Students Writing Their Own Textbook, A Successful Situational Learning Case Study

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Abstract

Culturally-situated learning is the creation of learning environments where theory is tied to contextual practice, such as students authoring a textbook on instructional message design during an online instructional design graduate course. From this perspective, learning is enhanced when it is imbedded in an authentic system of shared beliefs, values, goals, customs, and behaviors. This class project tied theory to practice, and the result is now available as a hardcopy from Amazon, as a Kindle e-book, and as a free PDF from the host institution's Digital Commons. This AECT presentation and proceedings paper illustrates a successful process where the affordances of Google Docs and Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing were used to coordinate, communicate, and create the book. Lessons learned and best practices are offered for attendees and readers, and thoughts, comments, and suggestions for the second volume are welcome.

Introduction

Culturally-situated learning applies theory to real-world contexts where learning is enhanced through practice, feedback, and collaboration (Brown et al., 1989). This project describes a creative instructional design that expands upon previous work, an innovative application of technology tools, and an effective culturally-situated instructional strategy. Culturally-situated learning is the creation of authentic learning environments where theory is tied to practice, such as students authoring their own textbook on instructional message design during an instructional design graduate course. From this perspective, learning is enhanced when it is imbedded in an authentic system of shared beliefs, values, goals, customs, and behaviors. As an added motivation, students did not have to buy a textbook for this class because they were writing the textbook during the class. This AECT presentation illustrated a successful process where the affordances of Google Docs, Creative Commons copyright options, and Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing were used to coordinate, communicate, and create a course textbook.

Literature reviews are a popular assignment in graduate courses and give students an opportunity to research, analyze, synthesize, and summarize a class-related topic. However, it has been this instructor's experience that these literature reviews have limited or no direct application after the course. That effort commonly goes into a binder to collect dust or takes up storage space on a hard drive somewhere never to be seen again. Along with a comprehensive textbook for the class, another goal of the course was to turn a classic academic literature review assignment into a published book chapter with best practice guidelines for the practical application of a self-selected topic (see Figure 1).
Figure 1. Each chapter was written by a graduate student and peer-reviewed by the instructor and all other students in class. The result was the course textbook *Instructional Message Design: Theory, Research, and Practice, Volume 1*.

**The Culturally-Situated Learning Activity**

The graduate course, "Instructional Message Design", details and describes a critical aspect of design models for instructional designers and human performance technologists. Instructional message design is the use of theory, tools, and techniques to convey information to learners to create knowledge and understanding (Fleming & Levie, 1993). There are several textbooks on the topic, though the foundational text has been out of print for over 25 years. The instructor also wanted to include contemporary applications such as simulations, augmented and virtual reality, cultural aspects, and empathic considerations. Other textbooks cover significant aspects of the course's learning objectives, though this collection would require students to spend a small fortune buying nearly half a dozen books (or the instructor navigating the legal copyright implications of scanning and posting online multiple chapters from each book). The instructor was uncomfortable with either prospect. However, the instructor was inspired by similar research, projects, and other ongoing work with student-generated books (Kidd et al., 2011; Mays et al., 2017). The instructor revised the structure of the course to focus on the student chapters being the main, culturally-situated deliverable.
The process started with the instructor creating a list of nearly 24 topics in Google Docs and sending the link to their students. Topics ranged from theories, models, and cultural aspects of message design, to contemporary tools and techniques. Students self-selected a topic based on their specific research agendas or their general interests. The topics not selected became the focus of the instructor's chapters, class presentations, and other learning objectives throughout the course. Several milestones were worked into the course to ensure students stayed on pace to finish their projects. These milestones were paced several weeks apart and included their selection of a topic, initial chapter outline, initial chapter draft, working draft, then their final draft. The instructor's introduction chapter served as a starting point for students and a basic template for their chapters. This chapter was written before class started, introduced students (and future readers) to the main topics (and future chapters), and was read by students as one of the class's early assignments. The chapter was posted to Google Docs, and students were asked to provide feedback via Google's “Suggesting” and add “Comments” features as they would when they reviewed their peers' chapters later in the course. The format of the chapter (and the example for student chapters) employed APA version 6 formatting with the use of single-spaced, 14-point font size and 1-1/2 inch margins to aid in readability when color printed and bound by Amazon.

Each student's working chapter draft was posted and shared online as a Google Document, and each student was required to read and provide their peers with feedback on each chapter. The instructor wrote one of the theory chapters and also provided each student with feedback. The student authors could see their received input via the Suggestions and Comments features in Google Docs. These features work very similarly to Track Changes and New Comment features in Microsoft Word where students can compare their original work with suggested edits, feedback, and comments. The students then used this feedback to edit and create their final draft. Learners were also required to analyze and synthesize each chapter in a reflection assignment to confirm that all students had read every chapter. The final activity of the class was the student authors voting and selecting the book's front and inner cover (a PowerPoint slide sized to about 11x17 was used to create the front and rear cover of the book).

While the final draft of their chapters completed the requirements of the course, the instructor served as the book editor after the class was complete. The instructor integrated the book chapters together into a single cohesive document, addressed image copyright issues, and initiated the upload process to Amazon using Amazon's Kindle authoring tools (the book was made available at the lowest cost Amazon would allow). The instructor also partnered with the host institution's library to upload each chapter to that university's Digital Commons (with a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license). The book and each chapter are now publicly available as a free open source PDF, as a hardcopy from Amazon, and as a Kindle e-book (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. The finished book is now available as a hardcopy and a Kindle e-book from Amazon, and as an open source PDF.
Conclusion

Culturally-situated, real-world projects create authentic learning activities that connect theory to application. The purpose of this AECT presentation and paper was to describe how the lack of an available course textbook and the desire for applied literature reviews led to the creation of a culturally-situated, open-source, student-authored book. A lot of work goes into a thorough literature review, and it would be a shame if the efforts of talented students and future scholars did not extend beyond the graded deliverables of a class. Adult learners are also motivated when they can see the real-world relevance of their work, and creating a book that will benefit others and live on after class was definitely motivating. Each student now also has a published chapter that can be listed and referenced in their professional portfolios and in their growing curriculum vitae and resumes.

Writing a book takes a significant investment of time and effort (Ben-Ari, 2002; Kerr, 1978). However, the overall workload can be lessened when a group of interested authors work together. The online access and shared affordance of Google Docs allowed for a level of communication where co-authoring, reviewing, and editing book chapters was much easier than managing files sent to and from the authors. Meanwhile, the authoring tools in Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing service opens other avenues for student-authored books besides an institution's Digital Commons and other open resource collections. The use of Google Docs, Amazon's authoring tools, and Word and PowerPoint meant that expensive or custom software was not required to author or assemble the book. Several other lessons learned includes to leave more time for students to revise their final drafts, review the use of open source figures and diagrams, and for the instructor to plan for a lengthy editing process when creating the book. For instance, after the class was complete, the instructor was still contacting students for edit feedback, was replacing figures that were not open sourced or were previously copyrighted, and organizing the book into its final form. This final process took several weeks after the end of the class. However, this project worked well, students provided feedback that they enjoyed the process and the final result, and the instructor looks forward to a second volume that should be created in the Summer of 2021. This model can successfully be applied to other disciplines in other classes, especially when the instructor is sensitive to the cost of textbooks and wants to motivate adult learners with an authentic and culturally-situated project.

References


