Chapter 13

“The Proffer”:
Using Scenarios for Instructional Technology Planning

Shalin Hai-Jew
Kansas State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Most tools for instructional technology research, design, and development are specific and short-term. They are non-fictional (real) or based fully in facts and realities. One tool, however, allows for a long-term visioning: the use of fictional scenarios. Scenarios purposefully are non-linear. They are not simply trend-lines that project into the future. Rather, scenarios emulate the unpredictability of the world—with unintended consequences, accidents, surprise discoveries, and punctuated equilibrium-types of leaps in progress. They use the human imagination—to play out fictional possibilities with the understanding that elements of the scenario may well be real in the future. This allows for broad-based planning, particularly for endeavors that make take many years to actualize; this type of planning also allows the complex integration of multiple technologies simultaneously and to understand the potential interplay between these—in the human realm. This chapter focuses on the use of a fictional scenario about a future e-learning space to depict how a scenario might work in the instructional technology research, design, and development realm, and particularly in application to instructional development and practice. This scenario strategy draws from other fields like disaster planning and management, policy-making, security studies, and military studies.

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INTRODUCTION

A “scenario” is a synthetic depiction of a future reality. As a planning tool, it is used in policy planning, organizational development, business, military science, and geopolitics. In instructional technologies, it may be used to project a mix of integrated future uses of technologies and how that learning environment evolves for future learners. These will not result in specifications for software development but may offer ways for design teams and leaders to deploy current technologies and to anticipate ways to build to future uses—based on human needs and perceptual and cognitive capabilities. Scenarios provide in vivo and in vitro lines of information. In-world information and in-laboratory imaginings combine to probe possibilities that may not be conceptualizable in any other way. Scenarios are not about full plausibility or even predictability but about visioning for potentialities, with the understanding that the future may involve some small part of the anticipated events but also a whole lot else that may not have been anticipated. “Future-proofing,” the preparation for the future to provide for the best possible outcomes, is an inexact science. Surprises are a given. However, to be totally unprepared is a non-starter and a non-option.

What follows then is a short scenario titled “The Proffer.” Then, there is a debriefing afterwards to show how future e-learning technologies integrate for a fast-paced learning environment. This was written in the style of science fiction.

ABOUT THE SCENARIO

This scenario is focused on J4, who has a time-critical challenge. As a government agent, he is trying to meet up with an elusive researcher whose brilliant and shadowy work is threatening to the present social order. This scenario tracks with real-world realities of nation-states constantly assessing each other’s capabilities—including those of their respective populations. In this world view, ideas are dangerous; ideas are salvation. This confrontation has the potential for long-term implications—none of them fully predictable.

This short story then is debriefed factually given the extant research information of where the online learning environments technologies are headed. With the disappearing of computers being built into the lived, carpentered environment, the artificiality of virtual immersiveness has seeped into augmented reality spaces. Objects in this space have become metameric (different essential objects that share similar stimuli signals and so misleading perceivers as to their actual natures)—with experienced mixes of the real and the coded. The real seems digital; the digital seems real. Information is pervasive and atmospheric and delivered and interchanged within the system as part of the lifeblood of the mixed environment. The learning is moment-to-moment, fast, and occasionally high-value and high-risk. “The Proffer” plays on the idea of transactional exchanges (with people trading strategic information and benefits with each other), in an asymmetrical data environment, with known and unknown effects.

The Proffer: A Conceptualization of Future Online Learning Environments

J4 is being cued by the machine (Figure 1). He has arrived in the panoramic immersion when he heard the faint music, starting first like a floating tapping and then distinctly emerging from the far distance—his digital compass suggests the northeast. The music at first does not seem to carry any message, just machine sounds and a hint of spun sugar, but then he begins to detect actual instrumentation and human voices and a sub-sound pattern. This is not just sheen at play. There is disorder, and that disorder has meaning. He sets aside these ideas that have spilled into his conscious awareness and lets them settle back into his subconscious and unconscious; he knows that
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