

Understanding and enhancing the student's learning experience in art and design using an on-line storytelling virtual learning environment

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The e-learning revolution heralded a new paradigm for learning, but its legacy has been a plethora of VLEs often designed with little regard to pedagogy. However, by applying a Constructivist approach to on-line learning we can move away from tools that merely deliver content and instruction, towards tools which support the student organising and interpreting knowledge. The paper describes 'StoriesAbout... Assessment', an attempt to design a real 'virtual' learning environment to enable students to reflect on their experiences of assessment in art and design. Through the collaborative and reflective storytelling process students tell their stories, explore these experiences with their peers and learn by sharing these experiences. With the increasing requirement for students to gain PDP skills, learning environments such as this could provide a new approach for fostering reflective skills. We discuss students' experiences of using 'StoriesAbout... Assessment' and how their stories can give us insight into their learning experience.

Introduction

Many Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) adequately support the needs of course administration, but it can be difficult to uncover the underpinning pedagogy and see where teaching or learning fits in. The introduction of Personal Development Planning (PDP) following the Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) has also resulted in a rise in on-line environments. However, on-line PDP tools are lacking in their consideration of the experiential nature of learning in art and design and a more discursive approach may be better suited to practice-based disciplines (Malins & McKillop, 2005). This paper investigates an attempt to design a real virtual learning environment using a Constructivist approach to support learning in the reflective, practice-based pedagogy of art and design. In this environment, 'StoriesAbout... Assessment', the content consists solely of the students' reflective stories of their assessment experiences and the responses of other students from a variety of perspectives.

'StoriesAbout... Assessment' pedagogy

A Constructivist pedagogy values the exploration and construction of individual interpretations of reality through sharing and discussing ideas with others (Bruner, 1986). The focus of art and design education is less about facts and more narrative and reflective in nature. A key part of this is the 'crit' where students reflect with their tutors and peers on the nature of the produced artefact: essentially telling stories centred around the artefact (Oak, 2004). Artefacts also afford storytelling as people will naturally construct stories in an attempt to make sense of their interactions and experiences with the artefact (Schirato & Webb, 2004).

Storytelling is a ideal Constructivist tool and the use of storytelling as a reflective tool is increasingly being used in higher education (McDrury & Alterio, 2003), including design education (McDonnell, Lloyd, & Valkenburg, 2004). Telling stories requires students to actively construct a story from a particular point of view, for a particular audience so that they can understand their story.

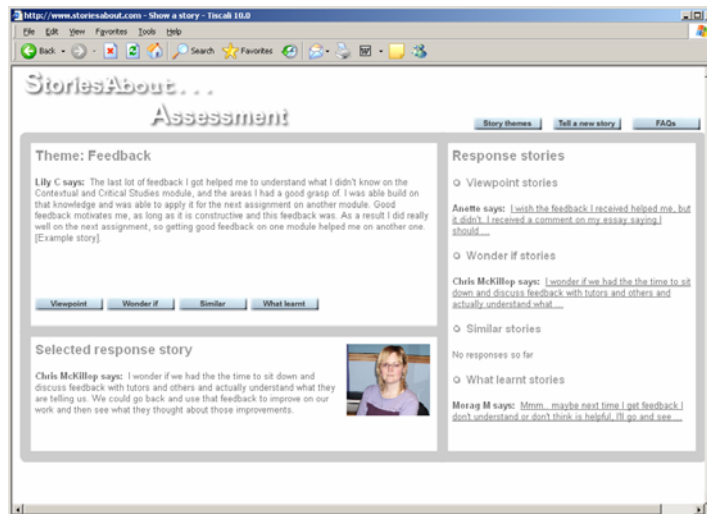
Assessment is at the heart of learning and the nature of assessment in art and design means there is often no right or wrong answer, which opens up opportunities for discussions. There is

often an assumption that only tutors have the skills to make judgements on student's work (Jackson, 1995), however, the future learning society calls for lifelong learners who are skilled in assessing their own abilities.

'StoriesAbout... Assessment'

This research has focussed on designing an environment where the only content is the reflective stories of students and their insights into other students' stories using a supported discussion based on a model of storytelling (McDrury & Alterio, 2003). This reflective process sits naturally with the critically reflective practitioner model employed in art and design (Schön, 1983).

The storytelling model enables an initial story to be told and then guides students to respond in one of 4 structured ways: exploring other viewpoints, considering different outcomes, describing what they have learnt, or telling a similar story. Students can tell stories grouped around a number of themes, e.g. self or peer assessment, feedback, creativity, and so on. Figure 1 shows an example screen snapshot where an initial story is shown in the upper left pane with the summary list of response stories on the right. The selected response story is shown in the lower left pane. Images or files can be uploaded to illustrate a story.



1. Example screen snapshot

By using this environment, students are engaged in a collaborative and reflective storytelling process enabling them to learn by sharing, exploring and understanding their experiences of assessment. Using an on-line environment enhances this process since stories can be told and responded to at any time, allowing students to stand back from the experience and reflect upon it. This also enables students from differing institutions to share their experiences with each other.

Students' experiences

Student's stories were initially predominantly negative, indicating a frustration over their lack of control of events which made learning more difficult. Stories highlighted a discrepancy between students' expectations about what they thought was being assessed and what was actually assessed. This negative connotation is backed up by a parallel study looking at students' visual representations of assessment where, for example, students are representing their experiences as: like a rat in a maze; pin the tail on the donkey; and as a journey up an almost endless flight of stairs with hurdles across.

However, we can learn from sharing negative experiences through exploring other outcomes and gaining insight from others, so this environment can provide students with a forum for peer support. To encourage positive stories, a range of specific themes were introduced which is resulting in a wider balance of stories, for example, about how effective peer support is.

There can be a natural reluctance of people to tell stories and students were worried about what their fellow students would think of their story. Initially only a small number of students participated (around 20), however, the environment is now available for anyone to share their stories. Widening access may make contributions more 'anonymous' if there are greater numbers of stories being told. There is also a staff version to look at assessment from the staff perspective and it will be interesting to compare staff and students' perceptions.

Some areas of art and design extensively use computers and other do not, so students may have a wide range of computer skills. To address this, the environment has a simple design which students have found easy to use.

Conclusions and future work

This research has just begun to uncover how students' really feel about assessment in art and design, and shown that it is possible to use the stories of students to understand their experiences. Stories can help bring out the subjective side of an experience and enable that experience to be shared in a meaningful way with others, enabling an effective Constructivist approach to learning. This research will now widen participation to anyone who feels they have a story to tell or would like to read and respond to others' stories. The environment can be accessed at: www.storiesabout.com.

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