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Problem solving in technology-supported learning environments

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Problem Solving in Technology-Supported Learning Environments

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B.Sc. (NSW), Dip.Ed. (W'gong), M.Ed. (W'gong).

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
from the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong.

April, 2002

Abstract

The increasing availability of technology-supported learning environments designed to enhance the development of skills for life-long learning in the classroom and the wider community provides opportunities for student-centred and cooperative learning. Researchers experimenting with these learning environments are attempting to use cognitive tools to scaffold learners in the process of a cognitive task, usually presented in the form of a problem.

Constructivist approaches to learning shifts the focus for organising knowledge construction from the teacher to the learner. Learners therefore need to develop a range of information processing skills to cope with this approach to learning. When faced with the responsibility for knowledge construction, they are thrown on their own management resources. While some may have the metacognitive skills to cope, many fend poorly in the increased complexity of such a learning environment. Many see the task as daunting and complex and feel ill-prepared for such creative freedom and choice of direction. Such learners need tools to help them represent the knowledge they are acquiring.

This study explores ways in which a range of support frameworks may be used to assist learners when solving problems of an ill-structured nature. The main objective was to gain a better understanding of how learners identify, organise and present information when problem solving in technology supported learning environments. The research has focussed on the three main areas: *problem clarification* (identifying the nature of the task and what information was required or provided); *solution formulation* including data collection and the solution process (sorting out the resources and generating new information as required); and *presentation of argument* for the solution (identifying propositions and the appropriate evidence for support or refuting the argument).

The primary data gathering strategies adopted for the study focussed on individual participants' notes, audio transcripts of think-aloud protocols, participant observation and participant interviews.

The results from the analysis of the collected data indicate that many learners have underdeveloped skills and find it difficult to adopt a systematic approach to both information gathering and in the analysis of supporting information. In constructing a response to the problems under investigation many participants preferentially consider one or two pieces of information rather than discriminating between issues. As a result of poor search strategies a number of participants missed access to essential information. Consequently this resulted in the formation of poorly constructed responses when developing an argument to support the answer to the problem under investigation.

Of the four frameworks introduced into the study, the Six Hats framework and the Critical Thinking framework appear to offer clearer strategies to assist learners with problem clarification and solution formulation. There was little difference in the quality of argument produced by participants using the different frameworks. The findings arising from the research suggest that many learners would benefit from cognitive support tools when engaged in solving ill-structured problems within technology supported learning environments.

Acknowledgement

Without the help, support and encouragement of a number of people, this thesis would neither have been started nor completed. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly thank all those involved.

In total, thirty-two pre-service teachers participated in the study and I would like to extend my appreciation to each of them for their cheerful and generous contributions and for their time and commitment associated with the data collection.

Specific acknowledgement is also due to my two supervisors, Professor Barry Harper and Doctor Brian Ferry who provided constant, prompt and supportive feedback that helped maintain my enthusiasm and direction.

I am also grateful to my peers and colleagues at the University of Wollongong for their guidance, support and friendship throughout this study.

To my wife Dianne, and our sons Scott, Evan and Paul, thankyou for being there in helping maintain a focus on the important things in life.

Declaration

I, Gwyn Brickell, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

The dissertation has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signed:

Date:

Table of Contents

List of Tables	ix
----------------	----

List of Figures	x
-----------------	---

Chapter 1

1.1.	Background	2
1.1.1	The Problem	4
1.1.2	Terminology used in Study	5
1.1.3	Cognitive Tools	7
1.1.4	Discussion of Research Materials	7
1.1.5	Purpose of the Study	9
1.1.6	Significance of the Study	9
1.2.	Overview of Methodology	11
1.2.1	Theoretical Perspective	11
1.2.2	Research Questions	12
1.2.3	Research Strategies and Data Sources	13
1.2.4	The Participants	13
1.2.5	Limitations	14
1.3.	Structure of Thesis	15

Chapter 2

2.1.	Problem Solving and Related Concepts	19
2.1.1	Well-structured and ill-structured Problems	23
2.1.2	Learning Strategies and Information Processing Theory	26
2.1.3	Mental Representations of the Problem	31
2.1.4	Scaffolding	32
2.1.5	Transfer	35
2.1.6	Reasoning	36
2.1.7	Argumentation	37
2.2.	Learning Theory and Problem Solving	39
2.2.1	Constructivism	39
2.2.2	Constructivism: associations with Learning Theories	41
2.2.3	Constructivism: associations with Problem solving	44
2.3.	Technology Supported Learning Environments	52

2.3.1	Cognitive Tools for Problem Solving	54
2.4.	Research that relates to Current study	57
2.4.1	Expert versus Novice	58
2.4.2	Technology-supported Learning Environments	60
2.4.3	Specific Studies similar to current study	62
2.5.	Summary	64

Chapter 3

3.1	Introduction	67
3.2	Research Protocols	69
3.3	The Study	72
3.3.1	Site and Participants	72
3.3.2	Research Materials and Strategies Used	73
3.4	Data Collection Process	82
3.4.1	Ethics	82
3.4.2	Orientation Phase	83
3.4.3	Training Phase	83
3.4.4	Problem Solving Phase	85
3.4.5	Triangulation of Data	88
3.5	Data Analysis	90

Chapter 4

4.1	Introduction	92
4.2	Methods of Analysis	
4.2.1	Phase 1 - Preliminary Analysis	93
4.2.1.1	Participant access to data	93
4.2.1.2	Participant Strategies	97
4.2.1.3	Evidence of Framework use	101
4.2.2	Phase 2 - Research Question 1	101
4.2.2.1	Critical Thinking Framework - Case 1	104
	Action Plan CT2 - Problem 1	105
	Action Plan CT2- Problem 2	109
	Summary of Group Profiles	113
4.2.2.2	Six Thinking Hats Framework - Case 2	116
	Action Plan SH7 - Problem 1	117
	Action Plan SH7 - Problem 2	119
	Summary of Group Profiles	122
4.2.2.3	Venn Diagram Framework - Case 3	126
	Action Plan VD7 - Problem 1	126
	Action Plan VD7 - Problem 2	128
	Summary of Group Profiles	130
4.2.2.4	Concept Mapping Framework - Case 4	133
	Action Plan CM4 - Problem 1	135
	Action Plan CM4 - Problem 2	138

	Summary of Group Profiles	141
4.2.3	Phase 3 - Research Question 2	144
4.2.3.1	Critical Thinking Framework	146
	Case 1 – Participant CT2	146
	Case 2 – Participant CT4	147
4.2.3.2	Six Thinking Hats Framework	149
	Case 3 – Participant SH5	149
	Case 4 – Participant SH3	150
4.2.3.3	Venn Diagram Framework	152
	Case 5 – Participant VD7	152
	Case 6 – Participant VD4	153
4.2.3.4	Concept Mapping Framework	156
	Case 7 – Participant CM4	156
	Case 8 – Participant CM3	157
4.3	Summary	160

Chapter 5

5.1	Introduction	164
5.2	Cognitive Strategies used by Learners	165
5.3	Impact of Support Framework on Learners	171
5.4	Use of Guides	175
5.5	The need for Scaffolding	176
5.6	Conclusion	178
5.7	Implications for future research into Supporting Frameworks.	181

References	189
------------	-----

Appendices	202
------------	-----

List of Tables

Chapter 2

Table 2.1	Comparison of Problem Solving Models	20
Table 2.2	Characteristics of well-structured and ill-structures problems	23

Chapter 3

Table 3.1	Data Collection Procedures	70
Table 3.2	Research Protocols	71
Table 3.3	Weekly Schedule for Study	72
Table 3.4	Comparison of Critical/Non-critical Thinking	75
Table 3.5	Time Allocation	86

Chapter 4

Table 4.1	Access & Use of Evidence to support problem 1	95
Table 4.2	Access & Use of Evidence to support problem 2	96
Table 4.3	Identifiable Learning Skills – Problem 1	99
Table 4.4	Identifiable Learning Skills – Problem 2	100
Table 4.5	Action Steps for Problem Solving	103
Table 4.6	Analysis of action steps in cognitive strategies used in individual problem solving process (Critical Thinking)	115
Table 4.7	Analysis of action steps in cognitive strategies used in individual problem solving process (Six Hats)	124
Table 4.8	Analysis of action steps in cognitive strategies used in individual problem solving process (Venn Diagram))	132
Table 4.9	Analysis of action steps in cognitive strategies used in individual problem solving process (Concept Map)	142
Table 4.10	Criteria used in assessing use of support framework	145
Table 4.11	Use of Critical Thinking Framework	148
Table 4.12	Use of Six Hats Framework	151
Table 4.13	Use of Venn Diagram Framework	155
Table 4.14	Use of Concept Map Framework	159

List of Figures

Chapter 2

Figure 2.1	Suggested Problem Solving Model	22
Figure 2.2	Model of the Human Memory System (after Ormrod, 2000)	27
Figure 2.3	Information Processing Model (after Gick, 1986)	28
Figure 2.4	Overview of the learning process (after Barker et al, 1998)	31
Figure 2.5	Solution Framework (after Land & Hannafin, 1996)	34
Figure 2.6	A systemic framework for arguments (after Palonis et al. 1999)	38

Chapter 3

Figure 3.1	PDA viewer and electronic notebook	80
Figure 3.2	The Water Research Centre	84
Figure 3.3	Setting for Problem 1	86
Figure 3.4	Setting for Problem 2	88

Chapter 5

Figure 5.1	Demonstrated weaknesses in problem solving	185
Figure 5.2	Proposed Solution Framework	187