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Learning Relationships: From Theory to Designing Learning Objects

Dr. Pandeli Glavanis, Associate Director, Center for Learning and Teaching

In a recent issue of *New Chalk Talk* (Vol.5, No: 3) Dr Doris Jones contributed a most welcome comment on the significance of visual rhetoric and argued for the integration of visual literacy into text-based writing assignments. Coming as it did from a professional colleague in the Writing Program at AUC the message carried additional weight for many of us who continue to experiment with ways of motivating critical learning and self-learning in the classroom. The message conveyed by Dr Jones, of course, has also been a key and central issue of many studies and scholarship related to the centrality of visual images in our daily lives and even in our cognitive self. Dr Jones cites several such sources and I would like to contribute one which had a significant impact on my own approach to teaching many years ago. In 1972 the BBC produced an excellent documentary entitled *Ways of Seeing*, in which John Berger argued for the primacy of visual texts in a most forceful manner. (Berger, 1972) In effect Berger's message was quite basic as well as very complex and sophisticated. In the first place he argued that "*Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak*". (Berger, 1972: 7) This basic point underscores the significance of visual text and especially in an independent relationship to cognizance. Berger, however, also went on to argue that there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. Berger noted that "*It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled...The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.*" (Berger, 1972: 7-8)

It is particularly this second and more complex argument by Berger that inspired my own teaching methodology and thus I have made use for a considerable time of a variety of visual texts from still pictures to videos in trying to enhance critical thinking and self-learning in my classes. Nevertheless, it was not until much later and with the development of research in the cognitive science related to the scholarship of learning that I was able to grasp both the centrality and the opportunity afforded by such visual rhetoric in the learning relationship. It was in fact the pioneering work of Wenger in the late 1980s on cognition and learning relationships and especially his seminal text entitled *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998) which provided me with the theory needed to explain and account for the use of visual rhetoric in the learning relationship. In particular it was Wenger's work which enabled me to select the appropriate visual rhetoric for particular learning situations and thus engage even then in the production of what is now commonly referred to in the literature as targeted "*learning objects*" intended to communicate a certain concept or issue as well as generate critical thinking and self-learning amongst students. Nevertheless, I should point out that "*learning objects*" do not necessarily have to be visual, but in my case they invariably are as I derive my theory simultaneously from both Berger and Wenger and have embedded both of them in my teaching methodology. Let me explain.

Wenger's concept of *communities of practice* in effect synthesised in a very innovative manner prior research in the scholarship of learning and in particular two critical issues: first, the constructivist approach in which *learning derives primarily from activity* as compared to the earlier views that highlighted the *acquisition metaphor*, and second, a move towards the centrality of the social context in the learning process and especially the concept of *situated learning*. It is in fact this anthropological concept of situated learning which Wenger combined with constructivism in order to generate the critical concept of communities of practice. Thus, for Wenger knowledge and especially critical thinking derives from our participation in a community of practice which engages with a particular task (i.e. a learning

object). Furthermore, for Wenger participation is an active process through which meaning and knowledge is continually negotiated within the community of practice. In this respect participation is much more than collaboration or cooperation and in fact constitutes more of a *learning experience* derived from negotiating meaning within a community of practice (e.g. group work within a class).

It is from such a theoretical approach that I have formed my own teaching methodology in which I categorically avoid attributing primacy to the delivery of content per se as I do not believe that it is capable of developing critical thinking. Once the acquisition metaphor has been debunked it is impossible any longer to sustain the conventional approach to teaching where the “*sanctity of the content*” is paramount. (see New Chalk Talk Vol. 5, No: 5) Instead, the preferred teaching methodology is one which enables students to engage with particular tasks (learning objects) in order to make sense of that content and thus in the process develop critical thinking. Such activities, of course, are complimentary to the curriculum which is still delivered, but it is made clear to students that learning takes place in the engagement with the learning objects as such during group work both within and beyond the classroom. Thus, it is the student engagement with learning objects which provides the opportunity for them to negotiate knowledge through the process of participation in a community of practice that achieves primacy in my own teaching methodology.

Current scholarship of learning research argues quite forcefully that people are not motivated to learn per se, but are motivated to join a community of practice and thus a learning relationship exists only when we learn from or through others. “*We know that learning is not a passive act. It involves active construction and reconstruction of ideas and experience, usually through a range of carefully designed activities.*” (Alexander and Boud, 2001: 7) Thus, it is the design of such learning objects that constitutes the most important role of a teacher and the delivery of content as such. It is here that the professional quality of the educator is appreciated and of course what should constitute the focus of continuous professional development for faculty.¹ Such learning objects, of course, do not necessarily have to make use of instructional technologies per se and neither do they have to focus exclusively on visual rhetoric. The fact that I make use of both in designing my own learning objects simply derives from the fact that I am also inspired by the seminal work of Berger and that I have come to appreciate the benefits to be derived from using instructional technologies. (see New Chalk Talk Vol. 5, No: 6)

Designing appropriate learning objects is a highly complex and professional activity in which a variety of skills have to come together in order for them to achieve the desired effect of stimulating and enhancing critical thinking amongst students. For one the educator has to possess a high degree of expertise in the respective area of knowledge in order to identify the key concepts that constitute critical learning for the students. Furthermore, the educator needs to be engaged with the scholarship of learning as such in order to appreciate and explore the different ways in which students can relate and engage with these key concepts and thus learn. Finally, the educator needs the support of an instructional technologist if s/he will present these learning objects in a digitized format. Not to do so is to present students with learning objects whose quality will detract from the actual learning process. CLT, of course, is capable of providing such support to faculty at AUC and welcomes anyone who is interested in exploring the role of and/or producing learning objects for their respective courses.

Sources:

- Alexander, S & Boud (2001) *Learners still learn from experience when on line*, in **Teaching & Learning Online**, edited by John Stephenson, London, Kogan Page Ltd
- Berger, John (1972) **Ways of Seeing**, Hamondsworth, Penguin Books
- Wenger, E (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and identity*, Cambridge, CUP.

For further information on learning objects and how to incorporate them into your teaching at AUC please contact pandeli@aucegypt.edu and/or aellozy@aucegypt.edu

¹ It should be pointed out that learning objects are also referred to sometimes as “bites of learning”, “learning packages” and/or “learning activities”.