

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

Paper 9:

Developing Self Assessment in Networked Lifelong Learning Environments

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Abstract

This paper is a contribution to our understanding of the development of professional practice in networked learning environments. In the paper I examine:

- a) assessment processes in networked learning environments which involve the learner, their peers and a tutor in making judgements about the learner's formal course work;
- b) the role of the tutor/teacher in these processes.

I suggest that assessment should be a learning event and that networked learning course participants should be involved in making judgements about their own and their peers' learning. The benefits to learners and tutors of these collaborative learning processes are examined and discussed.

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

Introduction

- In this paper I wish to examine some issues concerning self/peer/tutor assessment of adult learners' formal course work in networked learning environments.

Assessment of learning is probably one of the last remaining bastions of academic life. It is usually the one element in a formal course where the learner has no, or very little, say or control over. Assessment is unilateral, carried out solely by the teacher, and often final.

Making assessment a learning event, rather than a form of unilateral judgment, is surely a goal that we should strive to achieve in the context of life-long learning. This is especially so in the field of continuing professional development where we work with people who already have some expertise in making judgments about their professional work. However, few teachers seem willing to embrace the possibility of involving learners in assessing their own and others work. Perhaps it is a fear of letting go of this last source of power that we have that stops this happening? Perhaps it is a fear of standards falling if we 'allow' learners to bring their own judgment to this process?

Self, Peer and Tutor Assessment

- The benefits to learning of some form of self assessment, especially in the area of continuing professional development, are enormous. The involvement of the self and peers, as well as a teacher/tutor in making judgments about learning outcomes and processes is a valuable and powerful source of learning in itself.

There are at least three good reasons for self assessment in networked learning :

1. it is a way of engendering cooperative group work : In general, the assessment process is largely a hidden one. Although quality control systems now require most of us to be more open about the criteria used in assessment, the actual process of assessing a learner's work is largely closed and not open to any form of scrutiny, from the learner's point of view. This is regrettable, and in terms of our practice as adult educators, unacceptable. Assessment is quite probably the most profound factor in any learner's experience of a formal course. The control of power in this unilateral way is surely counter-educational?

By making the assessment process public within the course of study - by involving the learner in their own assessment, and that of other learners - we are trying to ensure that an environment of trust and cooperation will develop in the online group.

2. it is a way of enhancing learning : self and peer assessment has been shown to be a way of enhancing and supporting learning (Boud, 1995). By bringing their own criteria for making judgments about their learning into the arena, and by engaging with others in discussion about the application of criteria generally to their work, learners begin to take control over their learning and begin to develop stronger positive views of themselves and of their capability to learn. Additionally, the exchange of course assignments between participants gives them access to a very wide range of material which adds to their understanding of how

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

their peers design and write, and how they approach the examination of relevant course issues and problems. This is a powerful way of enhancing their learning.

3. it is a way of developing lifelong learning skill : self and peer assessment processes work towards developing skill in 'effective' lifelong learning. Learners who are formally involved in making judgments about their learning carry these skills into other areas of their life and know and understand the need for self determination in their learning. Boud (1995) suggests several important outcomes for graduates who have been self assessors. They :

- develop a wish to continue their learning
- know how to do so
- monitor their own performance without constant reference to fellow professionals
- expect to take full responsibility for their actions and judgments

Developing the Online Learning Community

- The process of developing skill and understanding about self and peer assessment has to take place in a wider supportive learning context. It is highly unlikely to be able to introduce these processes into an online course that does not function as a cooperative learning community. Learners and tutors have to develop a sense of trust and a common purpose, a belief that they are a community of learners, before they are likely to believe that self and peer assessment will really be taken seriously, and will work effectively. They are, after all, going to 'reveal' themselves in this process.

Detailed discussion of the development of online learning communities is beyond the scope of this short paper. Elsewhere (McConnell, 1994) I have elaborated on what is needed in order to support the networked learning community. In summary, this involves :

- openness in the educational process
- self-determination in learning
- a real purpose in the cooperative learning process
- a supportive learning environment
- collaborative assessment of learning
- assessment and evaluation of the ongoing learning process

Self Assessment in Networked Learning Environments

- I would now like to focus on several issues emerging from the practice of self, peer and tutor assessment in networked learning environments. I am not doing this in order to suggest how it should be carried out: it is not an exemplar, but more of a way of illustrating from my own practice what it can involve, and the benefits to learners that can result from it.

The context for this is the MEd in Networked Collaborative Learning at the University of Sheffield, which is a two year part-time programme for professional people wishing to develop their skill and understanding of the use of the Internet and electronic communications in learning. The course is run using the Lotus Notes groupware, and via Web site (details can be found at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/csnl/>). Participants and a tutor work in small Lotus Notes learning sets. The whole MEd group meets in other Lotus Notes spaces.

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

Example One:

Sharing thinking about course assignment proposals

The first example relates to the development of a supportive learning environment where course participants come to feel they are working within a trusting learning community where they can offer tentative thoughts and ideas concerning the course assignment they wish to produce.

A learner's relationship to assessment does not start only at the point where they hand in a piece of work. Most learners are engaged in a complex relationship with assessment from the moment they join a formal course. We know that the assessment process can be central to the way in which a learner engages with learning. How they are to be assessed often determines what they learn, how they learn it and how they prepare for their assessment (Becker et al, 1968; Miller et al, 1974). If we are to develop deep processes of learning, and authentic, meaningful learning, we have to try to produce as early as possible on the course an environment where it is possible for us all to share our thoughts and feelings about the development of the course-work that is to be assessed. If this is achieved, then the learner is in a better position to feel they can bring some self-determination into the whole process, and feel that they have some control over it. This in turn helps them develop a more secure relationship between themselves, their tutor, other peer learners and the assignment they are working on and how it will eventually be assessed.

An example of how this starts in a networked learning environment may help. Below is my summary of how a participant on our MEd in Networked Collaborative Learning started to engage his co-learners and tutor in his thinking about the production of a course assignment. I have examined the online transcript of the topic and have tried to faithfully summarise the sequence of events that took place in order to show what was involved. In what follows, P stands for 'participant' and T for 'tutor'.

- P1 makes a statement about the possible focus of his assignment (facilitating IT/networked development of teachers in schools); he asks if this would be appropriate for the assignment.
- T makes a supporting comment; asks a question relating to the assignment; observes that it could be quite a complex piece of work to carry out; asks how P1 might go about developing the idea
- P1 provides further details and acknowledges that he has to keep it 'simple'
- T makes supportive statement; asks more detailed questions; offers further support and requests that P1 keeps the learning set informed
- P1 long entry describing his contacts with the school and their enthusiasm to be involved; mentions how he is becoming more focused; mentions Web resource he has found and gives URL for others in learning set to use; mentions DfEE (Department for Education and Employment) document found on Web and quotes from that; asks T for specific help on one issue
- P2 makes supportive comment; copies parts of what P1 has said to reflect back to him (as quotes) and asks some questions; finishes by saying she is puzzled about how this will relate to his own practice?
- P3 points P1 in direction of a CMC system freely available on the Web (gives URL); asks him to let her know what he thinks of it
- T makes supporting comment; copies something P1 said earlier, quotes it back to him, and makes some detailed comments on it; makes a cautionary statement to P1; poses some questions about P1's proposed assignment
- P1 recognises need to be cautious; re-states his re-worked assignment proposal; gives more background information about IT resources available at school; describes

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

who he is working with in school; discusses how the work will 'fit into' the MEd assignment and his own practice

T quotes back to P1 something he said earlier in order to elaborate on it; makes a supporting statement; makes a further possible suggestion concerning P1's proposal; provides some ideas on how to carry out educational evaluations; makes a supporting statement concerning the role of the learning set in helping P1; ends by making another supportive statement

P1 some time later : reports back on work already carried out in project; gives some thoughts on what is involved for school teachers taking part in the project; says he has now set-up a virtual classroom and is examining his own role (his practice) in the project as part of the assignment

P3 makes a supporting statement; expresses her interest in seeing the results; asks a question about something he said which isn't clear to her

P1 thanks P3; answers her question; makes a further statement about what he is trying to achieve in the project.

This sustained, focused discussion about P1's proposed assignment topic occurred over several weeks. This allowed him time to think about and re-shape the topic while receiving detailed comments from the members of the learning set. His struggle to make sense of what he was trying to achieve was carried out in a supportive learning environment. He was able to take time to think about the comments others made, go off and find Web and other resources to help him develop his thinking, and bring some of that back to the group to share with them. Even though some time elapsed between some of the entries in the discussion, P1 was able to pick-up the thread of the conversation whenever he needed to and could count on the other learning set members to 'be there' for him whenever he needed to talk with them.

By examining the 'transcript' of the discussion it is possible to 'see' P's ideas and knowledge developing, to 'see' him picking up other participants' and

tutor's points and using them. By working in this way on the MEd, I would suggest that participants are able to develop their understanding of the importance of a supportive online learning environment by experiencing and participating in such an environment.

'One great positive from this course for me has been the invaluable insight I have been given into issues through the views of others - wonderful after having worked on my own for so long. It has really helped to examine my own viewpoints.'

(Participant)

This extended period of discussion and development of the course assignment also sets the context in which the assignment can finally be submitted for comment and assessment. Those involved know what P1 is trying to achieve and why, and know something of his thinking around the topic. They have been prepared in advance for receiving his assignment, and are already in a different kind of position to understand how to approach it's assessment than they would have been had they not been involved in this process. The process is a necessary precursor to the assessment itself. Participants are able to learn in a 'real' practical way about how to manage their own learning during the period when they are working on their course assignments.

Example Two:

Developing Learning Relationships Through Self, Peer and Tutor Assessment Processes.

- The opportunity for participant and tutor to share their criteria for making judgments about the learning that is evidenced in a course assignment can also be a fruitful arena for learning.

The focus of the assignment is often on issues relating to the participant's own professional practice. They are encouraged to reflect on their practice, examine it and carry out a small scale action research intervention into it. The assignment often

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

has a dual role for them : it is a piece of work that has some real use for them in their practice eg it may lead to a document that can be used in their institution for some aspect of staff development or organisational change. At the same time the work also forms the basis for the assignment for the MEd.

One issue around this that sometimes emerges is how to write for different audiences when using the same research material. There can be a tendency for participants to prepare just one document for the two purposes (work and MEd). This often leads to a discussion about the form of a document that can be used for submission as an academic piece of work, and the form of a document for work-related purposes.

An example of this will help to illustrate the complexity of this learning relationship and show how beneficial it can be for a participant to be able to challenge the tutor's judgments on their work - within the wider social space of the learning set.

For reasons of clarity I will only refer here to discussions between the participant and the tutor, leaving aside the peer reviewer's comments on the assignment.

P presents her assignment online for peer and tutor review and assessment; she offers several criteria which she wants to be used by others in making judgments about the assignment

T reads the assignment; makes many supportive comments; raises several issues, including his view on the explicitness of the critical perspective which the participant has taken on some issues in the assignment (he suggests her critique is sometimes 'implicit' and not explicit)

P says she is confused and doesn't understand his comment; she challenges him to give some examples of 'explicit critique' so that she can understand what he means by 'implicit'; she thinks she has been 'explicit' in her critique; she points out that T does not raise this in reviews of other P's assignments (which are being

reviewed at the same time), yet from her analysis of them they offer no fuller explicit critique in their assignments

T reads the assignment again and agrees she does carry out explicit critique, to some degree; goes on to try and explain what he means by 'explicit' and 'implicit' critique, and why explicit critique is so important in the assignments; T somewhat defensive at this point...

P sometime later: P still needs to be clearer about implicit and explicit critique, before the end of the Workshop; she copies and pastes sections from the assignment which she thinks shows her being explicitly critical; she asks T what he now thinks ?

T re-confirms his view that she has indeed been explicit in her critique to some degree

Once again, this discussion occurred over several weeks. The summary of the discussion does not capture the strength of feeling that was clearly evident in the participant's comments to the tutor. She made it clear that she wanted to challenge the tutor on the issue. However, there was no sense in the discussion of either one of them taking the view that one was 'right' and the other 'wrong'. There was also no sign of the tutor resorting to a differential power relationship in order to retain his status. Both took time to 'listen' to each other, to re-read the assignment in the light of their new understanding of it, and offer new insight and comment on it. They were engaged in a 'learning relationship'.

I think this extract indicates the possibility for a deep T-P learning relationship online. The tutor's comments on the assignment can be challenged and dissected in an open way by the participant. This is also available to the other participants in the learning set, who can follow the ensuing discussion. This high degree of openness contributes to the participants' growing understanding about their role in the course, and the possibility for them to 'take control' and manage the learning process. Of course different participants engage with the process in different ways, and to varying degrees. But the sharing of power does become something

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

that is real to them all, and not just rhetorical. They can come to see through this process that they do have power in the learning relationship, and that it counts.

P's final comment to the T shows something of her orientation to the process :

'Thanks for your comments 'David' and clearing up the implicit/explicit confusions- there is a lot to think about in words like explicit critique! It was really useful to think about it. I re-read my assignment on the train back to (town) and could see how the critique was more to the fore in some places than others....(snip). It is interesting as the bit I found most difficult (brain wise) to write was the section where I was trying to be more explicit in my critique with reference to theoretical ideas as well as 'how they work in practice'. So looking at your initial comment about it being explicit has really helped me develop my thinking about this in evaluating my own work, and other things I'm evaluating, and of course being clearer about academic concerns.

(snip)...The process - i.e. my difficulty in writing (the) assignment for work and (the) MEd, and your difficulty in commenting on something geared around my practice, has been a total pain but again really useful in terms of taking my thinking further around the distinctions and overlaps around professional and academic awards.

Sooooo.... all in all a really useful learning and assessment process...'

What does this tell me about my practice ? In formal learning situations, knowledge is produced in the context of power (Giroux, 1992). My own thoughts are that while I may strive to engender a 'learning relationship' in my networked learning practice, I am nevertheless constantly engaged in a power relationship. I can only hope to be aware of my practice and its inevitable consequences by

engaging in some form of critical reflection on my pedagogy. Teaching is complex, and our practice is full of contradictions. It is our willingness to look for these contradictions, to be open to them and to engage with our learners about their meaning and impact, that can lead to the development our networked learning practice. Naturally, the goal is not to assume that we can achieve perfection in this respect - each situation and context is different. We can, however, critically re-visit the issues throughout our practice.

Implications

- The architecture of Lotus Notes supports one of the underlying educational purposes of the MEd, which is to offer an opportunity for participants to reflect on their learning as it occurs in the learning sets.

For learners, there are at least two outcomes of reflection :

- the production of new forms of knowledge
- learning to learn

New forms of knowledge :

Of course, within the networked learning sets, we only have a partial 'view' of learning, captured within the online discussions. But this trace is open to analysis by the learner, who is able to view, and re-view the discussion as it unfolds before them. We have evidence that participants do in fact do this, and find it highly beneficial to their understanding of the discussions. This 'written' record also allows them to develop new knowledge about the topic under discussion, as participants point out :

'It gives a written record of knowledge being developed, as well as a final product of the assignment. This makes it easier to refer back to relevant entries and pick up on different points over time'

(Participant)

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

'One of the 'goodness' factors, for me, is that I can read the responses, reflect and respond if I feel that I have something worthwhile to say. I can be a participant or watcher...I can go back to the 'parent previews' to refresh the threads of the conversations and nearly always see something new there, especially if I have been doing some reading in between.'

(Participant)

By being able to access previous entries posted by members of the learning set, the participant is able to develop, through reflection on the discussion, new understanding which can lead to new knowledge. This might be thought of as a form of 'local' knowledge which, at any moment, is implicit within the evolving discussion. It requires the participant to make it explicit by reflecting on it, organising it, deconstructing it and then constructing its 'new' meaning for themselves.

Learning to Learn

This 'referring back' is also, I think, a form of level two learning (Bateson, 1973) ie learning to learn. By taking time to reflect on the discussions, participants are examining what took place at a meta-level. It can perhaps be assumed they are analysing the discussion with a view to trying to learn about their learning. This can lead to a 'change in the process of learning' (Bateson, 1973; p 264), a redirection concerning their understanding of the nature of their own learning.

- the importance and benefit to tutors/teachers of critically examining our own practice
- the benefits of exposing, and working with, power relations in networked learning

The critical pedagogist Henry Giroux speaks of the need to engage in our practice in ways that are open to critical analysis :

'..critical pedagogy suggests inventing a new language for resituating teacher/student relations within pedagogical practices that open up rather than close down the borders of knowledge and learning ... it serves to reinvent the project and possibility of teaching and learning within a context that engages in its own ideological assumptions rather than suppresses them.'

(Giroux, 1992:166)

This small-scale study is one instance of an attempt to open up the borders of knowledge and learning in my own practice. The benefits to us all in engaging in a form a critical analysis of our pedagogy are surely self evident ?

Conclusion

- Several observations can be made from this study of assessment processes in networked collaborative learning:
 - the need to provide supportive learning environments for 'deep' learning to occur
 - the usefulness to learners of reflecting on the online discussions and using them as a learning resource

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

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