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Distributed cognition in computer mediated learning environments

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Distributed Cognition
In
Computer Mediated Learning Environments.

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy
from
Wollongong University

Michael Morgan

BCA, Grad.Dip.Ed, MCA, MEd.

Faculty of Education

2005
Declaration

I, Michael Morgan, certify that the material within this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own original work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of qualifications at any other institution.

Michael Morgan

1st of October, 2005
Table of Contents

Chapter – Section                                                                 Page No.

Declaration                                                                        i
Acknowledgements                                                                   ii
Abstract.                                                                         a-i

Chapter 1: Overview

1.0 Introduction 1-1
1.1 Background of the Study 1-4
1.1.1 Scene 1-9
1.1.2 Purpose 1-10
1.1.3 Resource Rich Computer Mediated Learning Environments 1-11
1.1.4 Distributed Cognition 1-13
1.1.5 Information Processing, Human Cognitive Architecture and Schema Theory 1-15
1.2 Research Questions 1-16
1.3 Significance 1-16
1.4 Overview of Methodology 1-17
1.4.1 Setting 1-17
1.4.2 Experimental Design 1-17
1.4.3 Redesigning the ‘Copy and Paste’ Function 1-18
1.5 Definition of Terms 1-22
1.6 Limitations 1-25
1.7 Structure of the Thesis 1-26

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction 2-1
2.1 Computer Mediated Learning Environments 2-1
2.1.0 Introduction 2-2
2.1.1 Historical Development 2-2
2.1.2 Resource Richness and Complexity in Computer Mediated Learning Environments 2-7
2.1.3 Limitations of the Computer Medium 2-9
2.1.4 The Potential of Computers as Mediating Artefacts 2-12
2.2 Learning Theories and Cognitive Issues 2-12
2.2.0 Introduction 2-13
2.2.1 Behaviourism 2-14
2.2.6 Cognitive Tools

2.2.6.0 Introduction
2.2.6.1 Construction, Reflection and Articulation
2.2.6.2 The Role of Computers
2.2.6.3 Influencing Cognitive Activity
2.2.6.4 The Limitations of the Cognitive Tools Approach

2.2.7 Distributed Cognition

2.2.7.0 Introduction
2.2.7.1 Socio-Cultural Theories of Cognition
2.2.7.2 Theories of Distributed Cognition
2.2.7.3 Activity Theory
2.2.7.4 Mediating Artefacts
2.2.7.5 Affordances and Constraints
2.2.7.6 Analysing Distributed Cognition and the Resource Model
2.2.7.7 Information Processing Theory, Schema Theory and Distributed Cognition

2.3 Text, Originality and Depth of Processing

2.3.1 Text, Originality and Synthesis
2.3.2 Plagiarism

2.4 Summary

Chapter 3: Design and Development of Research Instruments

3.0 Introduction
3.1 Analysing “Exploring the Nardoo”
3.2 Review of Previous Studies
3.3 TTC Instructional Environments
3.4 Analysis “Subject One for Sergeant: Offensive Operations”
3.5 Design Issues and the Redesign Process

3.5.0 Introduction
3.5.1 Encouraging Processing
3.5.2 Contextual Issues
3.5.3 Ownership Issues and Utilising Constraints
3.5.4 Temporal, Procedural and Organisational Issues
3.5.5 Scaffolding
3.5.6 The Re-designed ‘Copy and Paste’ Function

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.0 Introduction
4.1 Rationale
Chapter 5: Data Analysis and Results

5.0 Introduction 5-1

5.1 Results 5-1

5.1.1 Results of Observation of Learner Activity 5-6

5.1.2 Results of Analysis of Pre and Post Survey Data on Learner Familiarity with Note Taking and Summarisation Techniques 5-11

5.1.3 Results of Analysis of Text Features of Notes 5-14

5.2 Analysis 5-21

5.2.1 Analysis of Observation of Learner Activity 5-21

5.2.2 Analysis of Pre and Post Survey Data on Learner Familiarity with Note Taking and Summarisation Techniques 5-23

5.2.3 Analysis of Text Features of Notes 5-23

5.3 Data Sets 5-24

5.3.1 Data Set of Observation of Learner Activity 5-25

5.3.2 Data Set of Pre and Post Survey Data on Learner Familiarity with Note Taking and Summarisation Techniques 5-28

5.3.3 Data Set of Text Features of Notes 5-32

5.4 Conclusions 5-39

Chapter 6: Implications of the Study

6.1 Introduction 6-1

6.2 Alternate Interaction Strategies for the ‘Copy and Paste’ Function 6-1

6.2.0 Strategies 6-1
6.2.1 Interaction Strategy Selection 6-1
6.2.2 Categorisation 6-2
6.2.3 For and Against / Positives and Negatives 6-3
6.2.4 Concept Mapping 6-4
6.3 Other Functions in Computer Mediated Learning Environments 6-5
6.3.0 Other Functions 6-6
6.3.1 Annotation in the Resource 6-6
6.3.2 Question Analysis 6-8
6.3.3 Tools Module Interaction Strategy 6-8
6.3.4 Genre Templates and Text Types 6-9
6.3.5 Simulation Experience Guided Analysis 6-10
6.4 Refining Distributed Cognition Theory for Education and Learning 6-11
6.4.0 Introduction 6-11
6.4.1 The Nature of Learning, Teaching and Assessment 6-11
6.4.2 Examining Causes of Failure 6-12
6.4.3 Co-opting of Mediating Artefacts From Other Contexts 6-12
6.4.4 Examining Fundamental Assumptions in Learning Practice 6-12
6.5 Conclusion 6-13

Bibliography Bib.1 – Bib.6

List of Figures

Fig 2.1 : The Atkinson and Shiffrin stage model of memory. (Lutz, 2000, p. 245) 2-20
Fig 2.2 : The Mediation Triangle. (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 5) 2-71
Fig 2.3 : Representing Distributed Cognition. 2-82
Fig 2.4 : Differing Views of the Sequence of Cognition. 2-95
Fig 2.5 : Expanding the Basic Mediation Triangle. (Cole & Engeström, 1993, p. 8) 2-96
Fig 2.6 : The structure of human activity. (Engeström, 1987, p. 78) 2-97
Fig 2.7 : Four levels of contradictions in a network of human activity systems. (Engeström, 1987, p. 73) 2-100
Fig 2.8 : Information Processing and Distributed Cognition: Mediating Artefacts Manipulating Sensory Input. 2-114
Fig 2.9 : Information Processing and Distributed Cognition: Mediating Artefacts Regulating Activity. 2-115
Fig 2.10 : Information Processing and Distributed Cognition: Mediating Artefacts Acting as External Schema. 2-117
Fig 3.1 : The Layers of Contextual Information That Surround a Selected Piece of Information and Mediate in the Construction of Meaning 3-57
List of Tables

Table 4.1: Summary of Participants in 2004 Study. 4-5
Table 4.2: Summary of Participants in 2005 Study. 4-6
Table 4.3: Assessment Criteria Assignment 1(Student Information Guide, 2005) 4-18
Table 4.4: Analysis of Video Observations Activity Key. 4-22
Table 4.5: Example Analysis of Video Observation Subject RIN 34. 4-24
Table 4.6: Example Analysis of Text Features of Notes of Subject RIN 32. 4-28
Table 4.7: Example Analysis of Text Features of Notes of Subject RIN 33. 4-29
Table 4.8: Task, Treatment and Data Collected. 4-30
Table 5.1: Summary Comparison of the Relative Durations of Activities of the Experimental and Control Groups. 5-1
Table 5.2: Notes Analysis Summary. 5-4
Table 5.3 Overall Results Summary Table 5-6
Table 5.4: Duration of Time Spent in Various Levels of Cognitive Processing By Week.  5-7
Table 5.5: Video Observation Example Experimental Group RIN 14 Week 1 2004.  5-8
Table 5.6: Video Observation Example Control Group RIN 50 Week 1 2004.  5-9
Table 5.7: Observation Results Summary Table.  5-11
Table 5.8: Significance of Survey Data Summary.  5-13
Table 5.9: Survey Results Summary Table.  5-14
Table 5.10: Text Notes Analysis Summary Week 1.  5-15
Table 5.11: Text Notes Analysis Summary Week 2.  5-15
Table 5.12: Text Notes Analysis Summary Week 3.  5-16
Table 5.13: Text Results Summary Table.  5-21
Table 5.14: Video Observation Data Week 1 2004.  5-25
Table 5.15: Video Observation Data Week 1 2005.  5-26
Table 5.16: Video Observation Data Week 2 2004.  5-26
Table 5.17: Video Observation Data Week 2 2005.  5-27
Table 5.18: Video Observation Data Week 3 2004.  5-27
Table 5.19: Video Observation Data Week 3 2005.  5-28
Table 5.20: Text Analysis Data Week 1 2004.  5-33
Table 5.21: Text Analysis Data Week 1 2005.  5-35
Table 5.22: Text Analysis Data Week 2 2004.  5-36
Table 5.23: Text Analysis Data Week 2 2005.  5-37
Table 5.24: Text Analysis Data Week 3 2004.  5-38
Table 5.25: Text Analysis Data Week 3 2005.  5-39

**List of Plates**

Plate 1.1 : Experimental Front End Screenshot Presents the Topic and Text Resources.  1-19
Plate 1.2 : The Notepad Screenshot Displays Embedded Interaction Strategies Available During the ‘Copy and Paste’ Function.  1-20
Plate 1.3 : Formatted Text ‘Pasted’ Into the Presentation Notepad Window.  1-21
Plate 1.4 : Embedded Resources Screenshot.  1-22
Plate 3.1 : Exploring the Nardoo with Context Video.  3-2
Plate 3.2 : Exploring the Nardoo Main Introduction to the Package.  3-3
Plate 3.3 : Exploring the Nardoo The PDA (Personal Digital Assistant).  3-4
Plate 3.4 : Exploring the Nardoo Help System.  3-4
Plate 3.5 : Exploring the Nardoo River Investigation Selection with Mentor Investigation Overview.  3-5
Plate 3.6 : Exploring the Nardoo PDA Navigation Module.  3-7
Plate 3.7 : Exploring the Nardoo Lower-catchment Pristine Condition with the ZOOM Navigation System Highlighted.  3-8
Plate 3.8 : Exploring the Nardoo Upper Mid-catchment Present Day. 3-9
Plate 3.9 : Exploring the Nardoo Viewer Module. 3-9
Plate 3.10 : Exploring the Nardoo Lower Mid-catchment Present-day with Embedded Video Media. 3-10
Plate 3.11: Exploring the Nardoo Tool Module including Chemical, Physical and Biological Measurements. 3-11
Plate 3.12 : Exploring the Nardoo Stream Quality Measurement Tool. 3-11
Plate 3.13 : Exploring the Nardoo Notes Module. 3-12
Plate 3.14 : Exploring the Nardoo Notes Module with the Editor Module Open. 3-13
Plate 3.15 : Exploring the Nardoo Presentation Tool with Formatting Tools. 3-14
Plate 3.16 : Exploring the Nardoo Research Station Interface with Tools Highlighted and Labelled. 3-15
Plate 3.17 : Exploring the Nardoo Filing Cabinet Content Menu. 3-15
Plate 3.18 : Exploring the Nardoo Filing Cabinet Content Example. 3-16
Plate 3.19 : Exploring the Nardoo Plants and Animals Book Menu. 3-17
Plate 3.20 : Exploring the Nardoo Plants and Animals Book Media Example. 3-17
Plate 3.21 : Exploring the Nardoo Video Media Example Showing Historical Issues. 3-18
Plate 3.22 : Exploring the Nardoo Radio Media Example. 3-19
Plate 3.23 : Exploring the Nardoo Newspaper Clipping Media Example. 3-19
Plate 3.24 : Exploring the Nardoo Database Search by Keyword and Region. 3-20
Plate 3.25 : Exploring the Nardoo Household Water Use Simulation with Advice On. 3-21
Plate 3.26 : Exploring the Nardoo Blue/Green Algae Simulation with Graph. 3-22
Plate 3.27 : Exploring the Nardoo Blue/Green Algae Simulation with Animation. 3-23
Plate 3.28 : Exploring the Nardoo Dam Management Simulation with Graphed Water Flow and Overlapping Factors. 3-23
Plate 3.29 : Exploring the Nardoo Dam Management Simulation Animated Water Flow. 3-24
Plate 3.30 : Exploring the Nardoo Dam Management Simulation Land Use Updated. 3-25
Plate 3.31 : Exploring the Nardoo Presentation Guide Showing the Genre Template Menu. 3-25
Plate 3.32 : Exploring the Nardoo Genre Template Details. 3-26
Plate 3.33 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice 1. 3-26
Plate 3.34 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice Summary. 3-27
Plate 3.35 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice 2. 3-28
Plate 3.36 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice 3. 3-28
Plate 3.37 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice ‘Good Example’. 3-29
Plate 3.38 : Exploring the Nardoo Note Taking Advice ‘Poor Example’. 3-30
Plate 3.39 : Copy and Paste Dialogue Box Mock Up (Not Part of the Original Package). 3-30
Plate 3.40: Introduction Screen Showing the Visor Mode of the Package.
Plate 3.41: The Battle Visor represented within the 3D Scenario.
Plate 3.42: The Personal Communication System (PCS) used to give instructions and feedback to the learners within the 3D scenario.
Plate 3.43: Information on the state of the platoon available through the Pl Stats feature of the PCS.
Plate 3.44: The Notepad facility.
Plate 3.45: The second sub-scenario involving a patrol.
Plate 3.46: The situation involves an unidentified civilian offering a drink.
Plate 3.47: The standard structure for a lesson.
Plate 3.48: Introduction to a specific phase of the lesson.
Plate 3.49: A text and narration summary of the major points of the lesson phase.
Plate 3.50: Relating the phase completed to a concrete example of military action.
Plate 3.51: The end of lesson summary of the major points of the lesson.
Plate 3.52: Major Interaction Hygiene Viewpoint Control.
Plate 3.53: Major Interaction Casevac Map.
Plate 3.54: Major Interaction Key Point Security End of Activity Feedback.
Plate 3.55: Note taking Summary Notes Example Labels, Keywords and Lists.
Plate 3.56: Note taking Summary Notes Example Indentation.
Plate 3.57: Directed Note Taking Activity Video Resource.
Plate 3.58: Directed Note Taking Activity Feedback.
Plate 3.59: The Standard Notepad Tool.
Plate 3.60: The Label or Keyword Strategy Tool.
Plate 3.61: The Summary or Paraphrase Strategy Tool.
Plate 3.62: The Relates to Question or Topic Strategy Tool.
Plate 3.63: The Source or Reference Strategy Tool.
Plate 3.64: The Quote Formatting Strategy Tool.
Plate 3.65: Generic Functional Schematic of Notepad and Presentation.
Plate 3.66: Nardoo Version Notepad.
Plate 6.1: Interaction Strategy Selection.
Plate 6.3: The For and Against Interaction Strategy.
Appendices on CD-ROM

A.1 Consent Form
A.2 Explanatory Letter
A.3 Questionnaires 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2
A.5 Technical Specification Document
A.6 Raw Survey Data
A.7 Reference List

Session 1 Software and Resources
Session 2 Software and Resources
Session 3 Software and Resources
Explanatory Statement Presentation
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on analysing and redesigning a common mediating artefact in computer mediated learning environments, the ‘Copy and Paste’ function. Text-based resources represent a significant proportion of the content in computer mediated learning environments and are therefore an important factor in learner/content interactions. The ‘Copy and Paste’ function is central to the note taking process and to the learner’s interaction with text-based content. This study uses Distributed Cognition theory to examine and redesign the ‘Copy and Paste’ function as a mediating artefact that regulates the learner’s cognitive processes and the structure of learning activities. The aim of making modifications to the ‘Copy and Paste’ function was to increase the level of processing of the content for understanding by the learner and therefore to aid the encoding of the content to long-term memory. A by-product of this process for the learner was expected to be the internalisation of the interaction strategies embedded in the interface.

The modifications to the ‘Copy and Paste’ function involved embedding a note-taking process, summarisation tools and relevant information resources into the ‘Copy and Paste’ function. The theoretical basis for choosing to embed these particular interaction strategies in the ‘Copy and Paste’ process was Information Processing theory and Schema theory and Distributed Cognition was drawn on to examine and design a new ‘Copy and Paste’ concept. Schema theory in particular gives an insight into effective processes for encoding content to long-term memory in forms that are appropriate for efficient retrieval. These strategies were aimed at encouraging the learner to process content for understanding and therefore to encode content into long-term memory in forms that were semantically efficient, easy to recall and transferable across a wide range of contexts. Modifications to the ‘Copy and Paste’ function also aimed at constraining certain forms of activity, such as plagiarism and indiscriminate copying of text, by designing specific affordances and constraints into the tool. A controlled experiment was conducted in order to determine the effectiveness of the modifications in supporting learner interactions with text-based content.

The experimental study was conducted in 2004 and 2005. The experimental treatment involved a modified version of the ‘Copy and Paste’ function. An evaluation of the efficacy of modifications to the ‘Copy and Paste’ function was carried out using direct observations, pre-experience and post-experience surveys and an analysis of the characteristics of learner notes.

This research offers a new perspective with which to examine the activities of learners in computer mediated learning environments. The locus of the analysis was on a mediating artefact that was available in the learning environment and how successfully the learner was in making use of this mediating artefact in order to process content. The theoretical approach outlined in this thesis directs the instructional design effort to focus on the development of mediating artefacts that allow learners to interact effectively with content in computer mediated learning environments by embedding interaction strategies and resources into the interface. This approach is applicable to a wide range of contexts in computer mediated learning environments.