

Creating a Heutagogical Foundation for Interactions in Student-Centered Learning

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Rapport is a widely used concept that is not as easy to accomplish as it is to describe. Many disciplines attempt to build rapport, but the world is rife with stories of how those efforts fail. But what exactly is rapport? For this paper, the definition offered by Wright, Jones, and D'Alba (2013) will be utilized: “a close and interactive relationship that is built upon trust, shared control, and engagement in activities that are aimed at advancing the skills, abilities, or knowledge of a clearly defined group, and of its individual members” (p. 1603). Advancing skills, abilities, and knowledge is part of the realm of education. Therefore, rapport is an important factor in education. Additionally, Wright, Jones, and D'Alba (2013) identified several components of rapport, one of which was labeled as enjoyable interaction. Since “interactive” was a descriptor of a relationship with good rapport according to the above definition, interaction can be seen as a very important component of developing rapport in education – whether in physical buildings or technology based learning environments (TBLEs). All type of courses contain some form of interaction, either in the form of interacting with others (such as learners, instructors, or experts) or with content (synchronously or asynchronously). Labeling some interaction as “enjoyable” would imply that some interaction is not enjoyable. Wright, Jones, and D'Alba (2013) were able to identify enjoyable interactions as a factor of rapport: “principal component analysis also identified traits related to Enjoyable Interaction and Personal Connection as components of rapport-building” (p. 1609). While other factors were identified, this paper will explore enjoyable interactions.

However, despite interaction being an important factor of building rapport, many learning experiences do not take in to account how to create enjoyable interactive experiences versus unenjoyable ones. Instructors often make many incorrect assumptions about interactive learning

that can alter how they implement course design (Koutselini, 2008). Sometimes instructors make two assumptions about interaction that affect the scope of instruction covered in this paper: one is that interaction will automatically happen just because students are in a class and are told to complete “interactive” assignments; and the other is that if interaction does begin to occur in a class, this automatically means that those interactions are building good rapport and therefore have educational value. Additionally, when the lesson design attempts to be student-centered in some fashion, these two assumptions could possibly derail an entire course if serious attention is not given to creating positive rapport through interaction. One method of intentionally building good rapport through interaction that will be explored in this paper is designing lessons so that students learn how to learn about a specific topic rather than regurgitating knowledge. To that end, heutagogy is offered as the process of learning how to learn through self-directed learning while combining formal learning opportunities with informal ones (Hase & Kenyon, 2007). This newly emerging theory can potentially be used to create lessons that successfully leverage interaction in TBLEs in a manner that builds rapport among students. This paper will look at how heutagogical ideals have been used in the research to create student-centered designs that build rapport through enjoyable interaction.

Literature Review

One of the more difficult ideas to examine in this paper is the concept of “student-centered”, as this is a vague idea open to many different interpretations. Acknowledging this difficulty, Estes (2004) pointed out that while many educators promote student-centered education, the reality of their methods still lean towards being beneficial for instructors. Therefore, Estes defines student-centered as a word that “describes a learning process where much of the power during the experience resides with students” (p. 144) and “in some cases,

students and teachers are collaborators, sharing equal power” (p. 144). This definition would blend well with the concept of heutagogy in that students who have learned how to be learners will have taken on much of the power of the learning experience. However, this also adds difficulty in finding research that observes true student-centered learning design. One such study by Granger et al. (2012) acknowledge that their design would make sure that “the sense-making rests with students” (p. 105) with the teacher acting as “a facilitator to support the learning as students engage in scientific practices” (p. 105). Their results indicated that “learning outcomes were higher for students enrolled in classrooms engaging in scientific practices through a student-centered approach” (p. 105). Other studies have also found positive correlations between learning outcomes and student-centered learning when students have positive interactions (Chuck, 2011; Alharbi, Henskens, & Hannaford, 2012; Gainsburg, 2009; Foote, 2013). These studies tend to stretch across age levels from middle school to graduate study. However, some of these studies do not examine the exact epistemology behind the student-centered designs that they utilize.

For the most part, the connection in many studies between epistemology and student-centered learning has been made through certain factors that the various authors highlight. For example, many studies make an observation that connects the need to have students become life-long learners with the study results, thereby connecting student-centered learning with heutagogy. For example, Chuck (2011) states that “tertiary education should result in lifelong learners where students learn in different formats and styles so they can work better with others in changing, team based environments” (p. 179). Although Alharbi, Henskens, & Hannaford (2012) confused learning styles with learning preferences, they still based their research on what they refer to as a “lifelong learning paradigm” (p. 773), one where “students are responsible for

controlling and monitoring their learning processes” (p. 773). Also, Foote (2013) noted that student-centered learning could result in business leaders “who can act and communicate effectively in the face of the unknown” (p. 79) – a skill that will be very helpful in lifelong learning. Of course, most educators would note that training students to be life-long learners is almost always a stated goal of most educational efforts. Connecting these studies with life-long learning is not to say that they only support heutagogy and not other epistemologies like pedagogy and andragogy – this analysis is just to point out that the connection is present. Heutagogy itself presents challenges to papers like this one that seek to use it as an epistemological foundation.

For example, heutagogy has not been as heavily researched as other epistemologies. For now, many of the papers on the idea are theoretical pieces that attempt to identify a learning concept that may have been utilized in the past but not specifically named. Hase and Kenyon (2007), the originators of the term, acknowledge that there appeared to be “some deficiencies with the existing notions of pedagogy and andragogy” (p. 112) that led them to search for an idea that promoted learner-centered self-directed learning. They also note that

Since the initial paper there has been a growing interest in the concept that has resulted in some research and a number of theoretical papers looking at how heutagogy might be further conceptualised and, more importantly, applied in learning experiences. (Hase & Kenyon, 2007, p. 113)

Eberle and Childress (2007) expand upon the work of Hase and Kenyon to explain that interactive student-centered learning is a part of the heutagogical frame work, especially in technology-based education. Blaschke (2012) provides a good summary of the theoretical musings and research work on heutagogy, coming to the conclusion that “by incorporating

heutagogical practice, educators have the opportunity to better prepare students for the workplace and for becoming lifelong learners, as well as to foster student motivation” (p. 67).

In examining the ideas behind heutagogy, Albon (2006) also identifies the need for motivation:

Motivation embedded ubiquitously in student’s social use of technology dominated by conversation and dialogue, combined with a heutagogical approach to learning are argued to be key factors to designing online learning to promote self-development and human capital through critical self-reflection and critical action. (p. 63)

This observation begins to connect back to the central idea of this paper as enjoyable interaction is one factor that helps improve motivation. Agarwal and Karahanna (2000) found that motivation and enjoyment are important factors that affect cognitive absorption, a construct that describes how useful and easy to use technology is perceived to be. They predict that “as technology developments continue to focus on richer and more appealing interfaces, the importance of experiences that are intrinsically motivating, i.e., pleasurable and enjoyable in and of themselves, might dominate as predictors of usage intentions” (Agarwal & Karahanna, 2000, p. 688). Various studies have found that increasing the enjoyment of interactions in the learning experience can have positive effects on various learning outcomes such as increases in abilities (Wu, Yen, & Marek, 2011), stimulation to learn (Muntean, 2011), increased knowledge (Habgood & Ainsworth, 2011), and participation levels (Xie, Durrington, & Yen, 2011). The final piece to examine is the connection between interaction and rapport.

As previously noted, Wright, Jones, and D’Alba (2013) identified enjoyable interaction as one of several important components of rapport. The importance of interaction in rapport is so great that some researchers are creating ways to make interactions with virtual agents more

realistic and positive. For example, Huang, Morency, and Gratch (2011) reported that “the power of rapport in social interactions has inspired researchers in human-computer interaction and a number of virtual agents have been motivated by these findings” (p. 68). Enjoyable interaction has also been connected to building rapport through asynchronous interactions across social media and discussion boards (Lee & Markey, 2014; Oztok & Brett, 2011; Offir, Lev, & Bezalel, 2008). Rapport has firmly entrenched itself as an essential factor in learning, with enjoyable interaction being an important factor of building rapport.

Discussion

As examined in the literature review, student-centered learning that leads to self-directed learners is an important goal of heutagogical learning design. Many instructors claim to teach in a student-centered manner, when in reality they may miss the mark. In true student-centered learning, power should be shared equally with students or even given completely over to students. This may be a difficult proposition for some instructors, but without that transfer of power, true heutagogical design might not occur. Therefore, designers and instructors may want to find a way to rate how much power they give students in a course. If there is not enough power transferred to students, they may potentially end up relying too much on the instructor and never developing true self-directed skills.

One suggestion for accomplishing these power transfers is to design lessons that teach learners how to learn about a topic, instead of designing a lesson that relies on direct transfer of knowledge from instructor to student. If a lesson is to be taught about healthy eating choices, instructors could avoid lectures and PowerPoints about healthy food facts. The lesson could be designed so that students are put in groups that investigate various health viewpoints. These viewpoints could be discussed or debated until social agreement is reached. The key for this kind

of lesson is to not just break students into groups and assume that they will interact and learn. Another factor should be considered.

This other factor is enjoyable interactions. The lesson interactions could be designed to be enjoyable at some level in order for good rapport to have a chance of developing between learners. For example, going back to the healthy eating options lesson idea, random groupings that have no control over the topic they pick may result in unpleasant interactions. However, allowing learners to self-select groups, and then allowing those groups to choose the specific focus of the topic they present on may lead to a more enjoyable experience since this would give more power to the learners. Going further, instructors could design lessons so that each group presents their findings using the media that they choose, thus separating assignment completion from the stress of performing a specific way in a specific media that the group may or may not be familiar with. All of these ideas are designed to transfer power to the students as well as build rapport both between learners and between the learners and instructors.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are no simple guidelines for how to design a lesson to have more enjoyable interactions. Instructors and designers will have to experiment through trial and error to determine what their specific learners find enjoyable. Instructors will also need to be on the alert for students that are just trying to get away with not working hard by claiming that the work is “not enjoyable.” Students will need to realize that “hard work” does not equate to “unenjoyable.” Additionally, there are many other factors that affect rapport, so creating enjoyable interactions is just one factor to consider. However, successful lesson designs could create self-directed learners that know how to learn about any given topic, creating empowered learners that can continue to learn and grow for the rest of their lives.

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