Perceptions of guest lecturers' impact on online learning communities

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Abstract

A phenomenographic approach to case study is presented as a proposed methodology to researching guest speakers' impact in networked learning communities. This work-in-progress paper outlines the proposed use of case study and phenomenography in exploring learners' experience of guest speakers' impact on students' in online learning communities in higher education (HE). The rationale for this chosen methodology is outlined, as well as its epistemological and ontological underpinnings. The inclusion of guest speakers in higher education courses, such that they share experience with and learn with students and instructors through synchronous or asynchronous communication, is an area little studied to date. Little is known about guest speakers' impact on learning beyond a few documented benefits afforded by guest speakers in face-to-face learning environments. For example, guest speakers bridge theory and practice (praxis) through experiences they share with the class. Data collected from semi-structured interviews in each case will be formulated into outcome spaces. This multiple case study will generate outcomes spaces that depict the categories of description as provided by participants. Following Åkerlind's (2008) method of focusing on student experience, the outcome space will be representative of participants' variation of experience, from students' perspectives. The project's issues and challenges, as understood to-date, are outlined. Proposed next steps are identified. This paper presents an alternate approach to the use of phenomenography in researching learning in a student-centred phenomenographic approach to case study.

Keywords
Case study, phenomenography, guest speakers, online learning communities, networked learning

Introduction

As more universities continue to adopt networked learning, either as blended or online offerings, the need to understand and design courses suitable for this environment increases. Similarly, the need to better understand the impact of guest speakers, a successful authentic learning approach in on-campus learning communities, increases as well. Participants' experiences of guest speakers' impact on learning community group activity and sustainment, learning experience, social presence, engagement, and reflectivity in online learning communities requires investigation. This will be undertaken in the work-in-progress research project outlined in this paper. The projects' results will both add to the limited body of research on the use of guests in online learning and provide those involved in course design with insights on how to design courses so that guest speakers' presence positively enhances learning. Additionally, the study can provide insights into use of guest lecturers to better facilitate connectivity, and increase engagement in networked courses in HE institutions involved in online and networked learning.

Guest speakers in learning communities

Technology enhanced learning expands learning in HE by using information and communication technologies (ICTs) for learning activities. Networked learning, and distance education in particular, is often challenged by instructors' desire to replicate their on-campus courses (modules) in the online environment. The use of groups or teams is common in networked learning. Kear (2011) notes that online networked learning communities suffer from "impersonality and low participation" (p. 65). Increasing the degree of interaction or engagement

among participants through guest participation is one possible way of combating these issues as guests can expand upon a course topic by presenting their work to students and engaging in ensuing discourse. Guests do not hold the same status or responsibility of instructors as they are 'in' the course for a limited period of time and often do not have any responsibility for assessing student performance, as would the instructor. Use of guest speakers is an authentic means to "enhance student participation and motivation in a course" (Garrett-Dikkers & Whiteside, 2011, p. 1). Guests have an additional benefit in that they "possess a certain degree of credibility that serves to reinforce course concepts" (Eveleth & Baker-Eveleth, 2009, p. 417).

In face-to-face environments, guest speakers have been used in a variety of ways: (a) to promote student involvement (Meterjean, Pittman, & Zarzeski, 2002); (b) as an alternative to lectures (Meterjean, Pittman, & Zarzeski, 2002); (c) to demonstrate the theory to practice praxis (Agha-Jaffar, 2000); (d) to connect students to industry representatives (McCleary & Weaver, 2008); and (e) expose students to arenas of possible future study or employment (Lang, 2008). Mooney (1998) reported that the more positive the experiences of a guest speaker, the more likely students were to pursue further courses in that discipline. The use of guest speakers needed to relate closely to course aims and be well thought out in advance (Lang, 2008).

Little is known, however, about the use of guest speaker in networked learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Eveleth and Baker-Eveleth (2009) looked at the impact of student-selected guests on learning and noted several benefits: (a) increasing credibility of course materials; (b) demonstrating that guests' experiences mirrored students'; and (c) inspiring students' future endeavours (pp. 420-421). Hemphill and Hemphill (2007) reported that "critical thinking skills and interest levels were enhanced by the presence of the guest speakers" (p. 292) when guest speakers facilitated asynchronous discussions. Wearmouth, Smith, and Soler (2004) reported that guest experts enhanced the instructional method (pedagogy) by providing discussions and reflective moments through computer conferencing. None of the literature reports on the impact of guest speakers on learning community group activity and sustainment, enhancement of learning experience, social presence, active engagement and reflectivity, which are the foci of this proposed study.

Guest speakers' potential impact on learning

As an outcome of this work-in-progress, the study will add to the literature in the areas of online learning community and community formation, guest speakers, engagement, connectivity, issues of cohesiveness, social presence, situated learning, reflection, and research methodology. Some previous literature in these areas is presented as a basis upon which to build the foundation for the current work.

Online learning communities (OLCs) provide learners with a "sense of shared values and shared identity [such] that [they] feel a sense of belonging" (Paloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). OLCs' supportive, engaging, approach to learning facilitates students' collaboration and associated reflective practice (Paloff & Pratt, 2007). Most important to OLCs are the social aspects of learning (Paloff & Pratt, 2007, Wenger, 1999). Common elements among the various online group learning communities include engagement, interaction, presence, identity, dialogue, and collaboration. Many of these characteristics are associated with a social constructionist view. Hodgson and Watland (2004) note that a social constructionist view "assumes that learning emerges from relational dialogue with and/or through others in learning communities" (p. 126).

Effective learning communities do not always arise naturally but rather take concentrated planning and work to implement and sustain. Paloff and Pratt (1999, 2005, 2007) and Kear (2011) discuss strategies for successful learning communities and community formation such as articulating community's purpose, creating venue, facilitating internal leadership, outlining rules and expectations, supporting multiple roles and sub groups, and self-policing. Furthermore, instructors need to take a proactive role in facilitating student engagement, a means of successful sustainment. Kearsley and Shneiderman's (1998) theory of engagement sees students being meaningfully engaged in constructive learning events with others employing its core components of "relate, create, donate" (p.6). Its emphasis on peer collaboration and communities of learners aligns with situated learning theories (Lave, 1996; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Schön, 1987).

Issues of cohesiveness are discussed by McConnell (2005). He identifies characteristics of a successful (cohesive) group as having members who converse and support each other, work together as a whole or in subgroups, as well as alone when warranted (p. 36). Ultimately this dynamic is possible because of intra-group trust. Senior (2010) notes that if a "spirit of [cohesion] openness, trust and camaraderie prevails within the class,

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students are more likely to interact willingly with a variety of classmates" (p. 143). Learning community membership, discussed thus far, refers primarily to students and teachers, but could also include guest speakers.

Finally, Roberts (2002) addresses the role of reflection in the learning process in HE distance education, discussing the influences of previous theorists on reflexivity such as Dewey, Boud, Kolb, Mason, Schön, Rogers, and Usher. He borrows Boud, Cohen, and Walker's definition of reflection which refers to a process wherein learners "recapture, notice and re-evaluate their experience (Boud et al. 1993, p. 99)" (Roberts, 2002, p. 40). Reflection "is a crucial link between experience and learning" (p. 40) which is reminiscent of Dewey's theories of learning.

Methodology

The research methodology is of a qualitative nature (using semi-structured interviews for data collection) following a phenomenographic approach to multiple case studies (Marton, 1994, Åkerlind, 2005). The uniqueness of this case study sees exploration of the use of guests in sustaining community in a HE online learning course. This is an area that has yet to be reported on in the literature. An interpretive approach to case study research is suitable to exploring participants' experiences of the introduction of guest speakers in a networked course. The study will explore the narrow context of the use of guest speakers in a HE course. The researcher will explore the impact of the use of guest speakers by looking at the participants' variation of experience, from a student's perspective. Phenomenography's interpretive approach makes it suitable, or commensurable, with case study. Following Åkerlind's (2008) method in which participants report on students' experience, the outcome space will be representative of all participants' perception of students' experience. While each case will have its own outcome space it may be possible to construct one overarching outcome space, representing the collective variation of all cases in this project.

Case Study

Case study research is "the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 545). Case studies are used to "learn more unobtrusively about students, teachers, and trainers", (Savenye & Robinson, 2004, p. 1047). Gall, Borg, & Gall, (1996) identify four characteristics of case study research: "(1) the study of phenomena by focusing on specific instances, that is, cases; (2) an in-depth study of each case; (3) the study of a phenomenon in its natural context; and (4) the study of the emic perspective [participant's viewpoint] of case study participants" (p. 545). The study uses multiple theoretical replications (Yin, 2004 p. 54) where in the same approach (methodology and methods – data collection, analysis, and results presentation) are used in each case. It is expected that different (contrasting) results will be found in each case, but for predictable reasons, such as uniqueness of context. Each case will present its unique phenomenographic outcome space, as per the phenomenographic approach described below.

This case study contributes to improvements in practice, as well as research literatures, two important outcomes of case study identified by Yin (1994, p. 3). Its theoretical framework looks at constructionist student-centred learning in authentic environments. The study's findings will contribute to literature on online learning communities that informs design and practice as well as engagement theory. Savenye & Robinson (2004) say that case studies "present detailed data that create a picture of perceptions, use, attitudes, reactions, and learner/teacher environments" (p. 1047). Of primary interest in this study are participants' conceptions of the phenomena of guest lecturers in online learning communities from a students' perspective. This is attainable through a phenomenographic approach using interviews.

VanWynsberghe and Khan (2007) denote the recognition of a case study's generalizations as contextual. They note that "[a]s with Yin's analytic generalization, [...] the similarities and differences found among the phenomena of interest in case study research enable the researcher to expand the scope of the theory that guides or emerges from the original case"(p. 5). Each case's context (social, political, and historical) will be described. This affords readers the opportunity to determine an outcome space's applicability to other contexts. The degree to its generalizability (applicability) to their own situations rests with the readers to determine. Various criteria can be used to evaluate the strength of case studies: "plausibility, authenticity, credibility, and relevance" (Gall, Borg, & Ball, 1996, p. 572). "Walsham (1995) identifies four possible types of generalizations: development of concepts, generation of theory, drawing of specific implications, and contribution of rich insight" (Darke, Shanks & Broadbent, 1998, p. 278).

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Phenomenographic Approach

For any phenomenon there are a finite number of ways of experiencing it across a group (Hultén & Booth, 2002; Marton, 1994). Phenomenography is "the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualized, understood, perceived and apprehended" (Marton, 1994, p. 4424). It reveals individual's ways of experiencing the world through its interpretivist underpinnings. It focuses on participants' awareness and reflections of the phenomenon (Marton, 1988; 1994).

There are several foci and approaches to phenomenography. For example: to explore the nature of learning as an empirical study (Marton,1988); "studies of learning and teaching in various content domains" (Marton, 1988, n.p.); variation in individuals' conceptions of a phenomena (Marton, 1981); variation in awareness of experiencing a phenomena (Marton & Booth, 1997); "'pure' phenomenographic interest in describing how people conceive of various aspects of their reality" (Marton, 1988, n.p.); and focus on range of variation in individuals' experience of a phenomena from a students' perspective (Åkerlind, 2008). This study will adopt the latter approach. The instructor and guest interviews will be student-centred (Åkerlind, 2008) in that the focus will be on "what is happening for both teachers and students in a teaching-learning situation" (p. 634) rather than on what the teacher or guest is doing, thereby ignoring student activity. This approach should provide a rich set of data to determine the participants' variation of experience from a student-centred perspective. It will reveal both what (referential aspects of) and how (structural aspects of) phenomena are experienced.

Phenomenography's non-dualist epistemology denotes that knowledge of participants' world is a "relation between the learner and the phenomena being learned" (Booth, 2009, p. 451) and is context sensitive (Åkerlind, 2005). Marton (1988) notes that phenomenography "provides descriptions that are relational, experiential, content-oriented, and qualitative" (p. 146). Its subjectivist ontology sees reality as internal and unique to the participants, resting on a non-dualist viewpoint (Marton, 1981, 1988, 1996; Pang, 2003; Uljens, 1996). Individual realities are presented collectively across a group (Booth, 2009). Åkerlind (2005) suggests credibility and trustworthiness may be used to ascertain the strength of research findings. The descriptions used should support the categories reflected in the outcome space.

Research Method

Data collection instruments will be pilot tested in the fall of 2011 and refined prior to collecting data in the first course. Cases will be selected using purposeful criterion sampling. This study will take place in humanities-based courses which typically invite guests to class and use ICTs as a medium for learning community activities. Two or three courses will be used, with between 20 and 30 participants in total. Initial data collection will begin in late 2011 with the first case (course) and continue into the following spring until all cases' data have been collected. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews which are anticipated to last about twenty minutes. The initial question will encourage participants to think and speak openly about their experience, why they experienced it as they did, and how they interpret its meaning. For example the interviewing might ask, what can you tell me about the guest speaker's participation in your class, what did you understand the guest speaker's role in your course to be, and tell me about this experience. Subsequent questions will seek to probe deeper and clarify answers to gain a deep understanding of their experience. The conversation will continue until the conversation between interviewer and participant is exhausted on this topic.

Åkerlind's (2008) approach to analysis will be applied in this study. It consists of four stages or strategies; (a) contrast – discernment of the whole, or the phenomenon, from its context, or related phenomenon; (b) generalization – comparison of the phenomenon, or one whole, with related phenomenon, other wholes; (c) separation – comparison of varying features to other unvarying features; and (d) fusion – discernment of the relationship of the part-whole structure of the phenomenon (p. 638). Experience of all participants will focus on the student perspective. An outcome space will be formulated for each case and possibly one overarching outcome space for the project. Additionally, each of the cases' contexts will be described to provide background in which to situate the outcome spaces.

The project's findings will be reported in a thesis, and subsequently, other suitable venues. Each case will be discussed individually, presenting its respective outcome spaces. Additionally, an overarching outcome space will be considered, reflecting the collective discernment of variation of all participants in the study. The outcome spaces will depict the categories of description representing the participants' variation of experience from a student-centred perspective.

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Next steps

Between the time of writing this paper and the conference work will have progressed in this research project. Data collection instruments will be finalized, piloted, and revised. Guest speakers will have participated in class activity and interviews will have been conducted to collect data from participants. The iterative analysis process of sifting through the data to formulate the hierarchical categorical relationships will have begun. In the meantime, continued reading and preparation of the thesis' initial chapters (introduction, literature review and methodology) will evolve.

Conclusion

This paper presents an alternate approach to the use of phenomenography in researching learning in its use of a student-centred phenomenographic approach to case study compared to the others in this symposium. The use and impact of guest speakers in online learning communities is an authentic activity that has been little studied to date. A phenomenographic approach to case study will depict the qualitative differences (variation) of experience of guest lecturers on online learning communities form a student-centred perspective. The study's findings will contribute to literature on online learning communities, course design and practice, as well as engagement theory.

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