Supporting Learners’ Interaction by Means of Narrative Activities

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ABSTRACT

It is widely recognized that learners are empowered by interacting with peers on relevant, content-related matters, and are encouraged to feel involved in their own educational process. In order to really support learning, however, interactions need to be structured and organized by means of some suitable pedagogical approach. In this chapter, the author argues that narratives (in the form of both fictional stories and narrations of experiences related to the object of study) can provide a pedagogical framework suitable to exploit the educational potential of interactions. The narrative is an expressive form which is natural and familiar to both children and adults and validly supports meaning-making as well as personal engagement. Moreover, it is an inherently social activity, which makes it particularly suitable to support collaborative activities. This chapter analyzes several examples of narrative activities carried out in different collaborative contexts in order to exemplify how they can be organized to efficaciously support learner interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The technological advancements of the last decade have greatly widened the possibilities of learners to interact with each other, with their teachers/tutors and with a variety of software tools, such as simulators, games and intelligent systems. This is a great contribution to improve education, in that interactions with a variety of subjects and tools contribute to make the learners more active and make them feel personally involved in their own educational process. Among the many possibilities, we will concentrate on peers’ interactions because these are widely recognized to stimulate
cognitive development and favor the acquisition and organization of new knowledge (Bruner, 1996; Schraw & Moshman, 1995).

In order to meaningfully support learning, interactions need to be structured and organized by means of some suitable pedagogical approach (Jaques & Salmon, 2007). In this chapter, we argue that narrative activities, that is, making use of fictional stories or narrations of personal experiences related to the object of study, can provide a pedagogical framework suitable to exploit the educational potential of interactions. Narrative has been increasingly gaining attention in the educational field in the past couple of decades for its support to both the cognitive and motivational/emotional aspects of learning. Being familiar to both children and adults, narrative can be fruitfully used in any order of instruction, from primary school up to working adults, as it is witnessed in the literature and discussed in the next sections. A variety of technological tools can be used to mediate such activities, facilitating their development and amplifying their positive outcomes.

In the next section, the potential of narrative is analyzed, in particular as concerns the support provided to interactions contributing to learning. Then, in the following section, several examples of narrative learning activities are discussed, related to different subjects and instruction levels, in order to illustrate the potential of this approach to support the development of learning in a variety of ways through constructive peer interactions. Finally, some reflections on the constraints and potential of this approach conclude the chapter.

**CHARACTERIZING NARRATIVE**

Narrative (intended as stories and narrations, not simply as discursive talk, as often improperly meant in colloquial language) has been used to communicate ideas from very ancient times. It is recognized to be so much a natural expressive form that people widely rely on it to organize their experience and memory (Bruner, 2002). From early childhood and throughout life, human beings appear to be innately endowed with some “narrative intelligence” that leads them to naturally formulate and understand stories (Mateas & Sengers, 2002). Nevertheless, it is only in the past few decades that narrative has raised the interest of the educational research, thanks to the fact that scholars of various orientations have recognized its potential to support people’s sense-making and communication.

The definitions given by scholars working with narrative from diverse perspectives, such as cultural psychology (Bruner, 1990), cognitive science (Herman, 2003), hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 2005), mediated action (Wertsch, 1998) and many others highlight the presence of causal and temporal interdependences among the elements of a story, which derive from their position in the narrative sequence. This leads people dealing with both fictional stories or experience narrations to grasp not only explicit but also implicit information (Bruner, 2003), and consequently to engage in an instinctive meaning-construction process. This is well exemplified by Bruner (2004, p. 93) by comparing two apparently similar sentences which are formed by the same two phrases in inverse order, simply separated by a comma: “The stock market collapsed, the government resigned” and “The government resigned, the stock market collapsed.” Despite the similarity of these sentences, readers perceive different cause-effect and temporal relationships within each of them. This instinctive perception of logical connections among story elements makes stories work as meshes of interrelated ideas, each of which contributes to determine the meaning of the other elements as well as the overall one. This property allows narrative to overcome the intrinsically linear nature of human discourse and to combine richness of content with simplicity of form (Crawford, 2005). For this reason, stories represent a privileged way to give meaning to
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