

0447

Informal Learning within Virtual Social Learning Systems

Andy Smith

Blackpool & The Fylde College, Blackpool, United Kingdom

Background

If upwards of 70% of learning is informal (Kim et al. 2004) and Web 2.0 social software will have a 'profound impact on the future of education' (Mason & Rennie 2008, p.177), then there is clearly a need for greater understanding of how one occurs within the other. This research aims to identify incidents of informal learning within virtual social learning systems (VSLS), it investigates flashpoints for incidents of informal learning and considers strategies to encourage and scaffold such incidents.

Research Questions

This research aims to identify incidents of informal learning within virtual social learning systems (VSLS), it investigates flashpoints for incidents of informal learning and considers strategies to encourage and scaffold such incidents.

Three VSLS, all based on the ELGG social networking platform, were the environments within which discourse was examined. These consisted of one specifically designed for the teaching of a Foundation Degree in Project Management and used by the 105 students on the course, another designed for the 425 National Diploma Automotive students to build their electronic portfolios. The third was created as a student-run forum for 51 students studying on courses ranging from a Foundation Degree in Interactive Media Development, a Foundation Degree Games Design & Development and a BSc (Hons) Interactive Design.

Methods

Stern and Sommerlad (1999) argued that learning occurs on a continuum with informal learning as learning that comes closer to the informal end compared to the formal end of the continuum. Informal learning can be considered to include implicit, opportunistic and unstructured learning and the absence of a teacher (Eraut 2005). Trinder and colleagues (2008) also argued that it arises from daily, social life activities related to education, work, socialising with others or pursuit of leisure activities and hobbies. They proposed that informal learning may be intentional or non-intentional (incidental) from the learner's perspective.

Participants totalled 681 ranging in age between 16 and 48 years ($M=18.55$, $SD=2.72$). Postings to the on-line VSLS over a four month period were collated. Categories through which to carry out discourse analysis were constructed based on the SQUAD theoretical framework (Oriogun 2003) which is made up of Suggestion, Question, Unclassified, Answer, and Delivery with adjustments made to the cognitive indicators, participation indicators and interaction indicators based on Eraut's 2005 version of his typology of informal learning. Two researchers have been categorizing the postings.

Frame

Using the SQUAD theoretical framework (Oriogun 2003) and Eraut's 2005 version of his typology of Informal Learning, categories for analysis were constructed for discourse analysis to be applied to the on-line postings within the three VSLS.

Research findings

Results appear to show that requests for help (a subcategory of Question) are the predominate flash points for informal learning and that evidence of such learning extends to many individuals beyond the request originator and immediate respondents in an initial discourse. Question and Suggestion appear to elicit the most sustained discourse of high cognitive value with several strong examples appearing.

By understanding how flashpoints for informal learning occur, we can begin to design virtual social learning systems with inbuilt facilities for linking help request originators with possible respondents with suitable knowledge profiles (by means of meta-tagging).