Chapter 16

Framing Pedagogy, Diminishing Technology:
Teachers Experience of Online Learning Software

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores frames and sensemaking as a means of understanding the experiences of teachers in higher education who are slow adopters of technology in settings where technology is also inflexible. Literature on teaching online emphasises the differences between online and face-to-face teaching over the similarities between them, and conceptualises this as a discrepancy in expectation between face-to-face and online teaching that requires teachers to remodel their approach to overcome it. Problems of low uptake of courseware systems by teachers are commonly identified as either problems of teachers' insufficient technical knowledge, or as problems of the nature of technology, however it is more useful to understand them as sensemaking problems where teachers deal with new technology using old frameworks. Two cases are explored in depth showing that some frames require less effort to produce good teaching. The paper suggests that teachers with inflexible frames must break them to adapt to online environments. However, a pre-existing pedagogically oriented frame already primed to seek out new settings for learning forms a minimally sufficient frame for sensemaking within an online setting even in the absence of strong technological skills.

INTRODUCTION

It does not take a great deal of contact with those using technology in teaching and learning within higher education to realise that while some are hugely engaged by the possibilities opened up by

new media, a great number of teachers either do not engage or engage in a very limited way with new media and online learning.

The literature however tends to be written by and for early adopters. A large proportion of the writing on teaching with online technology is devoted to exploring, in both technology and in teaching practices, the further reaches of educative creativ-

ity made possible by the racing technologies of a networked world. Such enthusiasm suggests we are all cutting edge, and the curiosity for researchers lies in the manner of innovation. This I think is far from the truth. Most of us working in the field are stuck with technology which is aging, recalcitrant and ill-suited to adaptation, and many teachers are characterised by both technologists and educators associated with online learning, as well as by University policy makers as conservative, 'resistant' or unwilling to engage in the brave new world of online teaching. Further, not only are some teaching staff constrained in their use of technology, in many cases the technology itself is also constraining, such as the environment offered by Learning Management Systems (LMS's) like Blackboard.

It is this rather unfashionable bunch of slow adopters grappling with 'low' technologies that constitute my interest. Is it possible that despite these barriers some teachers nevertheless teach well online? If so, why are they able to do so?

Whilst much has been done to analyse the comprehension and use of technology by online learners, less recognition is given to teachers' experience of using technology to produce that learning. The literature that predominates is literature that by and large presents a normative account of teaching online – it instructs in new ways of using technology or proffers sets of criteria that should be met in the production of learning online. Little research has been undertaken to identify subjective experience particularly in the case of online teaching technological "laggards".

There are exceptions in discussions of technology use outside of higher education teaching such as Klein (2005) who usefully divides characterisations of non-adopters of Digital TV into "refuseniks' and "victims", a distinction which appears to carry over to academia where policy makers infer an assumed split between academics who do not adopt because they are apparently "resistant" and students who do not adopt because they are "a group at risk of digital exclusion" (p 1).

There is also a large multidisciplinary literature on "Technological Adoption Models" (TAM) (Davis's seminal article (Davis, 1989) is cited 4417 times by other authors according to Google Scholar). This literature concentrates on users, usefulness, ease of use and readiness (on the latter, see for instance Lin, Shih, & Sher (2007)). But use does not address the cognitive conditions brought by teachers to the transition from facility with one form of teaching to facility with another, especially when faced with an inflexible and limiting LMS.

The online environment created by Blackboard is also seen as passé by researchers keen on the possibilities opened up by mobile technologies, Second Life and Web 2.0. Explaining differences in how teachers respond to the limitations and opportunities presented by older style course management systems is to take the path less trodden, but it is also to address the concerns of a large group if not a majority of teachers.

Shih, Feng, & Tsai's (2008) content analysis of studies of course management systems found a very low number of articles addressing teacher's cognition as they navigate the unfamiliar landscapes of online teaching. In a contribution to redressing this, I want to focus on that aspect of cognition - sensemaking (Karl E Weick, 1995) which posits frames and framing as an essential aspect of sensemaking cognition, to draw out the kind of thinking on which teachers base their approach to online teaching.

This study is part of a larger study that uses the lens of the sensemaking research of Karl Weick to understand how teachers in higher education generally make sense of online teaching environments. Here I address sub questions of the study, 'What makes some teachers more receptive to and better at online teaching than others? What sort of sensemaking is going on here?'

My research suggests that there are at least four very different more or less prototypical ways of thinking about and using online courseware, and that one in particular may offer a way forward

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