

Contesting contexts: Critiquing curriculum design and transaction in distance and online learning

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Introduction

We are living in an evolving knowledge society – in a way, we are constantly contesting spaces. However, context is significant to human learning and human development, and therefore, to knowledge generation. In our globalized world of nation states, we find that socio-economic, racial and cultural variables enact impediments to devalue and/or minimise the context, and thereby human thinking and innovations. Culture, curriculum and learning are inextricably related; while culture-in-context is the framework and foundation, cultural fusion and processes (rather than the products) through globalisation – i.e. exchange of know-how, innovations, best practices, and the like – are the flesh and blood of an innovative and progressive culture, and therefore, of curriculum.

Developments in other contexts globally, therefore, need to be experienced and reflected upon by people in-context. Information and communication technology (ICT) does a yoman's job in this endeavour. Since dialogue and collaboration are essential to human critical reflection and learning, modern interactive technologies are fundamentally important to facilitate dialogue and interaction at a distance. However, one must guard against diffusion of technology (and technologically wrought products including curriculum) without the concomitant social shaping of technology (Lievrouw, 2002).

Distance education, which today heavily depends on modern media and technology, has grown through many generations (Taylor, 2001); has often been trapped into Fordism and instructional industrialism (Evans and Nation, 1989). What is essential is dialogue, interaction, critical reflection, knowledge construction, and negotiation of meaning. The new generation of technology-enabled distance education has the potentiality to serve the 'lifeworld' (if not the system) (Sumner, 2000), though there is a need that it should also serve a critically reflected 'system' to facilitate the lifeworld. Curriculum should empower to critically reflect by both the teachers while constructing/designing curriculum and by the learners while engaging in it.

This presentation concludes that, in this age of globalisation and cross-border curricular implementation, while 'context' is important to human survival, learning, and development (and, therefore, could form a base for curriculum), the cultural context needs to be contested to widen its base and operation through, and as a result of, globalisation. In this technologised world,

culture, curriculum, online learning community, and offline community of practice need to be seen in a comprehensive and integrated network to contextualise the contesting strands of spaces.

Evolving knowledge society

Technological developments have led to significant impacts on cultures towards institutional changes. In the emergence of what is called an information society, the processes of globalisation and technological changes which endeavour individual freedom as well as global solidarity, go hand in hand with changes in culture and ideology which preserve welfare, equity and justice. In the context of globalisation, it is argued that the economic changes are driven by global communication networks (Castells, 1998), while Giddens (1999) argues that technology adoption and socio-economic changes are instrumentations of broader globalisation. While information society as a modern society is seen in the continuum of industrialism-capitalism-modernity-surveillance, Beesen (2003) contends that communities in cultures must be empowered to resist their submersion in global information culture. Therefore, it has been pleaded that we must in our formulations look into what is called ‘knowledge society’ which grounds knowledge in culture; fosters diversity, pluralism and freedom; fuses traditional and new knowledge; ensures lifelong education and collaborative development. Context in a knowledge society, therefore, assumes greater significance.

Putting ‘context’ in context

In our formulation, as we shall see later, context consists of the culture and its communities of practice, and is characterised by both situated cognition and learning as well as mediated learning (Laurillard, 1993) towards scientific view of the world. Saljo (1984) underlined that “...Our knowledge gained by personal experience and therefore ‘true’ in our everyday realm of life, may in our culture have to yield to an alternative mode of conceptualisation that links with a scientific ‘version of the world’” (p. 31). Brown et al (1989) postulated that knowledge is contextually situated, and is influenced by activity. Lave and Wenger (1991) talked about situated learning as situated activity through legitimate peripheral participation. It is an integral part of social practice, and is also transformative. It provides a bridge between cognitive processes and social practice. In a later work, Wenger (1998) postulated that learning as social participation has four components: meaning (learning as experience), practice (learning as doing), community (learning as belonging), and identity (learning as becoming). Further, learning involves participation in community of practice, and also transformation of knowledge in form of experiencing one’s identity, and change in both individual and community ideology. The context here is the transformative practice of the learning community.

The question is how could distance/online learning address this context in the educational discourse, while designing curriculum to address the contexts of the global village?

Generations of distance education, and changing nature of distance learning

Distance education through its historical evolution has passed through many generations, interpreted in a variety of ways. The popular classification is technology-based since distance education delivery is heavily dominated by technology. Nipper (1989) identified three generations linked to developments in production, distribution and communication technologies.

However, Taylor's (2001) classification of five generations is widely applied depending on institutional preparedness for technology innovations.

- Correspondence model: This is the earliest form using printed materials through postal correspondence with occasional face-to-face contact.
- Multi-media model: Contributed by the developments in ICTs, this generation still uses the print, but distance teaching institutions are adopting media mix and media integration for mass delivery of distance education.
- Tele-learning model: This model is based on conferencing-audio, video and computer conferencing. Group learning, collaborative learning, dialogue and interaction were possible due to this.
- Flexible learning model: With the advent of WWW and such other technologies, new pedagogic and delivery models are being tested, and the multimedia basket is providing enough flexibility to learners to proceed as per one's pace and style without losing the quality of learning. Digitised asynchronous communication is found to be pedagogically more effective than others.
- Intelligent flexible learning model: This generation introduced automated and dynamic student access and advice system through multiple media outputs from a single source.

Given the technological developments transcending space and time, the nature of distance learning is changing. The Internet and online learning are providing enormous flexibility and resources to redefine, and rather widen, the context of interaction. Blended learning is emerging as the preferred form of distance education delivery. Sumner (2000), based on Habermasian theory of communicative action, argues that the new generation technologies facilitate distance education to go beyond the 'system' (i.e. the socio-economic/institutional system) towards the 'lifeworld' (that is characterized by interpersonal relationship, reflective discourse, etc. and is reproduced through the medium of communicative action). The lifeworld reproduces culture, and therefore crucial to defining the context. As shall be argued later, distance education needs to consciously bring isolated learners together towards communicative action. Given that there are both global and local contexts, the DE curriculum should be designed to facilitate both. Writes Sumner, "Distance educators can begin to make choices to build the lifeworld by increasing, wherever possible, the opportunities for communicative action, or they can continue to serve the system at the expense of the lifeworld by preserving the traditional isolation of distance students and by promoting the professionalizing, individualizing and personalizing trends of the field, which support the demands of strategic action" (2000, p. 270). While there is a need to critically reflect on the system itself, it is also necessary that technology be deployed for dialogue, social learning, and communicative action (Evans and Nation, 1989).

Learning in context

Much of curricular choices depends on our perception of how does (adult) learning occur. Adult learning theories are of recent origin, and most of the interpretations go beyond behaviourism towards constructivist ways of social construction of knowledge and negotiation of meaning. Mezirow's (1990, 1991) works on transformative learning, Schon's (1987) work on reflective practitioner, Moon's (1999) work on professional development, and Richardson's (2000) work on learning styles of both campus-based and distance learning shall be useful base to work out a framework of constructivist and transformative learning in which individual (and group) reflection holds the key towards deeper learning and change in cognitive structure of learners/professional practitioners. A derivative framework has been presented by Panda and Juwah (2006) given in Figure 1.

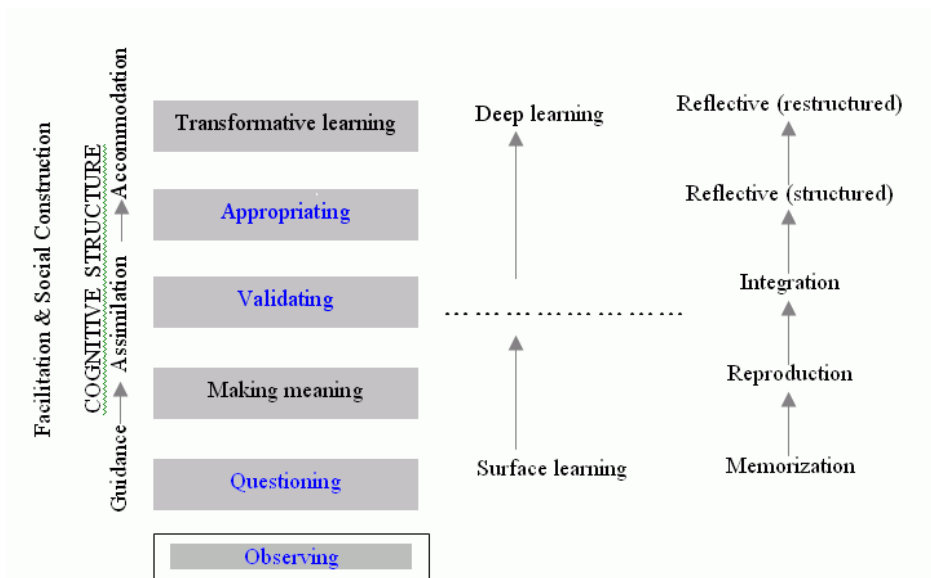


Figure 1: Cognitive structure, reflection and transformative learning/ professional development
 (Sources: Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Moon, 1999; Richardson, 2000; Juwah and Panda, 2005)

The framework as suggested in Figure 1 is grounded in constructivist view of learning, and the shift is from structured teaching to construction of own knowledge in a network called ‘cognitive structure’. The six-stage mental process comprises, from bottom to the top: observing (i.e. observing any phenomenon), questioning (i.e. the learner questions and clarifies, gets reassured of one’s own understanding), making meaning (i.e. building on prior knowledge, establishing connections, assimilating new materials), validation (i.e. application and validation in real life situations; also a private process of construction of meaning), appropriation (i.e. using learnt materials in new contexts); and transformative learning (i.e. extensive use of the cognitive structure towards evaluating one’s own frame of reference, and others’ process of knowing). It must be underlined that ‘reflection’ plays a critical role in facilitating best possible representations of learning, moving from surface to deep approaches to learning (Marton et al, 1984; Marton and Saljo, 1997; Entwistle, 1997; Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1993; and Richardson, 2000). Reflection is involved at the third stage onwards, and possibly facilitates the cognitive structure to upgrade/move towards higher stages of learning. One needs to move beyond Schon’s (1987) analysis of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action; the classification suggested by Cowan (2002) and the processes indicated by Moon (1999) should be useful; and Cowan’s (1998) reflection-for-action provides further impetus towards designing for reflection.

In the cultural context of meaning-making, one needs to go beyond the interpretation of situated cognition (Brown et al, 1989) towards experiencing the world; and that while academic learning is to be situated, academic teaching ‘must address both the direct experience of the world, and the reflection on that experience that will produce the intended way of representing it’ (Laurillard, 1993, p. 29). She has further suggested that the process needs to be dialogic, involve description of actions, recognise second-order character of academic knowledge, and should follow the process of discursive-adaptive-interactive-reflective characteristics so that the situated context is further supported by wider understanding of the global world. To quote her, “Thus teaching is a rhetorical activity: it is mediated learning, allowing students to acquire knowledge of someone

else's way of experiencing the world" (1993, p. 29). In the context of globalisation, online learning facilitates this mediation.

Based on the works of some of the critical scholars of education and distance/online learning, an online professional development framework is suggested in Figure 2. The context-specific framework suggested in Figure 1 is further extended to online learning contexts which has more space, than conventional face-to-face education, to contest contexts, and widen the sphere of interaction, dialogue, discourse, reflection, and therefore affirmative action. The context comprises the online learning community (OLC), the community of practice (CoP), and the social context/community culture. It is argued that individual and collective 'reflection' binds and brings coherence to the meanings derived from all the three. Jonassen's (1994) articulation of the web of constructivism comprising context, collaboration, and construction should be useful in visualising this framework of context.

In the online learning context, Garrison and Anderson (2003) articulated 'critical thinking' for individuals and 'discourse' for group activity in their online learning community of enquiry. What we contend, as given in Figure 2, is that learning is not an exclusive online activity – while learning online one is also offline, i.e. in the context of the community of practice. In our formulation, we contend that 'reflection' can be effectively used towards individual and group interactions in making and negotiating meaning – in the situated context, and the cross-cultural global contexts respectively. Garrison and Anderson's formulation of online cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence is of immense value to distance educators. An additional 'design presence' is articulated in Figure 2 – in what ways the reflective curriculum and online resources can be designed.

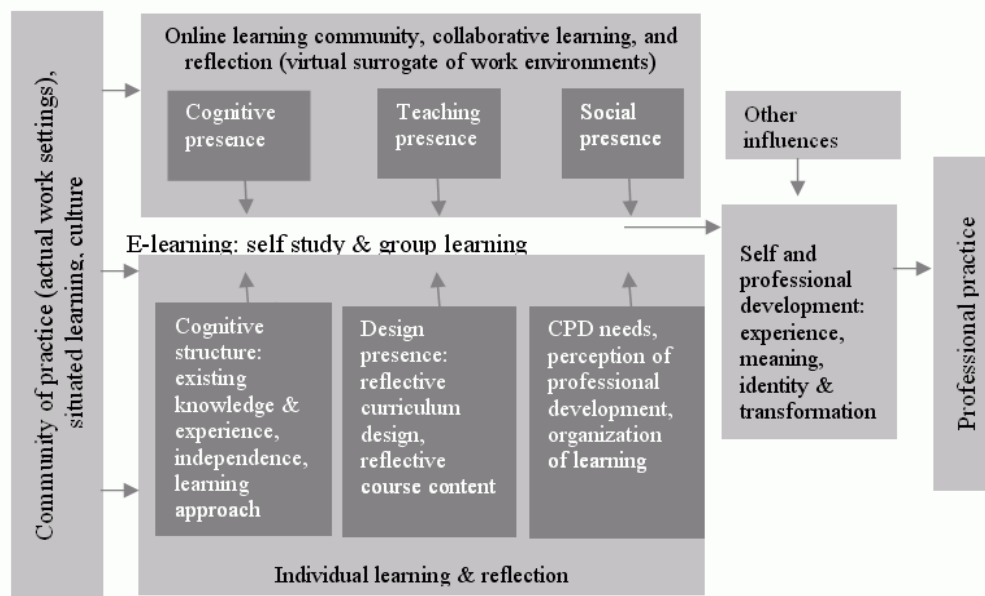


Figure 2: Constructivist online continuing professional development of online facilitators: a framework

(Sources: Dewey, 1933; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Habermas (1971); Jonassen et al, 1995; Gunawardena et al, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Mezirow, 1990, 1991; Moon, 1999; Richardson, 2000; Salmon, 2002; Schon, 1987; Wenger, 1998)

Figure 3 outlines a framework of reflective online resources (Panda and Mishra, 2006) in which the central theme across orientation and organization tools, learning activity tools, interactive and collaboration tools, support tools, and analytic tools is that how could reflection be built into the design of these curricular experiences in the context of online learning. While Internet supports the existing CoPs as OLC, the existence of the local community of practice and its group collaborative projects ensure authentication and credibility. Culture is important to this context – culture, ethnicity, personality and political ethos, rather than chronological age, are important to experiencing learning (Brookfield, 1995).

Framework for Online Resources				
Orientation and Organization Tools	Learning Activity Tools	Interaction and Collaboration Tools	Support Tools	Analytic Tools
Welcome and Calendar	Module	Email	Mentor Support	Model Evaluation
Instructor & Learning Community	Self-Assessment Questions	Discussion Forum	Technical Support	Module Evaluation
Concept Map	Assignments	Online Chat	Web Resources	Teaching Evaluation
Syllabus	Case & Community Projects	Participant Corner	Search Engines	Satisfaction
Online CPD Framework	Action Research	Wiki	Online Dictionary & Thesaurus	Reflection on Process
	Reflective Journal		Netiquettes & Emoticons	Assessment of Learning

Figure 3: Framework for reflective online resources

While becoming aware and critical of one’s own and others’ assumptions (Mezirow, 1991) is essential for transformative learning, critical reflection facilitates transformative practice (Halen-Faber, 1997). Our framework depicted in Figure 2 is extended into a schema in Figure 4 which depicts causal relationships among context, collaboration, knowledge construction, social construction and negotiation, and transformative learning and empowerment.

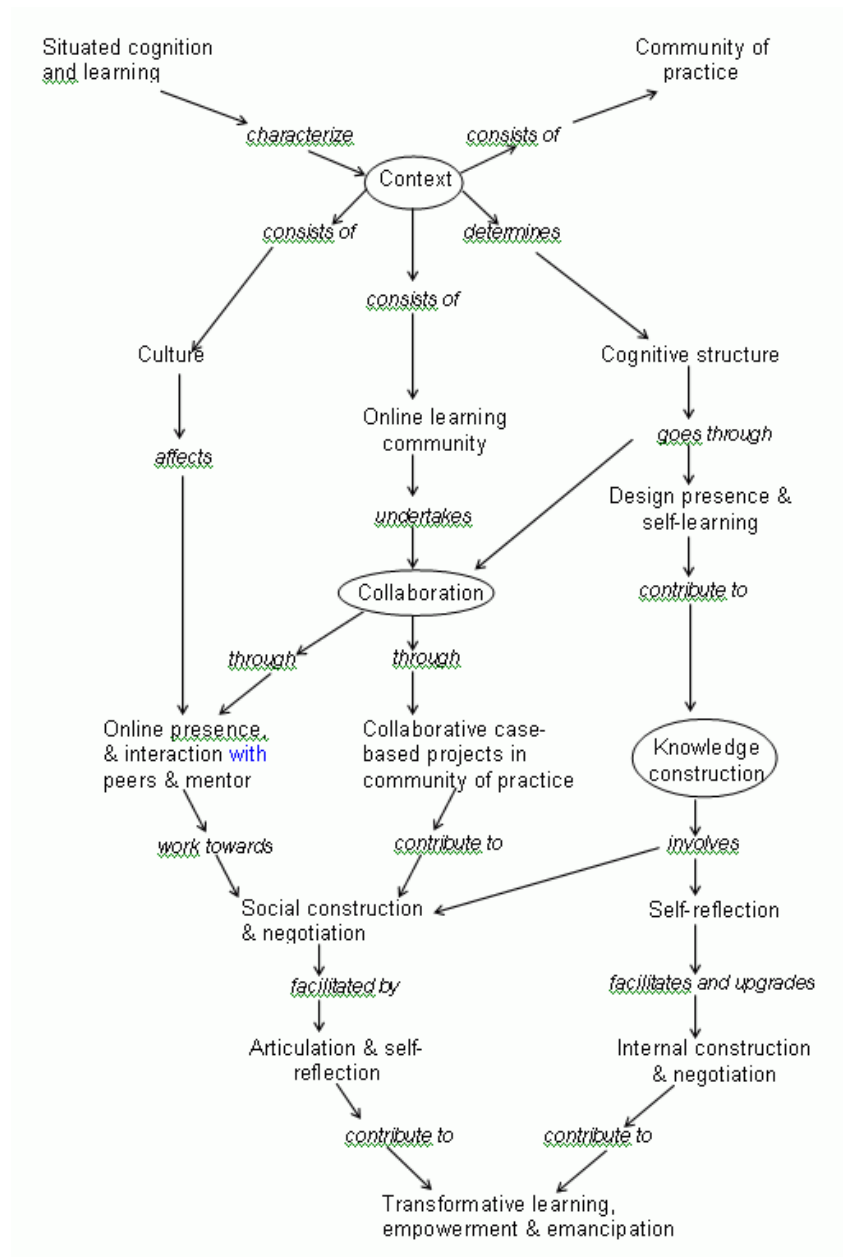


Figure 4: Online constructivist professional development schema
 (© Santosh Panda, 2003)

Work-integrated learning

As we have argued, while learning needs to be situated in context through activities designed within the community, the learners must be exposed to experiencing the world. Therefore, ‘work’ here would involve both the work-in-context and the global (niche) market. Since our everyday experience of knowledge in our own culture and context is true to us for day-to-day living, it needs to be conceptualised in an alternative way to link with the scientific vision of world (Saljo, 1984, p. 10). Therefore, while the curriculum must be related to the situatedness of learning, it must draw in global scientific/research-based conceptions and applications to make

sense and relate meaning to the globalised world. From this sense, curriculum design must address both the local context and the global context. A synergy between everyday experience and understanding of analytical/scientific concepts is a pre-requisite to any curricular framework.

What the local context can do is to create environments that will facilitate learners to examine the phenomena created/articulated by others. Reflection on what others have said and done, and deriving meaning to further articulate one's own conceptualisation and going beyond intended meaning is what needs to be contested. This is possible through experiencing the second-order character of academic knowledge (Laurillard, 1993, pp. 94-95). Jarvis (1999) argues that "what universities teach is not knowledge, but information, which only becomes knowledge when it has been learned, and only becomes legitimate knowledge when it has been found to work for the learners... The concept of practical knowledge – or personal theory – becomes significant" (p. 251).

Globalisation and cross border delivery

In the context of globalisation, it is argued that cross-border, especially corporate, learning products shall further perpetuate/serve the system, and not the lifeworld: 'the larger context of corporate globalisation promotes system-serving forms of distance education' (Sumner, 2000, p. 281). On the other hand, in the context of new technologies, Evans and Nation (1993) argue that '... there is the possibility of educators using technologies to create systems of teaching and learning which sustain dialogue between teachers and students who are separated in both space and time' (p. 196). However, there is always a danger that the linguistic means of communication of each community, and membership in multi-communities impede global education (Pincas, 2001).

As has been argued earlier, globalisation is essential since it contests contexts, and also in the context of, besides the situated cognition, experiencing the global knowledge/contexts and how others view the concept/activity/phenomenon as available locally. There is always a danger if external consultants and/or external knowledge products are imported to run in local contexts. In a recent study on West African adult distance learners, Wilson (2001) reported cultural discontinuities in areas of: worldviews of authors and learners, culturally specific knowledge and conceptualisations, linguistic intrusion, and reading cognition profiles.

The South African tradition of *Ubuntu* (i.e. free expression and sharing in discussions) is a finer example of context-specific modern/globalised interaction: consensus, community of independent relationships, and caring learning environment (Heydenrych, 2003). In their study on online learning community in UNISA, the authors point to success of online collaborative learning concerning: social support, learner empowerment, transformative learning, critical reflection, engaged learning, independent research, among others. *Schosholoza* (i.e. group work as one group) was a key factor to its success. Does it need to contest the context?

What Anderson (2001) has remarked in the context of hidden curriculum in distance education holds good here: "Distance education thus serves to re-contextualize knowledge by forcing students into unfamiliar circumstances. Like campus-based education, it certainly has the potential to be used – either wittingly or unwittingly – to promote a particular cultural or ideological point of view. But good education, however it is delivered, should develop critical capacity and the motivation to reveal hidden bias. Furthermore, distance education allows students and professors unusual opportunities to engage collaboratively with individuals drawn from different cultural, economic, and political systems – thus helping us increase our knowledge of one another and the finite boundedness of our global home" (p. 35).

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