Chapter IX
Online Tutoring as Conversation Design

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"Learning, development and evolution invalidate some ends and generate others"
Edgar Morin

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the design of conversations in online education. The central feature, conversation design, is presented as a continuous process that takes place not only during the preparatory phases but also during the emerging conversation, which is best understood as dialogue. Dialogue is seen as a useful way of understanding the principal task of the online tutor; the facilitation of the construction of knowledge by the learner within a framework of significant interaction. Furthermore, the developmental nature of this process requires a process in which the tutor, instead of implementing a series of previously designed actions, must adopt a role similar to that of the action researcher, continually observing, reflecting, and adapting the process. The chapter proposes a range of theoretical considerations and practical techniques for structuring and facilitating these online learning dialogues. The aim is to offer theoretical and methodological approaches to the design of learning conversations (dialogue) as a mode of learning and constructing knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The focus of the work in this chapter is the design of learning conversations in online education. Conversation design in learning contexts i sunderstood as an ongoing or continuous process that takes place not only during the preparatory phases (these are necessary but not sufficient) but also during the emerging conversation. Learning is a process that involves interaction, as authors from Dewey (1916, 1938) to Laurillard (2000) have observed, and following Laurillard it is legitimate to consider the sequences of interactions that form part of the learning process as conversations.

The design of learning processes, therefore, involves the design of these conversations. However, the open-ended nature of conversations, and of learning, when viewed from a constructivist perspective, precludes traditional approaches to design that locate the design process prior to the learning. Learning, like conversation, is a continuous developmental process and considerations relating to its design should take this into account.

It is also important to recognise that the term conversation is itself problematic; the "lay" understanding of the term is loose and tends to be described in terms of an "interchange of thoughts and words" or "familiar discourse or talk" (OED). There is a wide range of types of conversation. In this chapter, we will foucs on the kinds of conversation that promote or facilitate the construction of knowledge by the subject (in the context at hand, the learner). The nature of this kind of conversation is better described by the concept of dialogue, which more accurately describes the kind of focus and engagement that is seen as necessary for the construction of knowledge, which in our view requires interchange of a particular nature that goes beyond familiar discourse. For this reason the literature relating to dialogue is drawn on to derive the approach.

Given the continuously evolving and flexible nature of learning, the aim is to propose a range of theoretical considerations and practical techniques for structuring and facilitating online tutoring. This approach can be understood as the continuous design of a certain kind of conversation, the dialogue. Dialogue is seen as a useful way of understanding the principal task of the online tutor; the facilitation of the construction of knowledge by the learner within a framework of significant interaction.

BACKGROUND

The Nature of Dialogue

The capacity to learn from and with others through interaction is well covered in the literature. From Dewey through to Laurillard a range of authors, such as Bandura (1977), Lave (1988), Resnick (1991), Holmberg (1982), and Rogoff (1990) have, in their different fields, placed considerable emphasis on interaction as a key element in the learning process. Through interaction, the range of knowledge and perspectives of those involved is brought into play, forcing each individual to examine the matter at hand from different angles, and look for answers that fit the diverse realities of the group. This provokes a "cognitive conflict" which leads to the reorganisation of thought structures and the modification of schemas to assimilate new ideas. Furthermore, according to Kaplún (1993)[1] the central importance of interaction is located in the vital need for the learner to articulate this emerging understanding in order to develop deeper understanding. In this way, each participant constructs their own knowledge in relation to the field.

Interactions of this kind, which are key elements in the learning process, do not occur spontaneously. It is necessary to generate the conditions in which they can take place. A range of types of interaction, each with its role, can be described (see, for example, Garrison & Archer, 2000), such as for example logistical, informational, manage-

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