Chapter VI

Transactional Control in Traditional Institutional Learning

The dance of learning requires a couple, a partnership, a community, that can move together to transform perspectives and enhance knowledge acquisition. (Boyer, 2005)

Introduction

This chapter presents a range of familiar educational interactions with a view of examining the roles of choice and constraint and their behaviour. This is an attempt to clarify how the concepts presented in previous chapters may be applied in real life. Along the way, there will be some complexities and some unexpected results, but by the end of it, this will lead to clarification of how the interplay of choice and constraint is significant in understanding educational systems. More importantly, this chapter lays the groundwork for the following chapters, which look at similar processes in online learning.

The chapter begins with a high level examination of the general features of transactional control within commonplace forms of institutional learning. Further examples are discussed in greater detail, then a few general principles are abstracted that may be used to examine transactional control in a learning trajectory.
Breaking Down Lessons: Some Examples

To examine the nature of transactional control within a particular learning trajectory or set of learning trajectories, it is necessary to consider the kinds of constraints and the kinds of scale at which they operate. For any given instance, it is necessary to look at each participant’s level of control over his or her learning trajectory from one significant choice to the next, identifying who is controlling that choice, what are the constraining factors, and at what scale they operate. The following examples will take a fairly non-rigorous attitude to this process, in order to see how the concepts apply in an accessible and informal manner. By the end of the chapter, a more rigorous framework will be suggested for viewing any educational transaction.

There are many things that may happen within a traditional lesson in an institutional learning environment, of which, the following is necessarily just a small but representative subset.

Teacher-Led Presentation: Teacher Control

As a general rule, a teacher-led presentation demands few choices from the learner. In a face to face classroom or video conference, this is not always as clear-cut as it may seem, as teachers may be influenced in many small, but significant ways, by the audience. As Wiener (1950) relates:

...there is no task harder for a lecturer than to speak to a dead-pan audience. The purpose of applause in the theater—and it is essential—is to establish in the performer’s mind some modicum of two-way communication.

It is also significant that a teacher making use of, say, a poorly written PowerPoint presentation, may be as much a slave to constraint as the students, controlled by his or her pre-prepared slides and the order in which they come. Sensible use of such technologies involves the use of modes of navigation that are not purely linear, but the skills to do this are in relatively short supply.

At a larger scale, a teacher may be bound by lesson plans, course outlines, learning objectives or other constraints that may even have been designed by someone else. However, such constraints (being at a higher level) have a less direct effect on the teacher’s choices than those of, at the other extreme, someone else’s lecture slides. On the other hand, because they are at a larger scale, they define the constraint landscape in which choices may be made.
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