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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0968776010090307>

Title	Taking over someone else's design: implications for the tutor's role in networked learning
Authors	Whatley, J, Jones, CR and Asensio, M
Type	Article
URL	This version is available at: http://usir.salford.ac.uk/1214/
Published Date	2001

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Taking over someone else's design: implications for the tutor's role in networked learning

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Abstract

The experience of taking over an already designed Web based course helps us to investigate the claims in the literature about the role that tutors have more generally in networked learning. This paper addresses this issue through a case study and brings together the tutor's experience and her reflective diary as well as the interview data from a JISC/CALT phenomenographic study of tutors' and students' experiences. This particular case study raises issues around the tutors' role, teaching activity, design and the value of content resources and knowledge representation. Finally the paper reflects on the implications for the tutor in this situation and provides suggestions for future practice.

Introduction

This paper reflects on the experience of a particular tutor taking over a specific course. It is an example of a common situation found in Higher Education (HE) institutions when newly appointed or temporary part-time or full-time staff is hired to

teach courses that have been designed and developed by other members of teaching staff. The case study experience of this particular tutor may help us to illuminate the role that tutors have more generally in networked learning environments. For the purpose of clarification, we define networked learning as:

learning in which C&IT is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources

A large part of this particular course was the focus on the connection between learners and the online web learning resources, but there was also a significant element of interaction between learners and tutor and between the learners' themselves occurring online and via face to face events. In this paper we examine the claims in the literature whether the tutor's role in the networked learning environment is qualitatively different to conventional teaching. The paper investigates some current literature in this area and specifically Collins and Berge's (1996) classification of tutor activity. Collins and Berge state four main areas that tutors in networked learning need to pay attention to. These are: pedagogical, social, managerial and technical teaching activities. Our research findings help us to explore those main areas and the implications for the tutor's role when this involves taking over someone else's design of a mainly web based course. As a consequence other issues are raised around the value of content resources and knowledge representation.

Our research is based mainly on both the tutor's experience and the use of a reflective diary and the phenomenographic research in the tradition of Ference Marton (Marton 1994, Marton and Booth 1997). The study was carried out as part of a JISC/CALT Networked Learning Project in HE, UK. The tutor's diary detailed the

tasks that arose, the reaction of the students to the module week by week and the time spent by the tutor on amendments to the module. The diary was a “vehicle for reflection” as suggested by Moon (1999), and was kept for the purpose of evaluating the module prior to redesigning it, as necessary, for the next academic year. This paper uses some edited extracts of the diary and includes a section on the tutor experiences and suggestions for future practice. The JISC/CALT project has been looking at the students’ and tutors’ experiences across different uses of communication and information technologies for networked learning. The collaborative research between the tutor and the researches of the JISC/CALT research project has involved bringing together the tutor’s diary and her general experiences about the course and interviews with both the original designer and the current tutor of the course.

The tutor’s role in networked learning

This section examines the staff role in networked learning as it is portrayed in current literature. In broad outline the role of the educator in networked learning environments has been summarised by the idea that the educator needs to move from 'the sage on the stage to the guide on the side'. The role of the tutor in a networked learning environment tends to be that of a facilitator or moderator. Early accounts of computer conferencing emphasised this shift (see for example Kerr 1986, Feenberg 1989). In more recent years the idea has become part of what has been described as a new paradigm of teaching and learning (Mason and Kaye 1990, Harasim et al 1995, Koschmann 1996, Riegeluth 1999). The new role for the moderator/facilitator:

"...must change from the purveyor of knowledge to instigator, promoter, coach, helper, model and guide of knowledge construction" (Jonassen 1996 p261)

Compared to other media, networked environments are said to emphasise social skills in teaching at the expense of content and personal delivery. Collins and Berge (1996), consolidating a wide range of literature, classify the tutors' role under four headings:

- **Pedagogical** (intellectual; task)

Some of the most important roles of online discussion instructor/moderator/tutor revolves around their duties as an educational facilitator. The instructor contributes their special knowledge and insights and uses questions and probes for student responses that focus discussions on critical concepts, principles and skills. By modelling appropriate online behaviours, the instructor can prepare students, alone or in groups, to experience moderating the conference for themselves.

- **Social**

Creating a friendly, social environment in which learning is promoted is also essential for successful online teaching. This suggests promoting human relationships, affirming and recognising students' input; providing opportunities for students to develop a sense of group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, and in other ways helping members to work together in a mutual cause, are all critical to success of any conferencing activities.

- **Managerial** (organizational; procedural; administrative)

This role involves setting the agenda and pacing for the conference: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making norms. Meta-

comments can be used to remedy problems in context, norms or agenda, clarity, irrelevance and help participants deal with information overload. Unobtrusively managing the flow and direction of the conference discussion without stifling the participants a sine qua non of successful conference facilitation.

- **Technical**

The instructor must first him/herself become comfortable and proficient with the technology and then must ensure that participants are comfortable with the system and the software that the conference is using. The ultimate technical goal for the instructor is to make the technology transparent. When this is done, the learner may concentrate on the academic task at hand.

Introduction to the case study

The case study was a third year course entitled Developing Systems for Teaching and Learning taught in the Information Systems Institute (ISI) at The University of Salford. This module was concerned with exploring the development of information systems for teaching and learning, and it aimed at providing the theoretical underpinning and practical experiences needed for the development of education and training systems. The original designers of the course have written a report about the course (Nicholson and Bird 1998), which outlines their reasons for adopting their particular approach to web based teaching and learning to the course design. They described the course as an answer to growing student numbers. It was also designed to cope with a changing student population that had increasing numbers of non-traditional students (Nicholson and Bird 1998). The web site was intended to provide the main medium for teaching and learning and the face-to-face lectures and seminars were to supplement or complement the main Web based material.

Prior to the case study being undertaken, but after access had been agreed for the researchers to interview the students, both members of staff responsible for the course obtained jobs elsewhere. The new member of staff, who had been appointed on a temporary full-time contract, agreed to allow the JISC/CALT study to continue. This case study has, as a consequence of this change, the added dimension of being taught by a lecturer not responsible for the initial design. The new tutor was also new to the centre and the course subject; she had access to the online material, some other course resources and some of the journal papers written by the previous tutors. However she never had the opportunity to talk to the tutor about the course and the design itself, about his reflections and problems encountered throughout the course. She only had limited support and little time to become familiar with the web site, resources, aims, objectives and assessment procedures for the course.

The module comprised Web-based material covering educational theory and design principles. The Web site contained a freeware conferencing utility, the course administration, syllabus and assignment details, learning resources exercises and virtual spaces for the students to interact with each other and the tutor. There was a space for informal chat and a virtual seminar to discuss the course content. The virtual seminar was structured around the course into themes and one seminar space was set up for teams to give feedback to each other about their project work. The Web site also contained an archive allowing students to look at previous years' design projects.

The course had a team work component that was informed by ideas about co-operative learning. The students' experiences of this were marked by the general context of the degree structure, as the entire degree was built around teamwork. The students had broad experience of working in this way within ISI and also undertook

'commissions' sometimes for outside bodies, in teams composed of first, second and third year students. Thus the students on this third year course were very experienced in team working in a variety of settings with a number of different team members.

Assessment consisted of five different components, the individual element comprised 20% and the teamwork element comprised 80% of the final mark. The project was the major component of the course assessment in which students in teams of five were expected to build a prototype for a Web site on a topic of their choice as a learning and instructional system. Project designs included topics such as astrology for beginners, the basics of guitar playing, how to up grade and maintain a PC, etc. Each team was also expected to describe the design, purpose and intention of their Web site and to provide feedback to the other teams on their project proposals. The marking scheme contained an element of self and peer assessment. Within teams individuals were peer assessed by the members of their own team. Team projects were assessed anonymously by the other teams and the tutor collated these marks which were used to moderate the final mark which was determined by the tutor.

Implications for the networked learning tutor

In the context of this particular course and situation we explore how Collins and Berge's (1996) classification of the different activities that a tutor should take into account, i.e: pedagogical, social, managerial and technical, apply to this tutor's experience.

- **Managerial and Technical issues**

When the tutor described her experience her main focus was on the managerial and technical issues that she had to deal with before the course started. She commented that in the same way that developing an online course requires considerable input 'up front' updating an existing course also requires a great deal of input before the course is used. Compared to a lecture based course, she did not have to write or adapt lecture material, but simply familiarise herself with the published content material. The following text (in Courier new font) is an edited version of the thoughts and reflections on this from the tutor's diary:

The structure of the course in terms of assessment dates, and progress through the material needed to be sorted before going live. Unlike a lecture-based course there is no option to sort out dates and material as the course progressed. This took 16 hours before it started plus the reading to familiarise myself with the course material. This was quite time consuming as I read it online as the students will need to. At the beginning I assumed that I would be able to read up again on each section just before the students were programmed to get there. The 35 hours were on top of the 2 hours allocated each week for lectures, tutorials or seeing students about their work. This time probably represents about the same time as would be spent on a traditional lecture based course, so there was little saving through the module being online. (tutor's diary)

A crucial element that we have identified, as indicated below in the tutor's quotation from the interview, is the fact that time pressure was a main constraint to redesigning

the course content before the course started. This means that the tutor had to take the course content at face value, and try to amend/change it throughout the course.

“So as well as doing two full modules I was then going to do six weeks of this which brought me right up to Easter so the time pressure got worse actually, I wasn’t able to look at the site, spend any time on it basically, I was fire-fighting from then on.”

(tutor’s interview)

If we think of taking over a conventional teaching course, we find that the tutor has more flexibility to change the content of the course before each class, he/she can prepare a new set of slides the night before if he/she wishes to do so. Instead in a Web based course in which all the learning resources are available to the students from day one, the tutor lacks flexibility. Given the time constraints, she had no time to do any major changes to the course content and overall design, apart from updating the sections on course administration. This means that in this case the tutor took over the pedagogical design at face value and hoped to be able to redesign it as the course progressed over the weeks. Interestingly the tutor had also taken over a conventional lecturing course on Systems Design, the comparison of which shed light to the differences in tutor role in this medium. As the tutor said during the interview:

“Um it’s probably easier to pick up a load of acetates and be able to deliver a fifty minute lecture than it is to read through Web materials and think of some tutorial sessions that you should prepare with them....by contrast we have here something that all the course materials was there at the beginning, actually yes the big difference is that I prepared material as I went along for the hour lectures, so at the beginning I’d only done three weeks lecture notes, then I sort of carried on and I was preparing stuff as I went along....it was easier because nothing was set in stone from the beginning” (tutor’s interview)

The *'set in stone'* analogy is revealing here as it points out that taking over the networked learning course implied taking over, at least temporarily, the previous tutor's representation of knowledge and his personal understanding of the students' intended learning experience. Interestingly as the course progressed the tutor became more aware of how the material had been presented and she perceived mismatches between aims, objectives and assessment. This was also exacerbated by the lack of a course design documentation and specification up front. In addition she saw herself having to understand and internalise the content at the same time.

"Not having done the course or knew what it was all about before, I was actually try to read the material online at the same time as trying to update things....But there was no material there that directed you to what was on the site, I had to map it out myself and that's one criticism of the site that I don't think it's very clearly mapped and the students have said that when they've done the personal reflection at the end of the course, that they thought in cases it was very messy and they didn't know where they were. So that's one thing that needs altering." (tutor's interview)

This indicates that because in a Web based course the content is *'set in stone'*, the online tutor has less flexibility, at least at the beginning, to readapt the Web site. Moreover, as the tutor was trying to make sense herself of how the course content had been presented, given the time constrains and other work pressures, this also caused some anxiety. She described the whole experience as feeling *"fire-fighting from then on"* once the courses started, trying to catch up particularly with the redesign of the networked learning course. This emphasises the importance of well structured web page and smooth navigation to both the tutor and the students.

“As a teacher I felt that I was perhaps letting the students down a little bit in that I wasn’t always able to get back to them immediately with an answer to a questions, assignments took me a little bit longer to mark because I was trying to figure out how to mark them, so I do feel I let the students down a little bit in a way erm but at the end of the day most of them appreciated that I was under pressure and taking the course on face value they actually enjoyed what they did in the course, so that negated any criticism of my management of it. So in the end it wasn’t too bad but I feel I could have done it a lot better given a little bit more time” (tutor’s interview)

The light of this experience seems to indicate that because of time pressure, the tutor could only pay attention to two immediate priorities: the managerial and the technical. This is not to say that she did not consider, think or care about the pedagogical and social implications of the course.

- **Pedagogical and Social issues: the importance of face to face tutorials**

Given the time pressures on redesigning the course content and the general Web site, the tutor found that doing regular face to face seminars could compensate for the lack of time that she had to amend the site and resource material in a way that would better represent her educational view of the course and teaching style.

“The only way I could alter anything is to actually put in a tutorial, actually prepare some material that filled in the gaps and presented it at a tutorial session/face to face session as an extra which I did...in terms of the degree qualification you are trying to get the students to think about things, compare, contrast and delve a little deeper into some of the things, where as the material online is a very superficial look at theory, you either take it that it’s there so it must be fact, a bit like reading it from a book

....so the face to face tutorial is the only opportunity to actually discuss any of those, 'now do you think it is right or are there not occasions where this theory might be slightly wrong?' " (tutor's interview)

This raises the issue that the course content and delivery style was very personal and unique to the previous tutor. In other words the Web site and the choice of content represents the tutor's design and representation of knowledge and arguably not that of the student. Conversely we could suggest that in a text based computer conferencing environment, the opportunities for sharing and building on the students' as well as the tutor's previous experiences and knowledge, do not as clearly overemphasise only the tutor's view of the world and representation of knowledge. It appears that in this type of course the role of the tutor is also perceived by the students to be that of the 'subject expert'. Not surprisingly the new tutor found herself in a situation of both trying to comprehend someone else's design rationale and become acquainted with the course content. It appears to us that the face to face tutorials provided the means to bridge the gap of mutual understanding between the interpretation of the tutor of the course content and that of the students. However it is worth noting that a truly online module would pose difficulties in this respect. The ability to generate reflection from students is an important part of learning, which as Gilly Salmon notes (Salmon 2000) is a different tutor role online to that for a face to face environment. A virtual seminar potentially enables this sort of discussion but it requires tutorial facilitation to elicit meaningful reflection.

A true online course would of course have no tutorials, and some students were happy with this arrangement, whereas others liked to have a regular weekly contact time. It would be wrong to present material which those who did not want to come would

miss out on, as attendance was not stipulated on this module, except for certain sessions. (tutor's diary)

Indeed the difficulty was to offer equal access to content material and information on the course to all the students, given that online provision might offer a choice for students. However the majority of students attended the tutorials though these were not explicitly compulsory. Hence our interpretation that the face to face tutorials provided the means to check understanding with the students. They were a way of making sense of the content and the course objectives. We can argue that it also was an opportunity for the students to socialise as a class, to see each other and discuss issues as a whole group. This could have provided the way to include the pedagogical and the social activities. The use of the virtual seminar was so patchy that the tutor found it difficult to check understanding from the postings made. The questions posed to the virtual seminar needed to have clear objectives for them to form the basis of a useful discussion. In addition both the face to face tutorials and the fact that students saw each other regularly for their project work meetings also hindered the students active participation in the virtual seminar.

Tutor's experience and suggestions for future practice

In detailing such an account of progress regularly using a reflective diary it is possible to have a more objective view of the module. It was possible to identify patterns in the need to perform some tasks and to list these tasks in the form of a checklist for completion the next time the module is run. Reflection enabled by keeping the diary also proved invaluable for comparing the work involved in running this online module with that involved in running a traditional lecture-based module.

The problems encountered whilst updating the module were:

- Learning the Web development tool Dreamweaver
- Understanding the rationale for the assessments and the marking schemes
- Finding the individual web pages for alteration
- Planning appropriate topics for tutorials

The tasks needing completing before the module commenced included:

- Altering all references to dates for lectures and tutorials
- Changing module leader contact details
- Clearing out the previous cohort's virtual conference contributions
- Moving the previous cohort's team work to an archive
- Becoming familiar with the learning material

The technical difficulties meant that the tutor was unable to devote as much attention to the pedagogical and social areas of the module. It was found that more than 16 hours were devoted to making technical alterations before the module started, followed by over 35 hours as the module was running. These times were in addition to the allotted tutorial times each week. Ideally the module should be technically complete prior to commencement to enable the tutor to concentrate on pedagogical and social issues as the module is running.

As a result of the tutor's experiences a list of suggestions for designing online courses is presented:

- Keep timetable elements in a limited number of pages, which are documented
- Ensure there is good documentation with answers to exercises and MCQs (Multiple Choice Questions)
- There should be a clear map or outline with navigation between pages
- Ensure discussion topics have clear objectives

- Be rigorous when defining assignment specifications with marking schemes

Discussion and conclusion

If we think of the implications for the tutor's role in this situation, it is important to be aware of time pressure and lack of course design documentation and specification and how this may affect the order of the priorities that we need to pay attention to as tutors. In this particular case the order of activities that the tutor had to take into account - given the time pressures - clearly prioritised the technical and managerial, over the pedagogical and social; which according to Collins and Berge's (1996) classification of tutor activity, are the two first priorities in the networked learning environment.

It appears that the literature on the tutor's role and activities in a networked learning environment refer more widely to CMC (computer mediated communication) however when addressing a web resource based course we have found that other implications for the tutor arise. The study we have made of a Web based course might suggest that the role of the tutor is not only that of the moderator/facilitator/guide, but also that of the subject expert. This is clearly reflected on the content materials and resources developed by the tutor and in turn in the overall design of the course.

This case study illustrates that design encapsulates an individual or individuals' view of knowledge and understanding of the students' learning experience. We have explored elsewhere the practitioners' accounts of design in networked learning and how the design process and outcome is informed by assumptions about the nature of learning and the learning process (Jones and Asensio 2000). This case study brings about an added understanding of design itself. Taking over someone else's design

implies taking over someone else's representation of knowledge, this is exemplified here by the tutor's experience on having to familiarise herself with the course design and content.

In this situation it also appears that the face to face tutorials were a way to embed the pedagogical and the social. Interestingly the students in the course did not report to have been directly affected by the tutor being new to the course and found the tutorials useful. This supports the belief that the value was not the content alone, but how it was managed by the tutor and used by the students. This raises the issue whether the added value of the course is not the stated content in itself (which is only a partial and personal representation) but the input of the teacher that is taking over the course and the student's approach to the course material. Clearly face to face tutorials are not always possible in the networked learning environment and the increasing demand to provide flexible and open access to a global student market may hinder face to face contact. The danger is that increasing number of tutors in HE may be in a similar situation in the future, and that time constraints may adversely affect the more pedagogical and social aspects of the teaching activity.

Acknowledgement

This work was part-funded by a grant from the Committee on Awareness, Liaison and Training of JISC (the Joint Information Systems Committee of the UK higher education funding councils). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of JISC or CALT. Further information about the project can be obtained from the project's Web site (<http://csalt.lancs.ac.uk/jisc/>). We would like to thank the previous tutor in the course and all those students that took part in the interviews. We would like to acknowledge the contributions of other members of the project team: Peter Goodyear, Vivien Hodgson, Christine Steeples, Susan Armitage, Mark Bryson,

Michael O'Donoghue and David Hutchison. Finally we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and to Clive Young for their helpful comments.

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