

INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN PARTNERSHIPS ACROSS UNIVERSITIES: MOTIVATIONS, METHODS AND MEASURES

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Abstract

This paper explores and documents a learning partnership that has developed between two instructional designers employed at two different universities in Perth, Western Australia. The value of this crossinstitutional partnership is initially investigated in terms of the benefits involved for the professional careers of each instructional designer. The context of the university faculty in which the instructional designers operate is appraised. Also, the wider consequences of this partnership are considered in terms of the influence it has on other Australian tertiary education providers. The analysis of the partnership will be built upon an appropriate constructivist theoretical framework.

The instructional designers involved have different yet overlapping research interests. The first author is employed in a faculty school which prepares and delivers university courses for Indigenous adult learners. Her key research interests include online course development, online assessment and staff support for online course development and teaching. She is currently studying a Doctor of Philosophy degree, specialising in multimedia technologies. The second author works within the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry and is principally concerned with assessment of the students in this area. Her main research interests include online assessment, and innovations in medical education, particularly using online courses. She is studying her Doctorate

of Education in instructional design with a focus on online assessment.

Four case studies that illustrate the outcomes of this learning partnership are investigated. The first case is related to the two instructional designers' interest in assessment, specifically in the area of online assessment. In 2000 we devised a set of ten criteria used to evaluate and guide the construction of online assessment tasks. This development process was primarily driven by our belief in the value of including both qualitative and quantitative features in online assessment tasks. This set of criteria has been utilised in both of our university environments and has recently been further modified after a trial period. The second case study involves a project motivated by our identification of a need for tertiary students to improve their online communication skills. We worked together to complete a needs analysis of the situation which was followed up with the design and production of an online module or website. The third case that demonstrates the value of this learning partnership involves the authoring and production of a series of booklets that provide advice to academic staff to enhance their teaching. In this case, the partnership extended to include two additional instructional designers. Lastly, our contribution to our local instructional design interest group (IDIG) is described. The members of this group deliver presentations on various instructional design related issues at higher education campuses throughout Western Australia. Our contribution to this partnership included the facilitation of activities and discussion on the issue of appropriate instructional design paradigms. Although based locally, the group extends membership to instructional designers in other Australian states, a practice which enriches the experience and interest base of the group. In each of these cases, the paper examines this cross-institutional partnership in terms of its initial motivation, the method adopted and the measures adopted to evaluate the partnership's outcomes.

The main issues and overall outcomes of this learning partnership fall into three main categories, at a personal level, as well as intra-university faculty outcomes and inter-university outcomes at local and national levels. As members of this partnership, we recognised that we have gained a range of advantages in terms of intentional learning outcomes which have been quite specific. Additionally, we have both encountered much incidental learning in a more peripheral manner, such as our growing awareness of the various policies relating to online education adopted and followed by our two universities. At a Faculty level, our respective universities have benefited from our partnership which has resulted in the development of specific printed and online resources, staff and curriculum development, and useful research outcomes. For example, a series of booklets have been published on such topics as assessment, learning activities and discussion boards to provide academic staff with advice on how to enhance their oncampus and online teaching strategies. At a wider level, the outcomes of this learning partnership have extended to other universities and to statewide and nationwide networks of instructional designers through the exchange of ideas, supply of research data and sharing of models.

In conclusion, this learning partnership is beneficial in terms of intended and non-intended outcomes. It has enabled us to learn from each other, our students, our colleagues, the courses in which we are enrolled and our different institutions. We realise that many future opportunities exist for this partnership to continue in areas such as research grant applications, authoring of conference papers and a sustained support network for instructional designers within Western Australia and across other states and territories.

Introduction

This paper explores a learning partnership that we have developed as two instructional designers

employed at two different universities in Perth, Western Australia. Our partnership is documented primarily for the purposes of analysis and description. As Baldwin and Austin (cited in Clark & Watson, 1998, p. 63) acknowledge, academic collaboration is a topic which has existed for a long time but one which not yet been extensively researched. Being crossinstitutional in nature, our partnership is initially investigated in terms of the benefits involved for our professional careers as two individual instructional designers. Next, the context of the university faculty in which we operate is appraised. Lastly, the consequences of our partnership are considered in terms of the wider influence it has had on other Australian tertiary education providers.

The analysis of the partnership is built upon an appropriate constructivist theoretical framework. The perspective of both of us as instructional designers is acknowledged in terms of our own educational beliefs and the varied pedagogies represented by the university faculties in which we operate. Outcomes and processes associated with this unique partnership represent social constructivism (Vygotsky, cited in Tam, 2000) at work in that both of our knowledge bases as instructional designers have been challenged, changed and shared throughout the development of our partnership. Our own academic progress has developed within the confines of this partnership through “cooperative analysis, interaction, collaboration and communication with others” (Thompson, 2000, p. 97).

In the case studies presented in this paper, our work as instructional designers has fortunately been situated within the context for which the projects were intended to be used (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Additional case studies described in this paper demonstrate some central tenets of constructivism in that the outcome of each case study is a product that represents a personal construction of knowledge which also recognised the prior learning of each participant. Each of

the instructional designers within this partnership have clearly been the active drivers of their own learning processes:

... a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world (Rathborne, in Candy, 1991, p. 271).

Furthermore, through our awareness of our own and each other's metacognitive strengths, the processes associated with project and time management have often been adopted in this partnership, increasing the skills of each of us. Such metacognition "means that we reflect, critically and realistically, on what we are doing; it helps us cope with new and complex situations of all kinds" (Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 317).

The partnership

As instructional designers we have different yet overlapping research interests. Maria is employed in a faculty school which prepares and delivers university courses for Indigenous adult learners. Her key research interests include online unit and course development, online assessment and the supplementary staff support for online unit development and teaching. She has recently completed a Master of Education degree, specialising in multimedia technologies, and is currently studying a Doctor of Philosophy in online learning. Amanda works within the Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry and is principally concerned with assessment of the students in this area. Her main research interests include online assessment, with a focus on assessment tasks which contains both qualitative and quantitative elements. She is also involved and interested in various innovations in medical education, particularly using online courses and learning portfolios. She is studying her Doctorate of Education in instructional design with a focus on

online assessment.

The learning partnership which has developed between us arose from an initial shared concern about the quality of education, teaching and learning within the popular online environment, especially those issues directly relating to assessment strategies and learning tasks. As instructional designers, both of us have witnessed a range of both successful and less than ideal examples of such practices. By sorting through what was ideal, what wasn't, and which practices reflected our own pedagogical beliefs, many useful projects, resources and research foci have resulted.

By using effective communication techniques in both face-to-face and online contexts, we utilised the benefits of “collaborative learning and discursive interaction with peers ... in a variety of communicative settings” (Thorpe, 1998, p. 265). We have effectively used online communication technologies to extend our partnership, recognising that “the new technology offers unique prospects for promoting reflective and collaborative learning” (Taylor & Maor, 2000, p. 1). In fact, we have been able to act as collaborators and co-mentors for each other (Jipson & Paley, 2000).

Examples of this learning partnership

Four case studies which illustrate the outcomes of this learning partnership are investigated below. Each case study is presented in terms of the initial context in which the project developed, the skills and knowledge contributed by each of us as instructional designers and the final combined outcome of each case. When examined from a broad perspective, the common element in all four of these case studies appear to be directly related to the success and completion rates of

each. Objectives were met, resources have been produced and professional needs were met for both of us as individual instructional designers and the faculties in which we are based. When analysed at a deeper level, the success and effectiveness of each case study rests on the value of the collaboration that exists within our learning partnership, in particular our ability to contribute our own unique skills and expertise to varied projects in an efficient, ethical and cooperative manner. Since “much knowledge is embedded in the everyday practice of professional people” (Savage, 2000, p. 143), our collective resources have been utilised in a way in which we can both benefit from “the increased amount of learning that takes place in a collaborative relationship” (Clark & Watson, 1998, p. 63).

Example 1: Research in assessment

The first case is related to our common interest in assessment, specifically in the area of online assessment. Our experience as students within a range of tertiary education institutions combined with our employment backgrounds in the same field has enabled us to develop a comprehensive understanding of assessment practices in Australian universities. The centrality of assessment in tertiary learning was echoed by Ramsden’s recognition that “assessment always defines the actual curriculum” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 187).

Last year, we devised a set of ten criteria used to evaluate and guide the construction of online assessment tasks (Kendle & Northcote, 2000b). This task was initiated by an apparent lack of such criteria specifically for the online environment. We also recognised the current pressure on university educators to design effective assessment strategies within tight timeframes, strategies which are not “reduced to devising the most efficient strategy to allocate accurate grades to students” (Donnan, 1996, p. 1). Indeed, it is recognised that although much is known about

student learning through assessment and learning tasks in general, our knowledge as educators about online learning and assessment is still developing (Zariski & Styles, 2000).

This development of the ten criteria to evaluate and guide the creation of online assessment tasks was primarily driven by our belief in the value of including both qualitative and quantitative features in online assessment tasks. Instead of continuing the tendency within current practice of using more and more online assessment practices which are driven by objectivity and efficiency, a trend recognised by Pritchett and Zakrzewski (1996), we intended to develop a tool which rebalanced this current situation. This set of criteria has been utilised in both of our university environments and has recently been further modified after a trial period. Following our trial, we identified that our original set of criteria did have some bias towards using qualitative tasks, as we felt strongly about the bias in practice towards the other style, of quantitative tasks. Following feedback and further research we were able to modify our criteria to enable them to better evaluate an effective balance of both quantitative and qualitative methods of online assessment (Kendle & Northcote, 2001).

Example 2: Online communication skills site

The second case study involves a project motivated by our identification of a need for tertiary students to improve their online communication skills. Since student success rates in online courses are quite dependent on how comfortably the students operate and communicate within an online environment, the development of online communication skills can influence both retention and success rates:

... the ability to be 'literate' in using information and technology is fundamental.

Information and technology literacy are part of the key generic competencies for the

VET sector and are just as important as attributes for university graduates (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1997, p. 80).

We worked together to complete a needs analysis of the situation which was followed up with the design and production of an online module in the form of a self-instructive website. This website includes a collection of facts, examples, activities and instructions about how to use online communication techniques, specifically those involved with sending and receiving emails, contributing to online bulletin boards, chatting online and using online forms. The website itself is a representation of our pooled resources and skills. To develop the site, we used our combined instructional design backgrounds, our knowledge of online students' needs, our personal experience of being online students, and our developing skills in computer programming and graphic design.

Figure 1. Home screen of website, Communication Skills for Online Students

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~akendle/csindex.htm>

Example 3: Booklets

The third case which demonstrates the value of our learning partnership involves the authoring and production of a series of booklets. These guide booklets provide advice to academic staff to primarily enhance their teaching and, subsequently, their students' learning. The design and creation of this booklet series represents a response to a perceived need that was identified across a number of tertiary institutions. The four authors of the booklets collectively acknowledged that many university educators were keen to update and maintain their professional knowledge and

teaching skill base, especially in relation to topics such as using online discussion boards, creating meaningful learning activities, managing copyright issues and structuring student workloads. In this case, our partnership extended to include two additional instructional designers from varied backgrounds. This broader team project resulted in a wider use of the booklets across varied faculties and disciplines. To date, the booklets have been widely used by academic staff in two of Perth's universities.

Figure 2. Examples of three booklets created by a team of instructional designers

Example 4: IDIG

Our final partnership case study represents our contribution to our local professional organisation for instructional and educational designers, the Instructional Design Interest Group (IDIG). The members of this group regularly deliver presentations on various instructional design related issues at higher education campuses throughout Western Australia. Although based locally, the group extends membership to instructional designers in other Australian states, a practice which enriches the experience and interest base of the group. Members of the group are able to share their expertise and develop new skills in an environment friendly, collegial environment.

In addition to regular participation in the seminars and other activities of this group, we jointly conducted a workshop based on the definition of instructional design, the role of an instructional designer, and the question of a paradigm shift towards constructivism. The presentation incorporated the facilitation of activities, examination of current resources, analysis of role titles for instructional designers and subsequent discussion of the issue.

One aspect of the presentation which was particularly effective involved an activity in which each participant was encouraged to choose a paradigm which was meaningful to them. Participants were then asked to position their pedagogical stance on a continuum in three ways – their ideal paradigm, their paradigm in practice and that which was seen to be applied by a majority of teaching staff in their current institution. The results of this activity are represented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Results of paradigm positions by IDIG members

Throughout this presentation and subsequent discussion, our partnership instigated both the topic choice and the outcomes of this workshop. Our common interest in and knowledge of issues was reflected in the content and presentation method used in the workshop. Issues ranging from constructivism, learning psychology, online assessment and learning strategies, and situated cognition were included in the discussion, presentation and tasks which made up the workshop session. Lastly, the manner in which each participant was encouraged to identify their own status on the paradigm continuum illustrates an example where our learning partnership allowed us as individual academics to develop. It also allowed others in our field an opportunity to place their own pedagogical beliefs within a public context.

Outcomes

In each of these cases, this paper has examined our cross-institutional partnership in terms of its initial motivation, the methods adopted and the measures adopted to evaluate the partnership's outcomes. Essentially, the partnership has allowed "a creative, democratic space for the formation

of insights and understandings that help us search for and choose ourselves in the situation” (Jipson & Paley, 2000. p. 37). The main issues and overall outcomes of this learning partnership appear to fall into three main categories, including the personal outcomes for the instructional designers involved, intra-university faculty outcomes at a local level and inter-university outcomes at a national level.

It is unlikely that we would have conducted such research as sole-operating instructional designers within our respective institutions. As early-career academics, negotiating the “rules” of academic research is daunting and other researchers have noted that “collaborative research [is] as an important way of getting started, with most members researching as part of a pair” (Grbich, 1999). By combining our relative expertise, experience and interests, we have been able to negotiate the scaffolding of academia through a series of successful outcome-oriented research projects. As members of this partnership, we recognise that we have gained a range of advantages in terms of intentional learning outcomes which have been quite specific. For example, we have both increased our knowledge and use of online assessment software. Additionally, we have both encountered much incidental learning in a more peripheral manner, such as our growing awareness of the various policies relating to online education adopted and followed by our two universities.

At a Faculty level, our respective universities have benefited from our partnership which has resulted in the development of specific printed and online resources, staff and curriculum development, and useful research outcomes. For example, the series of booklets that have been published on such topics as assessment, learning activities and discussion boards provide academic staff with advice on how to enhance their oncampus and online teaching strategies.

Such resource development is costly and time consuming when completed in isolated contexts (Thompson, 2000).

At a wider level, the outcomes of this learning partnership have extended to other universities and to statewide and nationwide networks of instructional designers through the exchange of ideas, supply of research data and sharing of models. Our learning partnership has enabled us to define our relative research interests which has provided clear direction for our respective doctoral studies and employment pursuits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this learning partnership is beneficial in terms of intended and non-intended outcomes. It has enabled us to learn from each other, our students, our colleagues, the courses in which we are currently enrolled, those where we have been enrolled in the past and our current different places of employment. Just as Clark and Watson (1998) found, the benefits of academic collaboration can be measured not just in terms of output and institutional advantages but also in the positive personal outcomes for those individuals involved. We realise that many future opportunities exist for our partnership to continue in areas such as research grant applications, authoring of conference papers and a sustained support network for instructional designers within Western Australia and across other states and territories.

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