

Dead-Theorists Tell No-Tales – A Learning Theories Roleplaying Activity for Postgraduate Students

Who should read this guide?

This guide is intended for e-moderators who are interested in using the Dead-Theorists Tell No-Tales activity in their professional practice. It assumes a working knowledge of learning theories, pedagogy and the Web2.0 (particularly Facebook). Familiarity with the use of roleplaying in education is desirable, but not essential.

Introduction to the activity

This is a roleplaying-based activity intended to enable learners to deepen their knowledge and understanding of learning theories. It does this by imagining how would the most notable learning theorists engage with Facebook, blogs and other Web 2.0 tools. Learners are placed in the shoes of the theorists and maintain fictional web-presences for the theorists, engaging with one another in an online debate. The activity is thus an example of a collaborative learning model where several people learn, or attempt to learn, together and is strongly learner centred.

Aims of the activity

The core aim of this activity is to deepen the learner's knowledge of the key learning theories of Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism. To do this the learners will assume the identity of an influential theorist and engage in online debate and discussion with the other learners, all of who will be in the guise of other theorists. A secondary aim is to introduce learners to, and familiarise them with, the pervasive technolgies of Web2.0, such as Facebook and web-logs. The specific learning outcomes for the learners are as follows:

- Learners should be able to describe in detail the central ideas of the main theorists of Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism;
- Learners should be able to compare and contrast the different theoretical stances;
- Learners should be able to outline the shortcomings and limitations of these theories;
- Learners should be able to reflect on the implications of these theories for their own teaching practice.
- Learners should be able to use selected Web2.0 technologies in their teaching practice.

Learning Model

This activity is based on a collaborative learning model. There are five main stages in this model:

- 1) Engagement phase: In the beginning the role of the e-moderator is mainly to inspire the learners, introduce them to the idea and challenge them with it. The e-moderator sets the stage by giving a sense of ownership to the learners in an authentic collaborative activity. The e-moderator also supports evaluation skills by providing supportive documents for use of the technologies – for example the e-moderator could administer a short Web2.0 competency survey.
- 2) Exploration phase: The e-moderator encourages group interdependence and asks learners to demonstrate learning. The e-moderator ensures that all are interacting and the e-moderator will leave comments and 'likes' throughout that encourage the learners during the activity on each of the learner's pages.
- 3) Transformation Phase: The learners engage in activities that help them to reshape their own knowledge. Given the collaborative nature of the activity, it is crucial that the e-moderator ensures that all learners are engaged in active and meaningful collaboration, thereby maximising the chances that all class members achieve learning equally.
- 4) Presentation Phase: This involves the demonstration of learned material and feedback, peer or expert. In this activity, when the learner has posted information about another theorist, as well as receiving feedback from another learners. As the learners critically access and offer feedback on the other's resources they are asked to update their blog based on what they have learned from the resources provided and interaction on Facebook.
- 5) Reflection Phase: The e-moderator provides guidelines and reflective prompts which are both group and individually orientated. The phase requires constructive feedback from the e-moderator to learner that helps the process and progress of learning, which will be delivered through e-mail and/or a meeting.

Role of the e-moderator

To provide a model of the anticipated behaviour, it is advisable that the e-moderator takes on the role of a more ancient character – we suggest Socrates – who can engage with the personae of the learners. This provides a valuable backdrop for the activity and also allows the learners to see how the roleplaying aspect works. The goal of e-moderator will be observe and monitor the contributions of learners but not directly participate in the

interactions and discussions that will occur within the closed Facebook network and in the virtual learning environment. E-moderator advice for learners will be outside the context of the roleplaying network.

The primary roles of the e-moderator in the online environment will be:

- 1) Support, inspire and encourage learners throughout the module via prompts (e.g. provocative websites, videos) and comments (e.g. in early stage discussions);
- 2) Provide clear guidelines and a learning agreement to the learners;
- 3) Assist the learners in managing the workload of the activity;
- 4) Manage interactions between the learners and/or groups as appropriate;
- 5) Act as a sounding board and advisor when required by the learners, either in groups or individually;
- 6) Ensure that all of the learners are aware of the timeframe for the activity and the goals, learning aims and learner input required;
- 7) Troubleshoot technical issues, either directly or by referral to IT-support.

Some specific advice on these aspects is provided in the following sections.

Managing Learner Motivation

The learners' enrolled on this module are expected to be post-graduate learners who are self-motivated and have a range of learning and thinking styles. Motivational problems are generally not as large an issue as with other groups of learners. The e-moderator should, however, recognise that learner motivation will vary depending on particular tasks in the activity, support and contributions from their peers and, particularly in a part-time context, extra curricular activities. It is important to provide support and motivation throughout the activity in a number of ways, for example:

- 1) Rapid and reliable turnaround time for responses to queries raised in the discussion forum
- 2) Comments only where relevant in learner-lead discussion forums
- 3) Summarising weekly activities into a coherent document to act as a reference point for learners
- 4) Providing information on the learner's activity within Webcourses, for example, total time logged on, number of files accessed, number of messages posted and read

Managing Online Communication

We suggest that e-moderators considering this activity draft a formal Communication Plan. This is a very useful tool that aids e-moderators to manage the multiple communications encountered in online classes, even with relatively small numbers of learners. This plan is a relatively simple set of routine tasks that you should complete once you log in to your course.

- 1) Typical Routine Tasks:
 - a. Check content area discussion forums for new posts;
 - b. Respond by gathering 3 or 4 learner comments and do one or all of the following:
 - i. Develop a question to shift the view.
 - ii. Generate a deeper understanding of the content being discussed.
 - iii. Develop a theme which will provide a new frame of reference.
 - iv. Highlight tensions in the dialogue
 - v. Model effective feedback to promote peer responses (include questions).
 - c. Check social discussion threads
 - d. Check private discussion forums and emails
- 2) Critical Thinking Prompter:
 - a. Develop a series of questions that will encourage your learners to reach higher levels of thinking within the context of your own activity.
- 3) Management Issues and Strategies:
 - a. Consider the following issues prior to the commencement of the activity and develop contingency plans to address:
 - i. Inactivity of group and/or individual
 - ii. Dominant individual
 - iii. Digressions, misconceptions and inappropriate communications

Discussion Board Pitfalls

Discussion Boards can be a great tool for building community and working collaboratively. However, they are not without their flaws and there are some common problems and pitfalls by learners. In the following table we provide common pitfalls and solutions to them:

Pitfall	Potential solutions
misunderstanding directions or may be unsure of what is expected of them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provide clear guidelines for posting material, how often to comment, length of comment, what information to include in the comments. - encourage learners to contact you if they don't understand the assignment or are having technical difficulties. - demonstrate ways to support arguments, cite textbook references/online resources to support a point of view
comments can become off track or go in a direction that is not supported in the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish clear Netiquette guidelines and acceptable behaviour policies at the very beginning (learner agreement) - use small group activities to help build community and establish peer communication and connection.
not getting involved in participating in the discussion board until the last minute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - establish guidelines for giving learners credit for discussion board participation - give points for posting regularly, responding to classmates' posts
not feeling a sense of connection with their classmates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - encourage learners to interact informally.

Preparatory Materials

In advance of commencing the activity, the e-moderator will endeavour to make the transition from face-to-face lectures to an online learning environment as seamless as possible by providing a range of preparatory materials and activities. At a minimum we suggest the following are completed one week before the anticipated start date of the activity:

- 1) Web2.0 Competence Survey. This survey will be completed and submitted online using an online survey tool (e.g. Webmonkey) to determine the general level of Web2.0 and IT competence of the learners, thus allowing the e-moderator to identify specific additional training requirements and/or resources;
- 2) Learning-to-learn exercise. Using a mini-assignment the e-moderator will assess the learners ability to (i) Set up a facebook page and (ii) Post a number of simple facts about yourself on the homepage, e.g. name, interests etc. and (iii) set up and make a blog post. A template of a Facebook page with appropriate guidance on how to complete each section of the page will also be available. Learners who already have a Facebook page can direct the e-moderator to it to demonstrate their competency with the technology if they so wish.
- 3) Guides to good online practice and netiquette should be made available for the learners.
- 4) A sample Facebook page should be made available to provide the learners with a model for their own page.

Structure of the online 'environment'

To emphasise the Web2.0 aspects of the activity and provide a medium to enable roleplaying, the activity uses Facebook and a blog as its core technologies. The e-moderator should establish a closed Facebook group for the purposes of the activity and all learners (and the e-moderator) will have profiles within this group. Three further groups should be established for the canonical positions of Behaviourism, Cognitivism and Constructivism and the learners, in the roles of notable theorists, will become members of each group. The e-moderator will facilitate group formation and opportunities for learning by ensuring that learner's link to each other's Facebook pages, links, pictures and blogs, and that these resources are open to the entire class group.

In addition to Facebook, at the beginning of the activity Webinars will be used to lay broad foundations for the learner and introduce them to the idea of roleplaying online. These Webinars will be delivered using Wimba LiveClassroom (or equivalent platform capable of audio and video delivery). They should act as a springboard for further learning by providing sufficient information to serve as a basis for further reading, research, and learning. They will also enable the e-moderator (using the application sharing features of Wimba) to demonstrate how to carry out specific tasks in e.g. Facebook and Blogs for learners who are less familiar with Web2.0 technology. Where possible, webinars should be archived and made available to learners so that they can revisit them as needed during the activity. Five such lectures should be sufficient to orient and upskill learners to a sufficient degree to enable them to successfully engage with the collaborative online learning model at the heart of this activity.

Indicative timeline of the activity

In the following table, an indicative timeline for e-moderator and learners is provided. This is a guideline for learners to ensure that they keep up to date with the activity as it progresses. In addition it is suggested that learners should log into the site each day with the intention of downloading and/or reading information only.

Day	E-moderator	Learner
1 – 3	Ensure's learners persona details are updated on each Facebook page; Monitor the discussion and blog postings and respond to any early issues.	Three hours allocated to establish a Facebook page for the theorist, to upload a photograph and to share biographical and professional information.
4 – 6	Continue to monitor Facebook pages, forum and blog postings; Participate in individual advisory sessions with learners as requested.	Seven hours are allocated for writing and posting a 250-300 word, in character blog, reading the blogs of the other theorists and posting questions on their pages
7 – 8	Ensure that all learners are engaging with the activity – creation of Facebook page, daily posting on progress, commenting posting on other learners page and written the 300 word blog posting; Contact with any learner who may be falling behind to offer assistance.	Two hours are allocated to reply to the question(s) on their Facebook page by responding in the comment thread beneath the question.
9 – 10	Continue to monitor the Facebook pages, forum and blogs. Provide guidance via postings, prompts and steering questions on the forum; Participate in chat room sessions or virtual rooms if learners are present.	Three hours are allocated to write a post on their facebook page about an experiment conducted by the theorist they are roleplaying using the theorist's facebook page and resources.
11 – 13	Check-in with learners to ensure collaboration is taking part; Continue to monitor the Facebook pages, forum and blogs.	Four hours are allocated for collaboration, using Facebook chat and messaging with another learner to compare the theorists post and tag the comparison on the respective pages.
15 – 16	Monitor Facebook pages, forum and blogs Ensure all learners are participating and progressing satisfactorily.	Three hours are allocated to ask a question to each theorist which has not previously been posed.
17 – 18	Ensure learners are posting and responding to questions. Continue to monitor the Facebook pages, forum and blogs.	Two hours are allocated to reply to the question(s) on their Facebook page by responding in the comment thread beneath the question.
19 – 21	Continue to monitor Facebook pages, forum and blogs. Host chat sessions with groups to ensure learners are progressing and working within the requirements for the activity.	Three hours are allocated (day 19-20) to write a post reviewing a theorist from another school of thought. Two houes (day 21) is allocated to respond to this comment.

Following the completion of the activity, learners are expected to complete a 1000 word reflective assignment, comparing the 3 learning theories, that they have been exposed to for the duration of the activity, along with reflections of their learning throughout the activity.

Activity Assessment

If this activity is to be assessed we suggest that the e-moderator assess the learner on the following key criteria:

- 1) Contribution to the Facebook; development and maintenance of a blog:
 - a. Learner's contribution to Facebook will be imperative for the successfull of the colaberative learning model. A rubric suitable for the specific learning environment will be used to assess effectiveness of learner participation in online discussions and the learners' involvement during

the activity. It should include sections for promptness and initiative, delivery, relevance, expression, and contribution to the learning community.

2) Reflective Report:

- a. This report should include a summary of participant's gains and contributions from online interaction in terms of their personal learning. The learners should show evidence of understanding of the learning models and bring in evidence of external reading and personal practice/experience.

Revision and Evaluation of the Activity

On completion of activity the e-moderator is strongly encourage to survey the learners to review what worked well and what didn't. It is important to take on board learner's suggestions for improvement of the activity as these can prove to be important prompts for discussions with colleagues and other stakeholders. It is up to the e-moderator to determine if a focus-group or a formal survey is most appropriate for the evaluation process.