Learner-Generated Contexts: sustainable learning pathways through open content

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Abstract

The rapid increase in the variety and availability of resources and tools that enable people to easily create and publish their own materials as well as to access those created by others extends the capacity for learning context creation beyond teachers, academics, designers and policy makers. It also challenges our existing pedagogies. In this paper we suggest that one of the challenges that arises from the OpenLearn initiative is that of finding ways in which technology can support learners to effectively create their own learning contexts. We also suggest that the successful creation of Learner Generated Contexts can address concerns about the sustainability of OpenLearning. Our intention is to seed a wide-ranging debate at the OpenLearn conference.

What do we mean by Learner-Generated Contexts?

The proposal of a Learner Generated Context arose initially from the suggestion that an educational context can be described as a learner-centric ecology of resources and that a learner-generated context is one in which a user or group of users collaboratively marshal the available resources to create an ecology that meets their needs (see Luckin, R. 2006; Luckin, du Boulay, Smith, Underwood, Fitzpatrick, Holmberg, Kerawalla, Tunley, Brewster & Pearce, 2005; Luckin, Shurville & Browne, 2007 for more detail on the learner-centric ecology of resources framework and for more detailed examples). Through the discussions of the Learner Generated Context group[1] fresh perspectives on this contention have developed. For example, both spatial and process issues emerge. These could be described as Changing the learning context and generating learning spaces, and Changing the learning process and the learning context.

In this paper we consider the alternative perspectives of Learner Generated Contexts (LGC) and resolve these into a research agenda that is complementary to the issues highlighted in the Open Learn call. In particular the concerns the call raises about the sustainability of the open learning enterprise.

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[1] The LGC group was formed at a workshop in Bath in March 2007 – it's membership is interdisciplinary and is represented in the author list for this paper

Why Learner-Generated Contexts?

The motivation for the formation of the LGC group came from a shared excitement about the growth of 'User Generated Content' such as that to be found on YouTube and Flickr. However User Generated Content was already being sufficiently hyped as the public embrace new Digital Media. Our excitement was fuelled by the thought that the time was ripe for a substantive debate about the systemic value of User-Generated Content and Web 2.0.

Why now?

The LGC group share common concerns to ensure that learning is a participatory experience that is about: participative technology, participative education and participative democracy. The current popularity amongst learners for the creation and publication of their own material, combined with the open content and open source initiatives offer the tools for increased educational democracy. These tools support the potential for the boundaries to be redrawn between learners and teachers, formal and informal education and the producers and consumers of knowledge. However, learners still need support to scaffold their skills and understanding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) and yet many educational practitioners feel technically ill equipped to act as more able peers or mentors in this process.

Definitions and issues

Through formulating the following working definition of a Learner~Generated Context, cross-disciplinary issues and activities for further investigations can be identified.

'A Learner Generated Context can be defined as a context created by people interacting together with a common, self-defined learning goal. The key aspect of Learner Generated Contexts is that they are generated through the enterprise of those who would previously have been consumers in a context created for them'

Key issues

- Learners as creators not consumers

- The changing roles of educational practitioners: what type of 'ogy: Pedagogy, Andragogy, Heutagogy or something new?

- The transition from learning as regulated practice to learning as participation

- Learning as a collaborative activity taking place in locations that self-review and are self-validating

- Understanding purpose in learning design

- The role of narrative in learning

- Environments as physical, social and cognitive

- The ability of learners to take learning devices and appropriate them for their own learning needs

- The ability of learners to take ownership of their physical learning environment and enhance learning and creativity

Key activities

- The creation and maintenance of new relevant learning contexts

- Learning design to allow learners to create their own context or space: Co-Configuration, co-creation, co-design of learning

- The development of interest-driven learner-centred approaches that enable learners to own both their learning and their actions in the real world

- Identifying a range of learning strategies enabling the design of better learning software.

- The use of learner-centred and participatory design to understand learning contexts as 'ecologies of resources'

- The use of technology to support the ability of communities to define their own learning needs

- The use of technology to generate learning environments which will enable the more active learning roles of 'citizens' and 'employees'

- The provision of digital media tools that enable socially inclusive learning

Examples of current Learner Generated Context (LGC) activity

LGC could be about usefully linking various Contexts of Learning as a way to integrate informal, non-formal & formal learning and to widen participation and social inclusion. LGC could be a way of creating a framework for lifelong learning through a 'perpetual beta' (O'Reilly, 2005)

Examples from current practice that demonstrate aspects of Learner-Generated Contexts include:

The Participatory Learning Workshop approach that involves the construction of rich picture narratives of individual and community needs in order to develop outcomes concerned with both individual and as individuals and community. Development (see Day, 2003; Menou & Day, 2005)

'The design of flexible technology-saturated learning spaces in which practitioners can develop multi-media approaches to teaching and learners can interact with the learning space in novel and innovative ways (see Childs, Hamilton, Morri and Johnston, 2006).

Self-organised learning practice using Web 2.0 tools, such as that demonstrated by Kruger (2006) and depicted in Figure 1
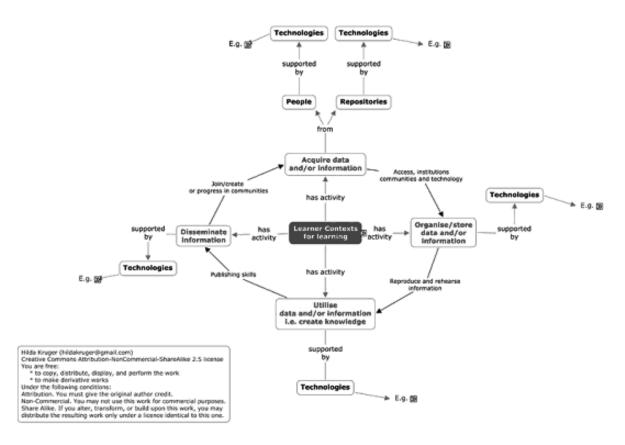
Figure 1. Self-organised learning practice using Web 2.0 tools

What next?

Our purpose in debating these issues is to get beyond the institutional, pedagogical, professional and educational barriers that block both the affordances of new technologies being realised and the learning that comes from allowing everyone's curiosity to answer the questions that naturally arise as we live in the world. Rather than just relying on educational institutions to generate content, learners could generate sustainable content and learning pathways in newly identified contexts.

A possible research agenda

The agenda is not about technology use per se. It is about contextualising learning before it is supported with technology. Nonetheless the issues we have highlighted have been prompted by thinking about the affordances and potentials of a range of technologies and practice; web 2.0, m-learning, participative media, learning design and learning space design. In order to develop a research agenda for future research and development we propose that the following three questions provide a useful focus:

1. How can we facilitate the development of context-based models as the organising principle for designing learning?

2. How should we re-conceptualise the relationship between informal learning and formal education?

3. How can we integrate the roles of learners as consumers and producers in the learning process?

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Wiki supporting this work (password lgc) http://learnergeneratedcontexts.pbwiki.com/.