

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING OF MARKETING ETHICS THROUGH COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues the utility of online collaborative learning in marketing ethics education. It presents initial findings from an analysis of student interaction during an online element of an Open University (OU) Business School course on fundraising, where the management of ethics by the students' organisations are considered and compared. The study reveals the importance of context (online, personal and professional) in how online learners work with each other to develop knowledge and understanding. Second, drawing on this analysis, the paper ventures some brief recommendations for designing collaborative learning experiences aimed at developing ethically competent marketers.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents initial findings from an analysis of collaborative learning about ethics during an online element of an Open University (OU) Business School course on fundraising (an area of marketing requiring stringent ethics). Of particular interest is the importance in this process of context, not only the immediate context of the text-based conferencing medium itself, but also the professional and personal contexts of the participants themselves. Second, drawing on this analysis, the paper ventures some brief recommendations for designing collaborative learning experiences aimed at developing ethically competent marketers.

ETHICS – A SITE UNDER CONSTRUCTION?

Valuing collaboration in learning, whether online or in other settings, implies an epistemology which acknowledges learners' mental constructions of the world as valid knowledge rather than conceiving knowledge as an external, consistent and objective reality – an approach which has become known as constructivism (Salmon 2003; Jonassen 1991). Bednar et al. (1991) point to the implications for education: "... the learner is building an internal representation of knowledge, a personal interpretation of experience Conceptual growth comes from the sharing of multiple perspectives and simultaneous changing of our internal representations in response to those perspectives as well as through cumulative experience." (p.91).

Rowntree (1995) appears to value collaborative learning as skills development in the area of learning

itself, rather than as a route to subject knowledge or understanding. For him its lesson is: 'not so much product (e.g. information) as process – in particular the creative cognitive process of offering up ideas, having them criticised or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion.' (p. 207).

But if a group of learners flounders on a complex and confusing subject like ethics, what, in the framework of constructivism, is to rescue them? The traditional liberal argument is that freedom of speech drives bad ideas out by allowing them to be challenged and replaced by better ones. Give collaborative learners long enough and they should, according to this theory, get it right in the end. But we are concerned with learners in the time-limited, curriculum-focused framework of formal education. Far from encouraging the abdication of pedagogic responsibility, constructivism throws down a challenge to educators to create an architecture offering students productive autonomy alongside the secure expectation of achieving agreed learning outcomes within the time and resources available.

Constructivism, Learning and Professional Knowledge

This challenge is worth accepting if only on pragmatic grounds. A number of studies show that the kind of collaborative interactions associated with constructivism in practice trigger cognitive mechanisms (such as explanation, internalisation, conflict and the recognition of discrepancies) which associate with understanding, learning and metacognition (Goodyear 2002; Thorpe and Godwin 2006). The online setting facilitates this considerably by allowing postings to be read, mulled over, and referred back to as appropriate. It also obliges participants to take ownership of their contributions more directly than might be the case in a face to face setting. Everything online is attributable and on the record.

Furthermore, professional knowledge (such as that which underpins ethical marketing activity) is itself the product of constructivist processes. Developed and promulgated in a particular community, a body of specific knowledge is one of the distinguishing marks of a profession (Eraut 1994). Industry ethical

codes or conventions are an important expression of this kind of knowledge. Vardy and Grosch (1999, p.4) point out the etymological root of the word, the Greek *ethikos*, denoting 'custom' or 'usage', a concept which makes no sense outside of a participatory, social setting. But professional ethics do not operate in isolation from a wider reality. They are, after all, developed to manage the moral dilemmas presented by balancing the internal and external interests at play in different professional communities as they interface with the larger world.

For these reasons (its cognitive advantages, its capacity for ownership and reflection, and its truth to processes of professional knowledge creation) collaborative learning online recommends itself to teaching and learning about marketing ethics.

METHODOLOGY

This data for this study was gathered from online collaboration by students preparing for the first of three assignments in a six-month blended learning course in fundraising run by the OU Business School in association with the Institute of Fundraising (the UK lead industry body for fundraising). The course assumes some experience in fundraising, either on a paid or voluntary basis, and is designed as a widely-accessible route to a nationally-recognised industry qualification. In spite of their common professional orientation, the course's students since its inception in 2002 have demonstrated considerable variation in experience and specialisation within the overall fundraising function. Their diversity makes them typical of the OU student population more generally. Informed consent was sought from all participants, and the data anonymised before publication.

The Nature of the Assignment

The assignment requires the students to compare the way their own organisation ensures ethical fundraising practice with how this is ensured in the organisation of at least one other colleague in their regionally-based 16-strong tutor group. The question stipulates that the comparison must be based on information exchanged using the web forum to which each tutor group has access

A number of delivery modes converge on this assignment – face-to-face teaching, online exchanges (using FirstClass conferencing software) and printed study texts. The assignment is introduced at a face-to-face tutorial for each regional group. Early student messages in the appropriate web forum tend to refer back to this 'live' tutorial, as

the task-related discussion begins. At this point the course reading is covering themes around fundraising ethics (for example the representation of client groups in promotional material). The relevant web forums have a relatively brief life of up to three weeks, after which the students submit individual assignments (electronically) before moving on to the next set of learning tasks. It is therefore essential for students to address the collaborative task swiftly, and the initial personal encounter accelerates the formation of the necessary trust to do so effectively (cf. Castelfranchi 2002).

The assignment itself is formative. In the cohort under study, it was submitted by 93 students from an initial registration of 104. Interestingly, only 73 students actually posted in the relevant forums suggesting that a significant number of their colleagues compared ethical practice in another organisation without reciprocating with their own information. Indeed, one or two of the later messages in the forums were from students apologising for not having contributed, but acknowledging the help they had received. This demonstrates that collaboration within the exercise as a whole was variable, which could be seen as consistent with the voluntary conditions under which collaboration is likely to flourish.

Data Analysis

The data consists of records of the messages constituting the collaborative work in each web forum. Because of the relatively short lives of each forum this data was not so extensive as to suggest the 'corpus methods' approach often associated with computer-mediated communication (McEnery and Wilson 1996). Instead the analysis proceeded qualitatively, through repeated readings of the messages in each forum, identifying and coding recurrent themes, and noting the varieties of interrelatedness of messages.

The coding was not predefined, but developed from the data, and modified as further themes and sub-themes developed (Miles and Huberman 1984). However, taking account of the relevant literature about online communication, the issue of context as a sub theme became increasingly prominent and eventually formed the framework around which the analysis and discussion proceeded.

DISCUSSION

The online setting presents participants with a learning environment many of whose variables are centrally determined. Preece (2000) divides them

into the two broad categories of usability and sociability, respectively the technical affordances and social policies which set the scene for collaborative activity online. But more importantly, like any form of discourse, computer-mediated communication creates its own context. Participants begin to forge this even before the collaboration starts – bringing a variety of expectations to the exercise. Their presuppositions are subsequently open to challenge by developments in the interaction itself. So, in spite of terms like 'online environment' (or indeed 'the online setting' with which I began this paragraph) which imply that context is something which exists separately from discourse, it might be more accurate to see it as something which unfolds alongside, or even as a result of it (Jones 2002).

Immediate Context

The data revealed three levels on which this sense of context operated to affect the collaboration. First was the immediate context of the forum itself. With six different tutor groups working separately (and one of them subdivided further), forums showed considerable variability in how the task was approached. Early messages set formal precedents (dialogicality at work). The use of attachments is a case in point. One conference was populated early by a series of message attachments of written ethics policies or similar statements, but little direct discussion. This prompted a number of self-deprecatory messages from other participants with attachments containing their reflections on not having a written ethical policy. One such was titled '*Ethical policy (or lack of).doc*' (Forum 2, Message 12), and a later message in the same forum read '*Attached are details surrounding the non existence of the ethical policy for XY Charity! I hope I have given clear information, should anyone have any questions or comments feel free to contact me. Emily :o*' (Forum 2, Message 14). The early messages had created the expectation of attachments as the main vehicle for meaningful contribution, as well as the impression of the desirability of a written ethics policy as a badge of a properly-run charity. Emily's emoticon rounds off the tone of cheerful self-deprecation evident in her message (and typical of this stage of the forum's development in terms of the somewhat detached social presence being created by participants by focusing interaction away from messages to attachments).

Following an intervention from the tutor, and the surfacing of several new participants, the discussion became more message based, and the attachments died away. To some extent this is because a critical

mass of policies had now assembled for scrutiny (reducing participants' anxiety about the successful outcome of the comparison task) but it also marked a maturation of the discourse into a less nervy style.

Personal Context

Further to this immediate context of the form and content of messages, many participants established the personal context of life outside online communication (which had the effect of grounding their ethical discussion as part of day-to-day activity). A number of messages featured the intrusion of personal life into the discussion – either as a rhetorical gesture of exit from the forum (e.g. '*One last things about ethics before I head off to play five-a-sides*' (Forum 6c, Message 1)), or as an explanation for some kind of disruption in service as a participant (including not being able to find a tutorial venue, problems with software, moving house, a sudden crisis at work, and even a proposal of marriage). In several messages, participants reflected ruefully that raising the issue of the lack of an ethical fundraising policy with a manager or trustee in the course of their research had resulted in their being immediately commissioned to draw one up.

Professional Context

The personal thus overlapped significantly with the third level of context, the professional. One participant recounted a compromise she had reached with her charity's director over her personal reluctance to have anything to do with a multinational company of whose activities she disapproved (and which were, in her view, contrary to the purposes of her organisation): '*So although I do not buy XY products in my personal life, in my work life I now take part in one of their corporate promotional schemes!*' (Forum 3, Message 8).

Frequently, a participant would acknowledge the absence of a written code of ethics but describe informal policies on legitimate support. Usually these messages contained scenarios, based on the participant's experience which engaged other participants readily in discussion, and constructed ethics as a process of discernment case by case.

Other aspects of this professional context were more explicitly external – for example, discussion of the rationale for the newly-launched self-regulatory body for fundraising in the UK, or reflections on the potentially hostile attitude of the media. Certain sectoral emphases emerged in the discussions. Charities serving the elderly or dying admitted

particular challenges in the area of donations from beneficiaries, and acknowledged tensions between fundraisers and service providers. Those working in health or cancer research avoided support from tobacco or drinks firms, while other good causes were less reluctant to accept it (notwithstanding reservations about publicity).

CONCLUSIONS

Goodyear (2002) identifies three key design elements for successful collaboration: the tasks required of learners, the way that relationships are supported by organisational forms, and what he calls the 'space' (real or virtual) afforded to learners for their appropriation. This tripartite structure of tasks, form, and space suggests itself as an appropriate framework for the conclusions to this brief paper.

Tasks: there is merit in making the tasks required of collaborative learners as straightforward as possible. A considerable number of exchanges in the forums expressed personal anxiety about the feasibility of the task: 'Actually I felt really shaky on Section D because so few organisations seemed to have a written policy, I was at a loss about what and how to compare ...' (Forum 2, Message 42). The issue of a written ethical policy assumed a disproportionate importance in many of the participants' minds (perhaps because of the security it offered as reference material). Essentially a number of learners (re)constructed the task for themselves, and some tutors were more successful than others in steering them back to the original brief (which was about how ethical practice was ensured).

Form: the integrity of the constructivist view of collaborative learning relies on autonomous contributions from learners. Thus the organizational form adopted for collaborative learning needs to be one which allows participants at different stages of competence in this kind of learning to develop confidently. Opinions differ on optimum group size for online collaboration (Kukulska-Hume, 2003) but the evidence from this study suggests that smaller groups thrive, but that all sizes of group benefit from some degree of facilitation.

Space: finally, the space into which learners need initiation is essentially one of incipient professionalism. The exchanges in this exercise, for all their diversity of experience, shared a common sense of the seriousness and complexity of marketing ethics in a shared professional milieu. They provide evidence of learning about ethics not as an abstract system, or something that is done by

other people in other situations, but as a directly relevant issue for engagement and ownership by learners themselves.

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