Chapter II

Modes of Openness and Flexibility in Cognitive Flexibility Hypertext Learning Environments

Rand J. Spiro, Michigan State University, USA
Brian P. Collins, Michigan State University, USA
Aparna R. Ramchandran, Michigan State University, USA

Introduction

The words openness and flexibility—the latter is the topic of this volume—are joined in the title of this chapter. We see them as two sides of the same coin—structure and process, as well as antecedent and consequent. Closed structures of presentation (how instructional materials are organized in delivery systems) and of representation (how knowledge is structured and operated upon in the mind) produce rigidity of thought and action. The antithesis of this rigidity is a kind of “openness-based” flexibility necessary for adaptive knowledge application, for transfer of knowledge to new situations, for situation-sensitive use of knowledge, and for the kind of world-fitting complexity of understanding that cognitive flexibility depends upon—and that the increasingly complex modern world of life and work needs now more than ever. Rigidity and oversimplification are rampant in learning and teaching (e.g., Feltovich, Coulson, & Spiro, 2001; Feltovich, Spiro, & Coulson, 1989, 1996; Spiro, Feltovich, & Coulson, 1996), but with the affordances of new media, we do not need to live complacently with this state of affairs (Spiro, in press).

A Non-Exhaustive Catalogue of Modes of Openness and Flexibility in Cognitive Flexibility Systems

Openness—and related flexibility—come into play in a wide variety of ways in learning systems based on CFT. Although we provide here the first cataloguing of a substantial sample of those ways that CFHs are characterized by forms of openness that promote flexibility, it is worth emphasizing that this is just a sample, that there are many more ways that each of the types listed below can be considered “open” and, in turn, create flexibility; and that there are more types than just these. It should also be noted that in this short chapter we will be talking only about characteristics of CFHs. We recognize that some of the features we discuss may be employed in other instructional design approaches in forms of varying similarity and difference to that used in CFHs.

Each of the following kinds of openness are found in all CFHs, with the exception of the ones that are specific to digital video cases, where the features are built into the subspecies of CFHs called EASEs (experience acceleration support environments). To see operative examples of many of the points that follow, see EASE-history (http://www.easehistory.org/), a system that uses presidential campaign ads, historical events, and core values to support the learning and teaching of U.S. history (Collins, Ramchandran, & Spiro, in preparation).

The Foundation: Complex, Open, and Flexible Habits of Mind

Most important of all in fostering more flexible thinking is the establishment of appropriate habits of mind (ways of thinking, worldviews, mindsets, and so on that prefigure the kinds of knowledge that will be built by an individual). People too often adopt a knowledge stance that we have characterized as the reductive world view, made up of a number of Reductive Biases (Feltovich et al., 1989, 1996, 2001; Spiro et al., 1996, 1988, 2004). This is a tendency to see the world as made up of events and phenomena that are orderly, predictable, decomposable into additive elements, non-contingent, and well structured, and accordingly to have personal epistemologies that see learning as best
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