Locating the Teacher Within Socially Constructivist Educational Practice

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Abstract

The rise of a socially-defined form of constructivism is identified as a central motif in current theorising around educational practice. The role of technology in supporting such a shift is noted along with a relative marginalisation of the role of teachers. While technology is implicated in creating less frequent contact between students and teachers in higher education, it is also argued to be implicated in rendering the contact that does occur to be less personal. Such re-mediation of the traditional student-teacher relationship represents a shift that might need to be more vigilantly monitored.

Key words: social constructivism; educational technology; role of teachers

As a theory regarding the nature of knowledge, positivism has lost its status within Educational Studies. Meanwhile, the theory of learning that complements positivist thinking, behaviourism, has also gone into decline. So, it is often argued that, in effect, “we are all constructivists now” (Wiliam, 2003: 475). Yet it is probably more accurate to declare that “we are all social constructivists”. In this short essay, I want to consider how new media and technologies have shaped the form taken by such a “sociality” in our constructivism. I am particularly interested in how social constructivism seems increasingly to marginalise the role of the teacher and how technology may be playing a role in bringing about that shift.

During that era when positivism and behaviourism exerted more influence, the significance of (digital) educational technology was largely a matter of “teaching machines”—devices for sequencing a learning regime and delivering feedback for the learner’s efforts within it. As behaviourism was overtaken by information theory and cognitive sciences, intelligent tutoring systems emerged. These sustained the feedback idea: the implication that learners were to be “responded to” and that in programming such responding, new
technology was effectively reproducing the role of teachers and what they did. Yet the “intelligence” of these systems was limited. Indeed it remains a challenge even now to reproduce anything like the sensitivity of response that we expect from a human teacher.

However, supporting educational practice through the reproduction of its dialogues was not the only way in which educational technology design was evolving. The development of that interactivity we associate with hypermedia and with simulations, offered learners a variety of environments in which more independent exploration and experiment might be pursued. Moreover, the falling cost of personal computers made it realistic for students to achieve such autonomy of learning in the privacy of their own study spaces and with the luxury of doing so at times that suited them. Such developments of technology can only have fuelled the constructivist preference for seeing the teacher as a “guide on the side”. Alison King (who devised this phrase) urges us to adopt this perspective with her suspicion of established teaching practice: “The professor is the central figure, the “sage on the stage”, the one who has the knowledge and transmits that knowledge to the students, who simply memorize the information and later reproduce it on an exam—often without even thinking about it” (King, 1993: 30).

In effect, new technology supports the appetite to marginalise the teacher into a guidance-only role: because it furnishes the material for a “resource-based learning” that offers the student the kind of autonomy that constructivism welcomes. However, this leaves us needing to understand how such trends towards student autonomy have come to harmonise with an emerging version of constructivism that stresses the social nature of knowing and learning (cf. Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996). Surely this requires to protect the place of the teacher as an agent of social interaction—rather than marginalise it? There are several perspectives on the “social” in social constructivism that help us see that it need not require any special concern for traditions that place teacher-student interaction at the centre of educational practice. The most general of these is to recognise that making knowledge social involves identifying its societal nature more than its social interactive nature. On this view, knowledge is created within arenas of socially-organised exploration and meaning-making. To represent this in designs for learning is therefore less a matter of shaping student-teacher dialogues and more a matter of creating “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—sites of social action within which learners can become legitimate members. Another perspective on the social in “socially constructive” learning is to stress the importance of knowledge exploration as it may take place within the (student) peer group—again, rather than exploration directed by teacher dialogue. All of these possible interpretations of learning as a social experience are well supported by the communication and networking tools we associate with the current generation of digital technologies.

Although the popularity of the phrase “guide on the side” is one simple indication of a shift in status for the teacher, it is useful to notice other symptoms of this shift and, in particular, to notice the role of new technologies in making it possible. Elsewhere, I have documented one simple index of these changes: namely, the way in which the images of promotional material portray the experience of learning. In scrutinising university prospectuses over the past 20 years, one can see a trend away from portraying the learner interacting with teachers towards portrayals of the learner engaged with peers or directly
interacting with the materials and resources of some academic discipline. In short, the teacher has been air-brushed out of the pictures that we use to depict the experience of learning.

However, there is a more vivid indication of these changes. Within UK higher education, it is made apparent in terms of changing numbers: that is, a shift in the staff-student ratio. Over the past 20 years, the number of students per teacher in the UK secondary education sector has remained constant. However, that number has doubled in higher education. It can be argued that digital technology has made it possible for universities to absorb more students while not increasing the number of teachers. This has been partly a matter of the technology furnishing well-designed learning resources for students to learn independently. But it is also because technology has streamlined the underlying administration of educational practice but also, to a significant extent, streamlined the very nature of interactions between students and teachers.

This last claim deserves to be expanded. Technology has supported a shift towards a teacher-student ratio that is less favourable to the availability of teachers for frequent and sustained dialogue. In that simple sense the nature of teacher-student interactions has changed. However, there are indications that technology is re-mediating the style of those interactions where they may still be taking place. I will next invoke three observations from my own research that identify these tensions.

Arguably the most prevalent technology in the hands of university teachers is PowerPoint. Our own observations of how such presentational technologies are used in lectures, suggest that they can serve to distance the student from the teacher. It is fashionable to think of lectures as inherently impersonal occasions, yet they can be theorised as forms of implicit dialogue (Davis, 2007) and, thereby, quite intimate. The potential problem with much presentational technology is that it can deflect attention away from the human presenter towards communication on the screen. More generally, the status of knowledge being explored in a lecture becomes less the particular perspective of a social agent (the lecturer) and more the impersonal authority of the text and images deflected onto the screen.

A similar species of distancing can be brought about through modes of using the now-popular “virtual learning environment”. These “learning platforms” that complement so many university courses offer the teacher a space in which course-related resources can be assembled and authored. We have recently surveyed a representative sample of such course sites (Crook & Cluley, 2009) and content, and analysed the material that has been authored in this way. What is striking is the way in which the voice of the individual teacher is absent in the text and, more generally, the extent to which the designs adopted by them fail to communicate a dimension of personal or informal contact with the student user.

Finally, we have also considered the way in which new technologies allow the administration of the student-teacher relationship around assessment to be rendered streamlined and efficient—in ways that, again, threaten the personal quality of the underlying exchange. Crook, Gross and Dymott (2006) documented the way in which coursework by students was processed for assessment by staff in a number of university departments. The universal practice was one that distanced the author (student) from the reader (teacher). At no point did the two ever meet for discussion or reflection. Feedback for the work produced
by the student was typically delivered electronically or on computer-generated coversheets. Although this is a rather indirect role for digital technology in educational practice it is nevertheless a role that does make it possible for what was previously a rather personal relationship (the giving of feedback) to be rendered more mechanical.

It has not been my intention in this brief discussion to query the changing status of the teacher: a change towards a position more on the margins of the learners’ experiences. In particular, I have not sought to celebrate the “sage on the stage” and neither have I questioned the propriety of being a “guide on the side”. However, I would suggest that neither “sages” nor “guides” can ever enjoy a very intimate relationship with students and that this is a potential loss to the experience of learning. Indeed commentators have long recognised the positive benefits of such closeness of relationship (see Pascarella, 1980 for an early review and Lundberg and Schreiner, 2004 for a more recent commentary). What I have argued here is that technology is not only reducing the density of student-teacher contact (in higher education at least) it is also undermining the personal nature of that contact. Teachers may be prepared to defend their marginalised status of being mere guides on the side. However, if the same technology disturbs the openness, sensitivity, and reciprocity of such (guiding) relationships where they do continue to exist—then, there is perhaps a case for being concerned.

References


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