

Promoting dialogue through authentic conversations in change management education

Sue Whale, Muayyad Jabri, Tim Cluley

UNE Business School
University of New England

This paper highlights a learning design intended to promote dialogue and social construction of meaning through the presentation of a series of workplace video scenarios related to change management. By delivering to students an authentic presentation of the conversations that occur during change processes, and facilitating dialogue through open ended scenes and activities, an immersive situated learning platform is created. Social construction is utilised both as an educational process and as a key theory for the management of organisational change. The scenarios facilitate both goals through providing a focal point for the former and demonstration of the latter.

Keywords: dialogue, conversations, social construction, authentic learning, video scenarios

Introduction

The use of dialogue as an educational activity enables co-construction of meaning and facilitates engagement in the learning process. “[D]ialogue plays a central role [in learning] because it is a medium through which participants are able to share their conceptions, verify or test their understanding and identify areas of common knowledge or of difference” (Bubules & Bruce, 2001, p. 1104). This paper highlights a learning design intended to promote dialogue and social construction of meaning through the presentation of a series of workplace video scenarios related to change management. Students are presented with authentic interactions, via video, which portray examples of the ‘mundane’ conversations that take place during organisational change. These conversations play a key role in the social construction of meaning employees experience while they make sense of change processes. The video series is carefully constructed to demonstrate how background conversations might unfold to build a positive outlook on change management.

Dialogue

Promoting dialogue in distance education has become an achievable reality through the development of synchronous and asynchronous web tools which facilitate discussion. Dialogue contrasts with pedagogies involving transmission, which have been criticised as ineffective by scholars such as Freire, Rousseau and Dewey (Ehiobuche, Tu & Justus, 2012, p. 300). Freire advocated “for a more world-mediated mutual approach to education that considers people incomplete” (Ehiobuche et al., 2012, p. 302-3). “One cannot limit ‘pedagogical’ solely to the things teachers say when they think they are teaching; nor is the involvement of a teacher necessary for communicative relations to be pedagogically significant; nor is overt and intentional speech always the form that such communicative relations might take” (Bubules & Bruce, 2001, p. 1102). In distance education dialogue needs to be encouraged through both educator-student and student-student interaction. The use of dialogue as an educational ‘tool’ enables all participants to contribute to the process and shifts the responsibility to learners – “through dialogue, people are engaged in a practice to listen to different perspectives, promote cooperation, work on different issues and build skills” (Ehiobuche et al., 2012, p. 300).

Students are encouraged to construct their own meaning through “connecting new information and concepts to what he or she already believes” (Ehiobuche et al., 2012, p. 300). Siemens (2006) argues that the “greater need of learning is to make sense of the space in which the learner functions and the potential implications of acquired knowledge” (p. 21). A dialogic approach provides an opportunity for students to engage in meaning making based on existing and acquired knowledge as well as personal and collective experiences.

Social construction

This unit takes a ‘process’ approach to managing change, which means it emphasises social construction and dialogue. It begins with agency and moves into diagnosis and intervention. Throughout the unit, students flesh out the importance of change communication and the process of creating readiness for change.

Social construction is increasingly utilised as a pedagogical approach to engage learners in meaning making through the co-creation of knowledge. Social construction is concerned “with how knowledge is constructed and understood” (Andrews, 2012, n.p) placing “emphasis on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality” (Andrews, 2012, n.p). As noted above, the dialogic approach facilitates the co-construction of the knowledge base of the students, however this unit also demonstrates social construction as a perspective for managing change in organizational settings. “There is a need for change management to revise its assumptions by understanding change in terms of shifting identities and relationships accomplished through utterances (words or sentences; spoken or written) rather than in terms of identity based on order and coherence fixed in narratives” (Jabri, 2004, p. 566).

Video

The use of video is intended to engage students through utilisation of multimedia content which appeals to auditory/ visual learning styles and generate dialogue around the “conversations” portrayed which cover a range of authentic situations related to change management. Development of the videos as a series creates familiarity with the characters and increases connection with the issues. They also have a “stand-alone” appeal which demonstrates to students concerns arising during various situations associated with change implementation, that are common across organisations undergoing workplace change. The use of these videos is a key starting point for the dialogic approach, particularly with organisational change processes, due to the inexperience some of our (particularly undergraduate) students have in work settings. The content of the videos has been created by the subject matter expert teaching this unit of study and combines voice-over exposition, live action video and diagrams showing the correlation between concept and practice.

The video series is based on a set of characters at one organisation. The characters and setting are described in each scenario as they are introduced and are interspersed throughout the series – establishing connection with each of their roles, for example:

Anna (Nurse) is in her late twenties. She is a dedicated nurse and mum who loves her job, but is frustrated at the lack of support from management.

John (Director of Nursing) is a well dressed executive in his late thirties. He is highly motivated and very much a people person, always willing to listen and offer emotional support. He is an experienced nurse and is willing to create readiness for change.

The series is narrated throughout by one character who takes a role of guiding students through the scenes enacted in the scenarios, for example:

My name is Kath and I am here to present you with this story... After watching this video, it would be useful to go back to your assigned chapter with a view of learning more about the role conversations play in constructing change and also (perhaps, more importantly) the importance of reflecting on background conversations with a view to reinventing them in ways that would help change to take root.

She returns throughout the scenario with explanations and prompts:

In everyday life we interact with people. We do so through conversation. Conversations, when positive, can help shape change. In the previous scene we saw how background conversations often take place.

And again at the end of each scenario we provide further explanations aimed at guiding students through each video:

Context in managing change is deemed important. Through conversations we build context. In fact we can amend context as we reinvent conversations... as we come up with new ideas and as we transform resigned conversations into something positive. Sometimes we build context badly and sometimes we do it well. The more we are able to build the right context... a positive one... the more we are able to construct change through others and with others.

This approach is based on process – looking at change based on how reality is co-constructed in organisations (Jabri, 2012). The idea is to showcase the role of mundane conversations in the way change is shaped and co-

shaped through utterances. The videos have been created with authentic interactions portraying examples of the background conversations that take place during organisational change. Such background conversations provide variation in perspectives of change management which are likely to be present in a workplace undergoing change (Jabri, Adrian & Boje, 2008). Students reflect on the conversations presented through the scenarios, or which they have heard or been participants in within their own organisations, to co-construct responses to change situations. Reflective learning reiterates encounters with people that evidence change, enabling students to be more aware of change and willing to embrace change through social construction.

The multimedia resources are developed using authentic settings and in a style which presents the conversations as realistic portrayals of common concerns employees raise during change management situations. “Sherer and Shea (2002) argue that certain new technologies create opportunities for designing student work outside the classroom that engage students in their learning and result in enhanced in-class participation” (Sherer & Shea, 2011, p. 56). The videos promote discussion around issues rather than presenting ‘answers’ for students. They are incorporated into the unit in a scaffolded approach through the learning materials. This allows the series to unfold and introduce concepts as students progress through the unit of study.

Conclusion

This unit demonstrates social construction through participation in conversations from which meaning is generated. The approach facilitated in this unit creates an immersive learning platform for students, through the presentation of the video conversations depicting daily interactions in organisations undergoing change management. This authentic approach enables students to engage in dialogic activities which encourage meaning-making and learning. The approach is carefully constructed in a scaffolded approach through the unit materials which guides students in a logical way through the concepts as they are presented. Students are provided with guidance and encouragement as they approach and reflect on the issues presented in a demonstration of the “challenges that are rooted in real life situations that are both interesting to the students and satisfying in terms of the results of their work” (Viking, n.p).

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Please cite as: Whale, S., Jabri, M., & Cluley, T. (2014). Promoting dialogue through authentic conversations in change management education. In B. Hegarty, J. McDonald, & S.-K. Loke (Eds.), *Rhetoric and Reality: Critical perspectives on educational technology. Proceedings ascilite Dunedin 2014* (pp. 625-628).

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