

EDITORIAL

Tools for negotiating meaning

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A range of tools for the job

In this issue of *ALT-J* we have seven articles that explore how we as learning technologists can use a variety of tools to explore, evaluate, develop and understand our practice and experience. These tools include concepts, theories, symbols and metaphors and are used to:

- Inform choices about ICT use.
- Frame the evaluation of learning technologies.
- Analyse and evaluate the student experience of online learning.
- Represent successful implementation of learning technologies.
- Describe and understand networked learning.

Concepts as tools to inform choices about ICT use

In ‘What are the affordances of information and communication technologies?’ Conole and Dyke explore the application of Gibson’s (1979) concept of affordances to ICT. They argue that by making the affordances of learning technologies explicit in the form of a taxonomy it will be possible for practitioners to make more informed choices about the ways in which different technologies can be used.

Theories as tools to frame the evaluation of learning technologies

In ‘Evaluating a Virtual Learning Environment in the context of its Community of Practice’, Ellaway *et al.* employ Wenger’s (1998) theory of ‘communities of practice’

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to provide a formal structure for articulating the affordances of VLES and looking at how a VLE is supporting a course community.

Theories as tools to analyse and evaluate the student experience of online learning

In ‘Course developers as students: a designer perspective of the experience of learning online’, McAlpine *et al.* present the results of a study that aimed to gather data that reflected the experiences of the authors and close colleagues in relation to being a student on a course conducted entirely online. McAlpine *et al.* use the constructive approach to course delivery as a tool to interpret and analyse the ‘designer as student’ experience and perspective.

In ‘Transactional distance in a blended learning environment’, Dron *et al.* present a case study that describes and discusses the problems encountered during the implementation of a blended learning course, the design of which was based largely on Moore’s theory of transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Dron *et al.* then use Moore’s theory, which focuses on the relationship between structure and dialogue, as a tool to understand the successes and failures of the course.

Symbols as tools for representing successful implementation of learning technologies

In ‘Implementing a learning technology strategy: top-down strategy meets bottom-up culture’, Lisewski presents a case study which explores why the University of Salford has adopted a Learning Technologies Strategy (LTS) and examines the factors which are likely to lead to its successful implementation. Part of this exploration focuses on the explicit reference within the LTS to establishing a ‘web presence’ via a Virtual Learning Environment. Lisewski explores how ‘web presence’ might be used to symbolize successful implementation of the LTS and argues that:

The term ‘web presence’ is the symbolic cultural mediator between the strategic goals of the LTS and how these are translated into effective learning and teaching practice on the ground. On the one hand, it seemingly offers flexibility and room for interpretation within different cultural contexts but on the other may produce fear, anxiety and increased pressure on academic staff

Metaphors as tools for describing and understanding networked learning

In ‘Networks and learning: communities, practices and the metaphor of networks: a commentary’ and ‘Networks and learning: communities, practices and the metaphor of networks: a response’, Ingraham and Jones debate the usefulness of the network metaphor in developing our understanding of online (networked) learning. Part of this debate focuses on the extent to which the metaphor over-simplifies or complicates the issues.

New tools for the job?

The use of concepts, theories, symbols and metaphors to explore learning technology practice is not new. What does change however, are the particular concepts, theories, symbols and metaphors we choose to use in this exploration. This can be illustrated by considering the trends of theory use in learning technology. Five or more years ago, when collaboration, interaction, communication, discussion and dialogue were of major interest to practitioners and researchers, particular theories were predominantly used as tools to explore how to promote these activities (e.g. Laurillard, 1993). In more current times, the issue of 'community' is of particular interest and Wenger's (1998) 'Communities of Practice' theory is a popular tool for exploring current issues and concerns. For example, in a review of accessibility literature, Seale (2004) identifies key issues that may influence the 'accessibility' practices of learning technologists and interprets these issues using Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice.

The popularity of Wenger's theory as a tool for exploring practice is reflected in the articles presented in this issue of *ALT-J*. Four of the seven articles make reference to Wenger (Conole & Dyke; Ellaway *et al.*; Dron *et al.*; Jones). Although Wenger's theory was based on observations of claims processors in a US insurance company, it is perceived by many to have relevance, resonance and application to learning technology. This is largely because the primary focus of his theory is on learning as social participation, which resonates with learning technologists' interests in collaboration and dialogue. For example, in this issue Ellaway *et al.* provide a rationale for why Wengers' theory is relevant to the design of online learning environments:

Wenger's theories can be particularly relevant in modelling learning environments where they encompass a pre-existing learning community of students, teachers/tutors, support staff and potentially many other roles and groups. Furthermore, any participant may adopt or change roles; students may be involved in teaching each other, teachers may become learners, support and administration responsibilities may fall to different participants at different times and so on. All of this activity is in turn informed by socio-cultural norms and values inherent in the practice and the related social contexts in which it is situated. If this is the case then such a course may be modelled as a community of practice, and indeed, its component parts (such as modules of study or groupings such as 'students') may themselves constitute subsidiary communities of practice.

Useful tools for the job?

Whilst learning technologists are comfortable using concepts, theories, symbols and metaphors as tools to explore, evaluate, develop and understand their practice and experience; there is a danger that the usefulness of these tools will not be routinely critiqued. For example, 'Communities of Practice' has become so ubiquitous as a conceptual tool that few people are questioning its usefulness. There are, however, some researchers who have identified some limitations of the theory. For example, in exploring the development of accessible e-learning materials, Seale (2003) acknowledges that Wenger's theory does not help to understand the more 'political' aspects of accessibility and disability rights. Therefore, if the tools we use are not regularly

critiqued and questioned, they may stifle rather than develop our understanding and thinking.

In discussing the metaphor of technology as a tool, Nardi and O'Day (1999: 25) note:

But it is important to recognize that all metaphors channel and limit our thinking, as well as bring in useful associations from other contexts. That is the purpose of a metaphor, after all—to steer is to think about the topic this way rather than some other way.

This is highlighted by Cousin (2002), who argues that the metaphor of the 'virtual classroom' has been used to encourage learning technologists to replicate old, traditional and conservative teaching practices rather than develop newer, more imaginative ones. She illustrates this with a discussion of the WebCT and Blackboard Virtual Learning Environments.

In this issue, the articles by Ingraham and Jones acknowledge the potential pitfall of using the network metaphor to steer thinking in a particular direction. Ingraham picks up on Jones' acknowledgement that the network metaphor can be value laden, which may serve to limit its usefulness in terms of expanding our understanding. If networks are understood as a set of nodes, then Ingraham is concerned that we will be directed to only view a network in flat and two-dimensional terms, while Jones proposes further exploration of both the network and community metaphor:

A specific grounded piece of research flowing from the network metaphor would be to explore empirically the relations found in technologically assisted learning. The aim of such an exploration would be not to impose either the network or community metaphor, but to provide descriptive accounts of the kinds of relationships that are found in such settings and see in what ways if any either metaphor illuminated such descriptions.

The right tools for the job?

In their discussion of metaphors, Nardi and O'Day (1999:27) emphasize the importance of choosing the right tool for the job:

Using the tool metaphor to describe technology suggests several tactics to users. Before starting work, it is important to choose the right tool for the job. There is a matching process in looking at the task in hand and deciding on the best tool for that task.

The challenge for the readers of this issue of *ALT-J* will be to assess whether the authors of the papers have chosen the right tools for the jobs they have set themselves. For example:

- Will Conole and Dyke's proposed taxonomy of affordances enable practitioners to make more informed choices about the ways in which different technologies can be used? Will it be flexible enough to incorporate or allow for 'extra', unanticipated affordances that may emerge during the use of ICT's?
- In using the constructivist framework to analyse and interpret student experiences have McAlpine *et al.* missed any significant points or issues? Would different, but equally plausible interpretations emerge if a different framework was used?

- In using Moore's theory of transactional distance have Dron *et al.* managed to completely understand why their course has not produced the anticipated outcomes? Would different, but equally plausible interpretations emerge if a different theory were used?

In evaluating whether the right tools for the job have been chosen, we will need to consider the context in which they are being used. As Ellaway *et al.*, in this issue, note:

The approach presented here is one that is grounded in theory, is based around a holistic view of course-VLE instances and has provided significant utility to the authors in the evaluation of their own work. ... the level to which other users may find utility in this work may depend on the degree of agreement and alignment in approach and philosophy with that of the authors, and the contexts they are working in.

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