Abstract

This chapter presents a philosophical framework to help understand the essence of learning contexts. It starts with a brief historical account of the emergence and evolution of the problems of context in learning, and of their increased relevance as learning activities migrate to the online world. It then presents a simple model for a learning event—involving learner, content, and context—from which it analyzes the answers to three key philosophical questions that discriminate between the positivist and the constructivist worldviews. These answers are expressed in the form of four foundational hypotheses or principles for each worldview, which help analyze the resulting two radically different interpretations of learning con-
texts. The implications of these distinctions on the management of learning contexts, on the perception of the duality between content and context, and on the approaches to the design of learning contexts are then analyzed.

Introduction

The problems of context in learning have been around for at least 200 years. In fact, they only started becoming serious when the school systems of the Industrial Age were created in response to the requirements of mass education, and, as a result, learning started taking place increasingly out of context. Up until then, a significant part of what people learned was learned just-in-time, in the context of real-world problems, rather than just-in-case, as a deliberate accumulation of knowledge. When faced with problems that they did not know how to solve, people were taught, in context, by other people, so that from then on they were able to solve similar problems on their own. Their knowledge was, thus, for the most part, the accumulation of knowledge gained through their real-world experiences. Even when wishing to become professionals, they started out as apprentices and learned a craft in the context of their master’s workshop. True enough, some learning did occur partly out of context, such as when people listened to the narratives and debates of the elderly or more experienced, but most of their learning did, indeed, take place in context.

When mass schooling started to materialize at the dawn of the Industrial Age, the ruling values became those of the mechanical world. To be perfect in those days was to operate like a machine. So, the factories, following the management principles of Frederick Taylor, became machines, and the workers, so well pictured in Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times, became parts of those machines. The same organizational principles applied to schools, the assembly lines that mass-produced manpower for the industrial society. The bells ringing, the aligned rows of desks, the breakup of knowledge into artificial disciplines, the memorization and reproduction of texts, and the “acquisition” of knowledge with no visible application all resulted from this mechanistic drive.

In the meantime, the metaphors of the ruling mechanistic language started describing knowledge as not something that could be built by the learners themselves in appropriate contexts but as “content,” some sort of mechanist fluid that could be “transferred” from the textbooks and the minds of the teachers into the empty minds of the learners. The sociable, contextual principles of apprenticeship learning, which had pervaded for centuries, had been replaced by something thought to be more effective—knowledge “transfer.” As knowledge was broken down into disparate subjects, most of them without visible application, and started being massively transferred, mostly by telling and questioning, real learning contexts gradually disappeared from education.
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