Mapping the terrain of role based learning: Building on lessons learnt from collaborative learning research

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This poster updates the lessons from a collaborative learning about how the process of mapping similar teaching cases can help define the terrain and share good-practice to encourage uptake. The context mapping process gives an understanding of how we might consider all the role based learning task designs in a way that is not dependent on the particular definition such as role-play or case-study but rather focuses on a process that considers the context of the academic and finding similar good practice to be able to work with them effectively. The author worked collaboratively with the Project EnRoLE team to map a repository of cases in ways that were helpful for the team's understanding of the factors that are key to useful definitions of role-based learning. It is hoped the exercise will influence and clarify strategies for disseminating the project and the cases in ways that encourage re-usability of the learning designs for role-based learning experiences.

Keywords: role-based learning, collaborative learning, context mapping, academic staff development, re-usable learning designs

Background

In 2003 a project on collaborative learning was undertaken at the University of Wollongong with Mr Marius Foley in the Faculty of Creative Arts. The aim of the university funded teaching innovation and research project was to look at how we could improve the group work processes, tasks, assessment and therefore learning outcomes for Design classes in the Faculty of Creative Arts. These classes simulated a 'real' design studio by giving the students an opportunity to work in teams which allocate tasks based on clearly-defined roles such as 'graphic designer', 'art director', 'web-developer' and 'project manager'. Online communication tools and web-areas were starting to be used to facilitate sharing of design ideas and feedback within the project groups (Lambert and Foley, 2003b).

Collaborative learning definition and scope

The project distinguished between different types of group-work that were present at the University, and defined these broadly as:

1. collaborative knowledge construction and
2. collaborative groupwork.

Collaborative knowledge construction focussed on groups who would discuss learning materials with a view to building their own understanding of the topic. It covered informal tutorial discussions common to the arts and social sciences, right up to highly structured and assessed group tasks such as reviewing and peer reviewing weekly readings. At the end of the day, in this model knowledge constructed collaboratively leads to assessment tasks undertaken individually such as essays and reports.

On the other hand, collaborative groupwork leads to the development and submission of a single group-developed assignment. A sub-set of this model is the kind of groupwork which allocates task/workload based on defined roles.

The final project report highlighted and justified the terms and definitions based in the literature but refined by the project (Lambert & Foley, 2003a). These definitions came out of a process of writing up group-work cases and developing visual representations which clustered similar cases together on a context map. This research method common in the Business and Commerce disciplines is useful in defining the scope of projects, and communicating with others regarding what is in and out of the project's scope (Veal, 2005.) In Figure 1 you can see that the axes labels that were developed show the

blend of face-to-face and online learning as well as the degree of collaborative vs individual work required to complete the learning tasks.

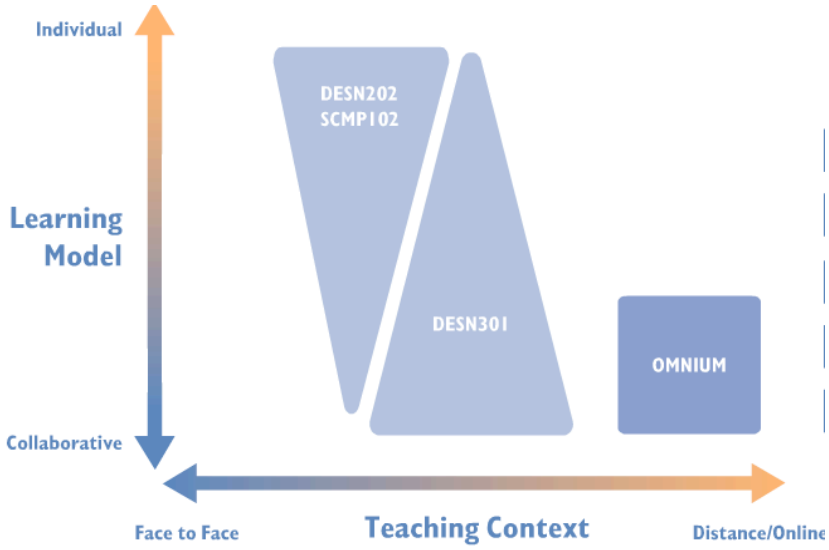

Figure 1: Mapping the context of collaborative learning from fully face-to-face to fully online settings

What this diagram shows is that the learning tasks in the Design subject DESN301 start with some individual tasks leading to a substantial collaborative effort with substantial online supports. In the light of this mapping process and also taking into account student feedback via focus groups, the preparatory subject DESN202 was redesigned to induct students into collaborative learning techniques, but the balance of tasks was mostly individual with a small collaborative component – it worked more in the face-to-face context with some online supports. This subject design was picked up and re-used for a first year subject in another discipline (SCMP102), a process which showed the usefulness of the map to communicate possibilities and allow rapid subject development for other academics. The challenge of the context mapping technique is in defining the axes – which criteria are key criteria that define the similarities and differences in the cases to be mapped. This technique was useful so that academics who were considering group-work could see cases of work that had been successful in teaching contexts similar to their own. I found this to be a most powerful tool for sharing good-practice.

Bringing context mapping to Project EnRoLE

Project EnRoLE funded by the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, is lead by the University of Wollongong to encourage role-based learning environments. Beginning with five NSW universities in 2007, the project aims to support the formation of university-based clusters or online and blended role-play designers and teachers with an aim of building these into a state- based support network. This will be expanded in 2008 to develop a national community of practice with international links. Whilst not involved in the application process, the author was co-opted into the NSW "cluster" in early 2007.

Important resources are being developed to document best-practice in role-based learning: a standardised case-study write up of about 50 known case studies, and an inventory listing of these showing key characteristics. These documents are an important resource to support the process of sharing good-practice. Work by key project team members builds on their previous research into role-based, case-based and experiential learning (Devonshire, 2006; Leigh, 2006; Wills and McDougal, 2006.)

After a series of project meetings to discuss and share the inventory of cases, it was decided to attempt and map these cases (as the author had done successfully in the collaborative learning project) to highlight common factors in the cases. It was felt by the group that some visual maps of the projects would supplement the case studies and table of key characteristics and be another useful tool in disseminating the projects leading to a wider take-up or re-use. See figures 2 and 3 for draft versions, developed after a project team case-owners as to which criteria should be mapped and then where their projects would fit on the first draft map.

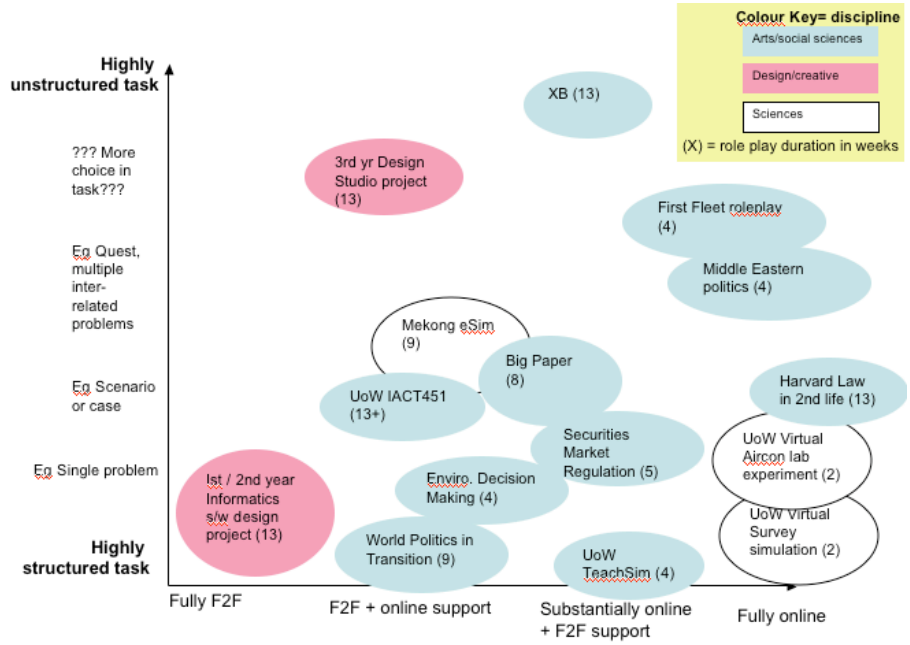

Figure 2: The first attempt at a context map for role-based learning

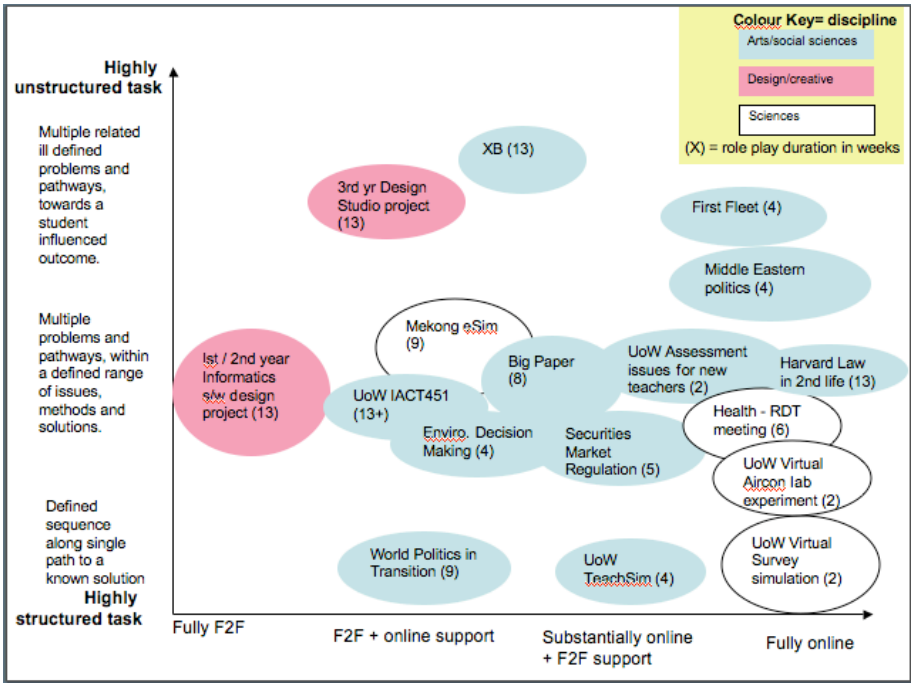

Figure 3: 3rd draft with renegotiated y axis

In addition to mapping the teaching context (face-to-face to blended to online) and the degree of structure in the role-play, I also colour coded the cases according to broad discipline areas and indicated the time that the role-based learning activity took up (in weeks) in brackets beside the title. As National Project Manager explains "The exciting thing about our meeting was that you were able to imagine the utility of your context mapping process for this purpose, and indeed, initial indications are that this is the case. This was the value, from our point of view, that you brought to the table. We now have a potential tool with which to communicate more effectively about role-based learning in a manner than transcends traditional boundaries of games, simulations, situational learning, role-play, experiential learning etc"(Rosser, 2007).

This is still very much a work in progress, with subsequent email and phone contact with the owners of the mapped projects still attempting to get to consensus on what the factors to be mapped should be, and how these factors are expressed as map labels.

Conclusion and future work

The maps developed (and we will be developing more as the project continues) are a useful supplement to the already developed case study and inventory documents. Whilst the case write-ups provide rich information, unless you have time to read and absorb the information in them it is hard to know which sub-set of cases you might recommend reviewing with academics as part of the process of facilitating uptake of design of new role-based learning experiences.

The project team are interested in moving away from training staff up in the academic definitions of 'case study' vs 'game' vs' simulation' then 'selling' one of these solutions to them. Instead we would like to move to a dissemination method that involves involving academics in a dialogue of identifying their context and preferences for teaching and assessment and to use the maps to help them see the similarities to existing good practice cases that might be from any of the number of sub-sets of role-based learning.

The task ahead is to apply the process of mapping to cluster like projects together based on the factors or drivers or issues in role-based learning eg:

- Undergraduate vs postgraduate
- The amount of induction required
- Degree of complexity of the task ie how structured, open or closed is the task
- The degree of interdependence of the defined roles eg will role X fail if role Y does not do their job properly.

These maps can then be used as catalysts for conversations with academics in academic staff development workshop series to assist in the development of new role-based learning experiences for students. It is hoped this will support the Project EnRoLE aim of building a national network of practitioners in the field.

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