Chapter 15
From Chaos Towards Sense: A Learner-Centric Narrative Virtual Learning Space

Torsten Reiners
Curtin University, Australia

Lincoln C. Wood
Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand & Curtin University, Australia

Jon Dron
Athabasca University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Throughout educational settings there are a range of open-focused learning activities along with those that are much more closed and structured. The plethora of opportunities creates a confusing melee of opportunities for teachers as they attempt to create activities that will engage and motivate learners. In this chapter, the authors demonstrate a learner-centric narrative virtual learning space, where the unrestricted exploration is combined with mechanisms to monitor the student and provide indirect guidance through elements in the learning space. The instructional designer defines the scope of the story in which the teacher and learner create narratives (a sequence of actions and milestones to complete a given task), which can be compared, assessed, and awarded with badges and scores. The model is described using an example from logistics, where incoming orders have to be fulfilled by finding the good and delivering it to a given location in a warehouse. Preliminary studies showed that the model is able to engage the learner and create an intrinsic motivation and therewith curiosity to drive the self-paced learning.

INTRODUCTION

Stories are one of the oldest means of passing on information and experiences to others. Storytellers combine words with gestures and expressions, creating illusions, using intonation to build up suspense to finally reach full immersion in the narrative. Storytelling is art; the canvas being the mind and the words the crayons to draw the picture. Storytelling is connective; it requires an audience with whom we can share. Storytelling is creative; we hear words and sounds, see

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5071-8.ch015

gestures and expressions, but we also combine these shared impressions with our personal experience, understanding, and knowledge to our very individual story. Storytelling is an effective mean to convey "information in a compelling and memorable way" (Neal, 2001) and the "original form of teaching" (Pederson, 1995). "[] It's our desire to still employ the mood and storytelling tools inherited from film and theatre" (Björke, 2003). Similar to the film industry, instructional designers have to adopt and use the technology in the way it is designed; not enforcing old beliefs and thoughts and methods on it. The narrative has to be sculpted and designed specifically to express the narrative in its environment.

Yet we have to ask ourselves if story telling is teaching? Are teachers story tellers? With all due respect to the numerous teachers worldwide and their never-ending effort to transform the classroom into a learning space full of stories and adventures, we can see that they are often not. The classroom is just a space, the story "provides relevance and meaning to the experience. It provides context." (Kapp, 2012; p.41). Instead, the system that these teachers work within is seemingly more concerned with the continuous equalisation of courses world-wide; predefining years ahead what has to be taught, which text book is to be used, and how the learners have to demonstrate the *successful* transfer to their heads; being assessed in uniform tests at times most convenient for the institutions; at least if we assume to be trapped on the lower levels of Blooms taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). While stories are still told by engaged teachers, the systems that they work within have forgotten to include the audience of the stories. We expect that all canvases show the same picture, not guiding the audience through the story but dictating what is important and how to interpret it. With no intention for discussion; we shall emphasise the governmental and administrative drag towards programs like "No Child Left Behind" or strict uniformity and comparability in undergraduate and master programs to simplify the transfer process between educational institutions and smoothen the transition to the working place (Noddings, 2007). Teaching and learning is not about the laziest way, but the best way to engage the learner in understanding and critical thinking (Friedman, 2005); one of the primary concerns for educators to achieve (Boyle-Baise & Goodman, 2009).

The endemic passivity within classrooms is disturbed by giving the listener the power of influencing the storyline by being asked to make decisions at key points. An example is the role playing game 'Dungeons & Dragons', in which a group of characters (each controlled by one player) undergo an adventure in a fantasy context. A storyteller (Dungeon Master) is responsible to pursue the story, play different roles in the story, and challenge the players with tasks like fighting, entering dungeons, or seeking treasures. The dungeon master is capable of controlling the story in any direction; being both the master of the scope and the given objectives. The lecturer can do the same in a classroom; can allow learners to explore the learning space without restrictions, yet having selected activities to provide a scope to keep learners on track. The supervisor or manager in an industrial context can monitor employees' activities to achieve the objectives, and just gently (or with a brusque attitude!) provides them with guidance to ensure that activities are finished on time; so that employees' efforts are not wasted.

The storytelling becomes more complex if we extract the storyteller; the component with the most direct influence on the learner (Bauman & Briggs, 1990). Learners may not attend a classroom session but engage in a self-paced learning process; e.g., learning in a distance educational environment (Gregory et al., in press; Moore & Anderson, 2012). The basic but often used model is to merely provide (or 'dump') all materials within a learning management system with some general instructions to proceed and succeed in assessments and examinations. The environment, in this case a rather unattractive and limited one, becomes the