselves in our new roles.

The original Taskforce adopted a "hub and spokes" communication model (Deepwell and Beaty, 2005: 10) with discipline-based members providing the links between the 'hub' at the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) and the 'rim' of the wider university comprising the faculties and key departments. This approach allowed the numerous semi-seconded members (the 'spokes') to work collaboratively, to inspire each other and to build on the secure foundation provided by their colleagues in CHED.

iPED is modeled differently, reflecting the current learner and more entrepreneurial environment within the institution. The three research fellows at the core of iPED are each required to build their own sub-network,

comprising members both internal and external to the University. Thus we are (to some extent) competitors, tasked as we each are with producing measurable outputs (gaining funding, generating publications and developing colleagues to do likewise). Our collaborations will be judged the more successful, the more we draw new active participants into the iPED network. (A reflective, internal collaborative venture such as this symposium has only limited value in these terms.) Hence, to be successful, it may well be necessary to work independently, even selfishly. The 'I' has become the essential element of our inquiry.

It has taken some time to grasp this key difference between the PedD focus of the Taskforce and the pedagogical research (PedR) nature of iPED. Searching for a way to enable iPED members to 'collaborate competitively' led me to investigate e-Research initiatives and to recognize that the collegiate world of the Taskforce had been replaced by a 'balkanised' world where researcher is set against researcher, research group against research group and institution against institution. In the UK, this is partly the result of the impending Research Assessment Exercise in 2008 (King and Deepwell, 2005). However, the cult of the individual has traditionally underpinned academic research where reputations grow according to the 'Matthew principle' (Becher, 1989, Becher and Trowler, 2001) (that is: given to those who have, taking from those who do not have). The pressure to be recognized as excellent by the RAE has made this rivalry increasingly overt, confirming Becher's view that the greater the emphasis placed on "gaining a professional reputation", the greater "[t]he competitive nature of academic life" (Becher, 1989 p 91).

BACKGROUND TO THE ADOPTION OF SBL

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2005:4) states that

"Higher education in the UK is rich and diverse. It is provided by many different types of institutions which carry out teaching, scholarship and research.

The main purposes of higher education are:

- To enable people to develop their capabilities and fulfil their potential, both personally and at work
- To advance knowledge and understanding through scholarship and research
- To contribute to an economically successful and culturally diverse nation."

This university has recently revised its mission statement and now aims, amongst other things, "...to provide an excellent education enriched by our focus on applied research" (Coventry University internal documents, 2005). The accompanying documentation underlines the strategic importance of applied pedagogical research in helping the university to advance its position within the various league tables which compare numerous facets of UK HEIs (past and future performance in the RAE is just one of these facets). Thus, whilst an HEI may be 'adding value' as required by HEFCE, its achievements are only 'worthwhile' in league table terms if they are measurable. Despite the benefits to many of our students resultant from the introduction of online learning at Coventry, the investment has not sufficiently benefited the University in terms of 'hard outcomes' (such as acquired funding and journal publications) and consequent league table position.

Against this background, academic staff begin to question their role, their identity and their priorities. In 2002, Laurillard continued to maintain Ramsden's 1992 view that "[t]he aim of teaching is simple: it is to make student learning possible" (p11). Ramsden reiterates this in his 2003 revised edition and both authors set this goal against the need to address multiple levels within the educational context, from the individual academic, through the content and aims of programmes of study to the institutional strategy itself.

Ramsden recognizes the pressures brought about by global competition between HEIs and the consequential importance of using PedR to promote student success. Laurillard, however, only indexes 'competition' in terms of the "importance of continual innovation" in order to remain a viable HEI. The cynicism expressed by some colleagues in the sector and evident in (for example) Laurie Taylor's weekly column in the Times Higher Education Supplement is not addressed. 'Poptleton University', which Taylor satirizes, represents a commoditised educational environment which has disengaged from the scholarly purpose of university teaching, to become a parody of commercial enterprise.

The challenge to a University such as Coventry is to provide a learning experience that anticipates current and future priorities and strategies. Our mission statement addresses this through the commitment to develop "enterprising and entrepreneurial graduates, contributing to innovation, creativity and productivity in their organisation or community of practice" (Coventry University internal documents, 2005).

SCENARIO-BASED LEARNING ONLINE

Through my appointment as a Research Fellow with the special remit to address Scenario-Based Learning (SBL) and Realistic Work Environments (RWE), the University acknowledged the potential of SBL to enhance student learning, particularly with relation to employability and entrepreneurship.

The term 'SBL' is used in a variety of ways and may cover a range of teaching approaches (problem-based learning, games playing, simulations, case-study-based learning, project-based learning). However, it is increasingly used to define role-played exploration within a virtual learning environment where feedback and background material encourage the student to recognise the most 'appropriate' behaviour within the scenario and to relate this to other aspects of their course of study.

'RWE' can be seen as a subset of Scenario-Based Learning and its inclusion will subsequently be intended where 'SBL' is used in this paper. RWE concerns the creation of a 'world' where learners can adopt work-like roles and experience the ethical, professional and day-to-day issues that face practitioners. Again, virtual role-play is increasingly used, dynamically supported by practitioner expertise where possible. Where student placements and other work-based learning opportunities are difficult to find, RWE can provide a substitute, particularly where practitioners and employers enrich staff to student interaction.

Thus SBL online can, when carefully designed, exhibit the beneficial features of tutorial-simulations and other 'adaptive media' so praised by Laurillard (2002): 'intrinsic feedback', 'extrinsic feedback', 'real-time' interaction, potential for group work as well as individual role-play, and virtual access to a particular environment for students who (for whatever reason) are unable to access it physically at that time.

Developments at Coventry in SBL online are at different stages in different disciplines, often reflecting the extent to which contact with the associated communities of practice have been maintained or dismantled over the recent past. As a first pragmatic step, staff have been encouraged to enrich their module webs with multimedia materials (for example, photographs from the workplace, video or audio clips of guest speaker talks) which can be used as the basis for scenario building and against which students can adopt roles, address problems and situate their learning. More radical work is also under way, addressing 'serious' computer games playing and the (re)design of entire modules around scenarios.

Adoption of these approaches by teaching staff provides a means of enriching students' understanding of theoretical material and of its relevance to a variety of situations. Through subsequent reflection, students are also encouraged to develop both academically and personally. The benefits of 'authentic' assessment and grounded learning are widely recognized. However, Laurillard, discussing the 1998 work of Brown and Duguid, highlights the dangers of proceeding too far down this path: "Informal, experiential, situated knowledge, developed through communities of practice, becomes fully contextualized, to the extent that it is no longer functional beyond that community" (Laurillard, 2002: 22).

THE PROBLEMATIC ROLE OF SBL

- The integration of SBL into a module or a course will inevitably require effort and thought by academic staff, already hard-pressed for time. It is important that the claims made for it are not so great as to lead to disappointment and rejection, nor so small that the approach fails to appeal to those seeking to improve their students' learning. As Coventry University is currently undertaking a redesign of all its undergraduate programmes, SBL may be seen on the one hand as an additional, unwelcome burden for staff or on the other hand as a timely opportunity. It is, as yet, too early to judge its status.
- Through the adoption of SBL online, there is a possibility of shifting the "pedagogy paradigm" (Coomey & Stephenson, 2001) away from tutor-controlled tasks and processes towards a more student-controlled arena. However, this does not necessarily follow. There remain strong tendencies for tutors to retain control as this is bound up in their conceptions of what a tutor should do. Similarly, the learners may not be prepared to engage in the process if it does not accord with their conception of a learning environment. Making a change towards a learner-centred pedagogy therefore creates tensions and resistance within the learning community as it requires new perceptions of self by both learners and teachers.
- Academic staff at Coventry have expressed some concerns regarding the use of SBL as a means of promoting the development of 'skills' at the expense of theoretical knowledge. Laurillard (2002) notes the likelihood of such tensions when staff feel that the academic purpose of universities is 'polluted' by non-academic objectives. Hence, care must be taken not to associate this approach with 'training'.

- SBL has a role to play in enhancing both the academic and professional socialization of students. However, authentic assessment is complex and time-consuming: initially for the academic staff involved in its design and subsequently for the students who take the assessment. Despite government's desire to promote employability as a key outcome of higher education, many students throughout the sector continue to focus on the hurdle of 'gaining a degree'. In cautioning that "[s]tudents spend a lot of effort learning to please lecturers and gain high marks" (Ramsden, 2003: 8), he recognizes the student instrumentalism which is now apparent even at elite universities (Misra, 2005). This is also apparent from informal student sources at Coventry, however, more work remains to be done to establish the extent to which learners' focus on "the grade" (Brennan and Jary, 2005) might lead them to reject SBL activities which they perceive as distractions. "[V]ery large numbers of students appear to be learning an imitation of at least some of the disciplines they are studying, a counterfeit amalgam of terminology, algorithms, unrelated facts, 'right answers', and manipulation skills that enable them to survive the process of assessment" (Ramsden, 2003: 37). The lessening 'market value' of a degree without the accompanying abilities demanded by employers is only slowly being recognized by students.

CHANGING ROLES AND ACADEMIC IDENTITIES

Influences

Although it is recognized that change is continuous, academic identities are currently in a notable state of transition. Although this is both a national and international phenomenon, staff at Coventry University have experienced additional instability through recent changes in high-level management, restructuring of faculties, a major voluntary redundancy programme, a onerous research-group funding competition and the imminent introduction of both a new release of our VLE software and a new staff assessment mechanism.

Despite a resistance to formal management training by UK HEI manager-academics (Deem, 2005), commercial management approaches continue to be adopted by universities. One example is the use of Kaplan and Norton's 'balanced scorecard' in staff assessment whereby institutional strategic vision is translated into individuals' annual targets for income generation, 'customer' satisfaction, application of business processes and demonstration of personal learning and growth (Turner, 2002). A variant of this model is being trialed at Coventry University, increasing the pressure on staff to demonstrate hard outcomes such as papers published and funding awarded. Although this emphasis on outcomes is common across the sector as part of preparations for the 2008 UK Research Assessment Exercise, it is also part of a strategic drive by Coventry to increase the level of applied research activity, as discussed earlier.

Against this background, although the effort of SBL adoption may be unappealing to many, the applied research associated with SBL may represent an opportunity to some colleagues. Academic staff who previously focused on teaching, may evolve into discipline-based pedagogical researchers. This will certainly require a change in their priorities, but may not mean too great an alteration in their view of themselves: "For teachers, academic identities are intimately linked to professional identities." (Brennan and Jary, 2005).

The balanced scorecard approach to staff assessment requires that an academic should have strengths in teaching, research, income generation and administration. It suggests that individuals who do not conform to this pattern are unworthy. Coventry staff are not alone in questioning this devaluing of both specialists and of colleagues who provide less tangible but crucial service roles. "The dominance of 'teaching' and 'research' in the discourse of university life manifests itself in promotion and tenure policies as a two-dimensional image of the academic role ...In this two-dimensional vision, the only alternative vision is of an 'all rounder'..." (Macfarlane, 2005: 26). Macfarlane's key concern is that these alternatives do nothing to reward those who 'serve' their departments in more collegial ways, hence individualism is actively encouraged while 'service and academic citizenship' (Macfarlane, 2005: 28) are not.

Responses

Consideration of the needs of members of communities of inquiry such as iPED who must strive to succeed as competitive individuals whilst dependent on collaborative arrangements, has led me to recognize that a new way to network and connect online is necessary. Contact with my former community of practice (that of freelance IT consultancy) can now be maintained through web-based organizations such as Ecademy.com and OpenBC.com. These emerging online communities are growing in strength and the benefits to their professional members are framed in terms of knowledge exchange and personal growth as well as collaboration (Radio 4, 2005). Membership of these organizations provides functionality such as searching for those with similar interests, those who want to sell what you want to buy (and vice versa) and those who wish to meet socially in your geographical location. Much more sophisticated 'match-making' functions are restricted to fee-paying members.

Re-framing the boundaries of organisations, work and leisure in this way reflects the rapid emergence of an e-society which our students (if not ourselves) will be expected to join in the near future.

This model is being investigated at Coventry as a means of connecting and communicating between staff of all types. It will also be considered as a type of realistic work environment for students from some disciplines.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The issues surrounding the introduction of Scenario-based Learning (SBL) online within the HEI context at Coventry has been analysed by means of the ‘ordered situational map’ (Clarke, 2005) below. This ‘low-intensity’ process allows low-level and high-level issues to be considered, and provides a framework through which to deepen the understanding of the pedagogies of scenario-based learning and their impact on academic roles and identity. The table is derived from a previous process of ideas generation and ‘messy’ accumulation of issues. Subsequent reflection enables these diverse elements to be grouped as shown. Clarke’s variant of Situational Analysis provides additional analysis techniques such as a ‘social worlds/arenas’ map, and a positional map which have been yet to be applied here.

The priority for this paper is to provide dense coverage of this complex situation. Note that Clarke provides the caveat that such maps are not “intended as forming final analytic product. While they may, of course, do so, the major use for them is ‘opening up’ the data and interrogating it in fresh ways within a grounded theory framework.” (Clarke, 2005 p83).

<i>Individual Human Elements/Actors</i>	<i>Nonhuman Elements Actors/Actants</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Student (current, past and potential) ▪ Researcher / Lecturer / ‘Server’ ▪ Administrator ▪ Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University mission statement ▪ VLE (WebCT) ▪ Balanced scorecard and staff appraisal ▪ Subject benchmarks ▪ Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)
<i>Collective Human Elements/Actors</i>	<i>Implicated/Silent Actors/Actants</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University management ▪ iPED Network ▪ Taskforce for Teaching, Learning & Assessment ▪ Applied Research Centres ▪ HEA ▪ HEFCE ▪ Communities of Practice (CoPs) ▪ PedR community and non-PedR community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Future employers ▪ Research funding bodies ▪ Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) ▪ Ecademy and OpenBC
<i>Discursive Constructions of Individual and/or Collective Human Actors</i>	<i>Discursive Constructions of Nonhuman/Silent Actants</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “Rethinking University Teaching” ▪ ‘Hub and Spokes’ model versus the iPED network ▪ Purpose of Universities in the UK ▪ Graduate employability and Graduateness ▪ Value of online learning ▪ Value of PedR 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students as skill sets ▪ Research reputations ▪ Requirement for ‘hard’ research outputs ▪ Technical constraints ▪ Socialisation of students into CoPs ▪ Academic staff as ‘freelancers’
<i>Political/Economic Elements</i>	<i>Sociocultural/Symbolic Elements</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Graduate employment rates ▪ HEI League Tables ▪ Funding associated with the RAE ▪ Voluntary redundancy programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ HEI League Tables ▪ Restructuring of Schools into Departments within Faculties
<i>Temporal Elements</i>	<i>Spatial Elements</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two-year PedR Research Fellowships ▪ New module structure from September 2006 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Physical dispersal of iPED members ▪ Virtual communities

▪ RAE 2008	
<i>Major Issues/Debates</i> <i>(Usually Contested)</i>	<i>Related Discourses</i> <i>(Historical, Narrative and/or Visual)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Academic Identities ▪ Collegiality versus Competition and rivalry, ‘the survival of the fittest’ ▪ Adoption of commercial management practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Value of online learning ▪ Value of PedR ▪ What counts as research

Figure 1. Ordered Situational Map of SBL Online Introduction (after Clarke, 2005)

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties explored in this paper, it is apparent that Scenario-based Learning online has much to offer a university such as Coventry:

- Students may gain better understanding of theoretical material as well as its application, an appreciation of its application and the professional/social issues associated with the workplace and potential interaction with practitioners.
- Teaching staff may find this a useful pedagogy, particularly where the learner group is heterogeneous and where direct contact with the disciplinary community of practice is difficult to provide.
- Academic staff (both education specialists and discipline-based colleagues) may find opportunities for applied pedagogic research through consideration of SBL in the curriculum.
- University managers may find that modules and courses demonstrating employability outcomes through the use of SBL (alongside or instead of work-based learning) will appeal to both potential students and potential employers.

The link between SBL and the University’s mission and aims is clear. However, just as the SOMUL project team found in establishing their research approaches that the different disciplinary backgrounds had shaped each individual’s expectations (Brennan and Jary, 2005), so the different academic identities represented within iPED demonstrate different values and priorities. The measures of success to be used with both the iPED network and academic staff generally at Coventry, require shifts in role, identity and priorities.

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