MSc Project Background Report

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# Abstract

The way we define learning and what we believe about the way learning occurs has important implications for situations in which we want to facilitate changes in what people know and/ or do. Learning theories provide instructional designers with verified instructional strategies and techniques for facilitating learning as well as a foundation for intelligent strategy selection. Yet many designers are operating under the constraints of a limited theoretical background. This paper is an attempt to familiarize designers with three relevant positions on learning (behavioral, cognitive, and constructivist) which provide structured foundations for planning and conducting instructional design activities. Each learning perspective is discussed in terms of its specific interpretation of the learning process and the resulting implications for instructional designers and educational practitioners. The information presented here provides the reader with a comparison of these three different viewpoints and illustrates how these differences might be translated into practical applications in instructional situations.

Learners are increasingly shifting their preferences for learning environments from the physical to the virtual; Virtual Learning Spaces offer significant advantages in enabling learning activities that are distributed in Time and Space.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

Space according to Oblinger (2005), “is an agent of change”, change is the goal of learning, learning is imperative for survival in the complexity called humanity. The challenge however is that learners change from time to time, the learners of today are in many ways different from the learners in the 1950s, thus learning need to be constantly improved or adapted to fit in with the learners of the day. Improving learning requires that educators continue to support pedagogical innovation. One of the areas to consider in doing this is the learning space. Learning spaces must continually be re-examined and improved.

Learning spaces encompass the full range of places in which learning occurs, from real to virtual; classroom to chat room. The effective design of learning spaces whether physical or virtual can enhance the way learning takes place and consequently the outcome. With the advancements in technology leading to convergence of platforms and proliferation of high capacity mobile devices, learners are increasingly shifting their preferences for learning environments from the physical to the virtual. For any interactive system that implements virtual learning spaces, usability is a key determinant in uptake. Usability is defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 9412) as "the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use".

PLEs are designed for learning. Designing for learning requires an understanding of how learners construct knowledge. Significant learning theories need to be explored and applied within the learners' context to capture the learning activity in a way "natural" to the learners. Theories such as Social constructivism, Constructionism, Self-directed Learning, Communities of Practice, etc have existed for a long time. However, the context of learning keeps evolving. It is therefore important to re-examine these theories with a view to adapting them to the prevailing contexts in which learning occurs. This is even more challenging when viewed from the virtual learning perspective. Interestingly enough, ICT presents a lot of tools that can help us realise our objectives. These ICT tools have been applied in various ways in many learning tools but the question is how usable are they? This project would focus on these and more in order to improve usability in user generated learning spaces.

**/\*\*\*\*\*\*FOR USE BUT WHERE?**

**TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNING?**

"Even if we have the finest technology, it remains ineffective if the teachers did not tame and integrated into teaching. We must therefore pay particular attention to different modes of training and support to the use of ICT. We must in this matter, have an approach that respects the rhythms of schools and individuals, as opposed to measures ‘wall to wall’ "(Jacques Tardif)

[http://principlesoflearning.blogspot.com](http://principlesoflearning.blogspot.com/)

From Donald Tapscott's perspective, Papert's desired reality is happening now, as a paradigm shift to more interactive learning due to the exploitation of the digital media is taking place in our learning institutions.

Tapscott cites eight shifts in learning today: [Can you draw up a conceptual diagram for this?]

* From linear to hypermedia.
* From instruction to construction and discovery.
* From teacher-centered to learner-centered education.
* From absorbing material to learning how to navigate and how to learn.
* From school to lifelong learning.
* From one-size-fits-all to customized learning.
* From learning as torture as learning as fun.
* From the teacher as transmitter to the teacher as facilitator.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*/

/\*\*\*\*\*\*\*Nice to use here or maybe else where

When we refer to learning spaces, we talk about the environment in which learning occurs. This gives rise to two kinds of learning spaces namely:

Physical learning Spaces and

Virtual Learning Spaces

describe them describe them describe them.

However, at the risk of ambiguity, I would like to point our here that I personally would have preferred them as Physical Spaces for Learning and Virtual Spaces for Learning. This is because, sometimes, it sounds as though the physical and virtual qualifies the learning. Learning is neithe physical or virtual, the environment or space is. I believe this clarifies every reader doubts and misconceptions, however, to maintain synchrony with the literature (and having put thing clear therefore), we will maintain the more used terms, Physical Learning Spaces and Virtual Learning Spaces.

\*\*\*\*\*\*/

/\*\*\*\*VERY USEFUL BUT FOR WHERE?

The most impactful of these being Information and Communication Technology. The emergence of the world wide web has given rise to emergence of ways of learning. Couple that with the advancements in mobile phone technology, then you have a whole new universe of learning. Nothing describe the situation better than the words of Brown himself:

“Indeed, the availability of network access, in one form or another, is today almost taken for granted. Handheld devices have acquired a growing set of functions, providing a telephone, a digital camera, and an operating system running a variety of applications. Laptop prices have declined while increasing in functionality—to the point that their use exceeds that of desktops for most students.”

I believe Brown left out a vital point in the statement above though, “Integration of platforms”. Not only are the mentioned devices acquiring a growing set of functions and familiarity with the learner of today, their integration is also enabling them to be used in ways not even imagined by the manufacturers. Oblinger puts it right on point when she declared that “students appear to have no fear of technology” (Oblinger, 2005). In a similar fashion, Jason Frand observed that “today’s young students take technology for granted and that staying connected is a central part of their lives” (Kvavik, 2005 @REF Kvavik cited Jason, see how its done @ Havard Refs).

End \*\*\*\*\*/

/\*\*\*\*\*\* Rounding off introduction or Begininning abstract or even introduction

It is possible to build learning environments from both brick-and-mortar and bits-and-bytes that draw students in and elicit a sense of mystery and enchantment. See p84 of learning spaces. Good for concluding remarks.

\*\*\*\*\*\*/

* 1. Project Objectives

The main objective of the project is to investigate usability in user generated learning spaces. The findings would then be applied in improving the usability of virtual learning spaces in a Personal Learning Environments (PLE). As part of this I would be working on improving the User Interface of the learning space in the Manchester PLE; performing development in FLEX® 4 and complementary technologies.

The main objective has been decomposed into mini targets that would act as guiding posts to achieving the main objective. They are as follows:

* To understand the application of relevant Learning Theories to the design of learning spaces
* To improve active knowledge construction via User Generated Learning Spaces
* To improve self-directed as well as collaborative learning via PLEs
* To Investigate by User Evaluation the Usability of current Learning Spaces in the PLE
* To develop improved user interfaces (that are being tested by users) for the current Learning Spaces in the PLE
* To assess by user testing the Usability of the developed user interfaces
  1. Project Scope

The project scope includes investigating the usability of learning spaces. This would involve the use of testing and formative evaluation in iterative process of design & implementation. A careful comparism of various frameworks for usability testing would be made and the most appropriate one that can be applied selected. Usability evaluation for pedagogical applications comprises two parts namely: technical/functional usability evaluation and pedagogical usability evaluation. The selected evaluation framework would need to encompass both aspects as much as possible. Where this is not the case, the framework would be adapted to fit in using established theoretical principles from learning and instructional theory. Web usability is also within the scope of the project. This is because virtual learning spaces are mostly implemented on web pages. Consequentially principles of web usability design would be incorporated in the design and implementation of the improved learning space. Finally, evaluation of the improved learning interface would be carried out and reported. Some innovative features of the proposed learning space are as follows:

* The ability to track and highlight changes in the space both in private and collaborative mode
* The ability to undo actions in collaborative mode, considering the fact that some other actions might have been performed based on the action to be un-done.
* The transfer of desirable classroom and informal space characteristics into the virtual learning space such as ambience, immersion principle, attention and motivation theories, layout reconfigurability, knowledge discovery, etc.

The project scope does not cover large scale testing and usability evaluation. Expert evaluation would be mostly used.

* 1. Report Structure

The project has been introduced, the objective and scope defined. The remaining part of this report is structured as follows:

**Chapter 2 – Background**

This section discusses relevant background materials with the aim of situating the project into a wider research theme. Learning Spaces are designed to promote learning. Doing this requires an understanding of the actors, the process and the context which in this case are the learners, learning and the environment where it occurs. Relevant learning theories and how they apply to learning are discussed. Current trends in learning space design are examine and then usability in learning spaces design with focus on usable virtual learning spaces.

**Chapter 3 – Research Method (@Cross Check even 2 above)**

This section gives a clear description of the project. I present a concise delivery strategy; a 3-phase research methodology; description of proposed tools to be used; project plan and finally a project management plan. Some of the questions answered in this section include (but are not limited to) “What will be done”, “How it will be done”, “which tools will be used”, “what will be delivered” and “how will be evaluated”.

# Chapter 2: Background

This chapter explains the background behind this project. Significant learning theories are introduced which generally specify ideal ways to learn and teach. This is followed by discussion on Virtual Learning Spaces. We then turn to the importance of usability in virtual learning spaces and finally conclude with reviewing related work in this area of research.

BASIC TERMINOLOGIES

LEARNING

I would “attempt” to define the term “Learning”. Being a complex process, it is not easy to define learning. According to author(year), “Learning is such a common experience that we hardly ever reflect on exactly what we mean when we say that something has been learnt”( Domjan & Burkhard 1993). According to Domjan & Burkhard, “A universally acceptable definition for learning does not exist”. However, in the following definition, they attempt to capture many critical aspects of the concept of learning:

“Learning is an enduring change in the mechanisms of behaviour involving specific stimuli and/or responses that result from prior experience with those stimuli and responses”

Domjan & Burkhard’s definition seem to view learning from a behavioural perspective, when we start discussing learning theories, it would become clear that such perspective is inadequate to define learning when considered in isolation. Illeris (2000) and Ormorod (1195) provide the missing link by defining learning as “a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences and experiences for acquiring, enhancing, or making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and world views” (Illeris, 2000; Ormorod, 1995). This definition attempts to capture the process as well as the product. A noteworthy fact in the definition is that learning is a product of the interplay between the cognitive, the emotional and the environmental. However, the environment can affect both emotion and cognition, positively or otherwise. It therefore becomes a very important factor in learning. Leonard, Noh, & Orey (2007) view learning as “how we acquire knowledge”. In this case, they are more interested in the process than the product. Leonard, Noh, & Orey also differentiate between “the theories that describe how we come to know things” called “learning theories” and those that “describe how you can support learning” called “instructional theories”. We briefly explain what is meant by cognition and theory, then dive deep into learning theories.

COGNITION

Cognition is about how our brain works or how our mind works (Leonard, Noh, & Orey, 2007). Cognition is the psychological result of perception, learning and reasoning. To put it in simpler terms, it is the act or process of knowing. Additionally, cognition can also refer to the process of knowing. So in my own words, cognition can be a “process” as well as a “product”. To clarify any ambiguity, when we talk about how the brain works, we are not making a biological reference to the brain, according to Leonard, Noh, and Orey (2007), “most cognitive theories are more conceptual and therefore it might be more accurate to talk about how the mind works rather than a biological reference to the brain”.

THEORY

The term theory is a frequently used word in everyday vocabulary. However, the meaning of a theory in science is not the same as the colloquial use of the word. Leonard, Noh, and Orey (2007) define a theory as “a hypothesis that describes, speculates, or defines a relationship between a set of facts or phenomena through a body of principles, policies, beliefs, or assumptions”. A theory is quite different from a strategy in that while the former is descriptive; the latter is prescriptive, (suggesting steps to be followed).

## 2.1 Learning Theories

A Learning theory attempts to help us understand the complex process of learning by describing how people (and animals) learn. According to Hill (2002), learning theories have two chief values:

* Providing a vocabulary and a conceptual framework for interpreting the examples of learning we observe.
* Suggesting where to look for solutions to practical problems.

Interestingly, the theories do not provide solutions to practical problems. However, it should be noted that they do direct our attention to important variables that are crucial in finding solutions. The meaning of “Learning” has been discussed in a previous section above. Learning theories are generally categorized under three philosophical frameworks namely:

* Behaviourism
* Cognitivism and
* Constructivism

**BEHAVIORIST THEORIES**

Behaviorism is a learning theory based on the idea that all behaviors are acquired through conditioning which occurs through interaction with the environment. J. B Watson, widely regarded as the father of Behaviorism [@Ref], defined learning as a sequence of stimulus and response actions in observable cause and effect relationships [@Ref]. Thus behaviorism assumes that the learner is essentially passive, responding to environmental stimuli (@Ref, Learning Theories). According to Learning Theories [@Replace], “the learner starts off as a clean slate (i.e. *tabula rasa*) and behavior is shaped through positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement.” Positive indicates the application of a stimulus while negative indicates withholding of a stimulus (@Ref, LT), thus learning is observable by the change in the behavior of the learner in response to the stimuli. There are basically two kinds of conditioning in Behaviorism namely classical conditioning and operant conditioning.

**Classical Conditioning**

This is a behavioral training technique in which a naturally occurring stimulus (**S1**) is associated with a response (**R1**). Then a previously “neutral” stimulus (**Sn**) is associated with the naturally occurring stimulus. Eventually, the previously neutral stimulus after some time, begins to cause the response (**R1**) even in the absence of the naturally occurring stimulus (**S1**). Thus **Sn** and **R1** are referred to as the conditioned stimulus and conditioned response. An example of this is the case of Ivan Pavlov’s dogs (@Ref). [@Expand if necessary page-wise, else delete]

**Operant Conditioning**

In this case, learning or behavioral change occurs through “rewards” and “punishments” for behavior. Through this kind of conditioning, an association is thus made between a behavior and a consequence for that behavior. According to this model, rewards are supposed to increase the likelihood of the behavior recurring while punishments are supposed to reduce the likelihood. Consequently, a punishment is not applicable if it does not result in reduction of the behaviour.

[@Diagram Here, Too Many Words huh?]



Behaviorism has been applied in the fields of psychology and medicine but here we are more interested in its application in learning improvement. Educational approaches such as applied behavior analysis; curriculum based measurement; and direct instruction have emerged from this model [@Ref Kim T & Axelrod, 2005, See Refs Note]. We discuss this further in later sections.

Many scientists have worked on behaviorism enriching it with new concepts and experiments. For example, Edward C. Tolman, Clark L. Hull or Burrhus F. Skinner who produced theories about reinforcement, language and problem resolution.

The original theory of behaviorism is now more commonly referred to as “classical behaviorism”. New lines of thought have been extracted from classical behaviorism thus giving rise to Neo-Behaviorism (second Generation) and Social-Behaviorism (Third Generation) (@Ref from PLE Group p. 21, Deaudelin & Lefebvre, 2005). Of these two, Social Behaviorism focuses more on learning. It considers learning as a relatively stable behavior modification arising from experience.

**BEHAVIORISM IN LEARNING**

In Behaviorism approaches learning is centred on the teacher. The teacher is given the role of transferring his knowledge to the learner which is confirmed done by observing a relative permanent change in the behavior of the learner. This approached is marked by reinforced and programmed learning [@REF Learning Theories PDF]. Interestingly, all computer-assisted instruction is solidly planted on the foundation laid by behaviorist researchers (Abrahamson, 1999). According to Standridge (2002), “Behaviorist techniques have long been employed in education to promote behavior that is desirable and discourage that which is not”. Among the methods derived from behaviorist theory for practical classroom application according to Standridge, are

* Contracts

Contracts involve the educator and learner agreeing on particular terms or set of activities that improves or eliminates a behavior. The educator works closely with the learner to ensure that the terms of the behavioral contract are being fulfilled as agreed.

* Consequences

A consequence is the immediate result of a behavior. It follows immediately and according to Standridge, “may be positive or negative, expected or unexpected, immediate or long-term, extrinsic or intrinsic, material or symbolic (e.g. a failing grade), emotional/interpersonal or even unconscious”.

* Reinforcement

Reinforcement refers to whatever increases the strength of a response [@REF LT, Melvin Marx]. It is the process of increasing the probability of a behavior by the delivery of a “stimulus” (e.g. a Chocolate Bar) immediately after a behavior (or “response”) is performed. Reinforcement may be **Negative** to reduce the probability of the response or **Positive** to increase it.

* Extinction

Extinction according to Strandridge, decreases the probability of a response by contingent withdrawal of a previously reinforced stimulus.

* Behavior Modification

Behaviour modification is a method of eliciting better classroom performance from reluctant students (Strandridge, 2002). According to Strandridge, it has six basic components including specification of outcomes; development of a positive, nurturing environment; identification and use of appropriate reinforcers, reinforcement of behaviour patterns until success is achieved; reduction in the frequency of rewards and finally evaluation and assessment of the effectiveness of the approach based on the teacher’s expectations and the learner’s results. This set of patterns can be applied where any modification in behavior is needed from the classroom to skill acquisition centers to reformation homes.

The table below shows example(s) of the practical application of each method.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **METHOD** | **EXAMPLE** |
| Contracts | A student is failing in class, the teacher devises a contract providing that the student will always be punctual, sit in front, and stay back for extra help. This contract will minimize distractions and help the student perform as expected if fulfilled by both parties. |
| Consequences | Praising students’ ability, Selecting students for special projects, etc |
| Reinforcement | Submitting all coursework on time gives you 5% for each |
| Extinction | A teacher gives extra marks for students who answer questions in class; other students consider this unfair; the teacher then decides to withdraw the extra marks incentive. |

Table x.x [@TODO, Label Table]

Below is a summary of some features of a behaviorist learning model:

* Learning is done in small, concrete, progressively sequenced tasks
* Learning is marked by repetition in order to increase retention and speed of learning.
* Consistent use of reinforcements during the teaching-learning process. For instance, with verbal acts such as congratulatory remarks and non verbal acts such as medallions.
* Habits and other undesirable responses can be broken by removing the positive reinforcements connected with them (use of punishment).

**COGNITIVIST THEORIES**

Cognitivism as a learning theory looks beyond behaviour to explain brain based learning. In other words cognitivism attempts to improve learning by considering how the human memory works. Cognitivism shares a similarity with behaviourism on the basis that both view knowledge as “given” and “absolute” [@REF Learning Theories]. However, cognitivism is based on the basic assumption that human beings are logical beings and thus make choices that are most sensible to them. Pure cognitive theory largely rejects behaviorism on the basis that behaviorism reduces complex human behavior to simple cause and effect (Fritscher, 2011)[@Ref, Lisa Fritscher, <http://phobias.about.com/od/glossary/g/cognitivethedef.htm>]. In 1929, Bode, a Gestalt psychologist challenged behaviourism, criticising it for being over dependent on overt behaviour to explain learning. [@Expand more on Cognitivism]

Many of the information processing models of teaching and learning are based on the cognitive view of learning [@Ref, Learning Theories PDF]. However, current trends in past decades have been towards merging the two into a comprehensive “cognitive-behavioral theory” [@Ref Fritscher].

**COGNITIVISM IN LEARNING**

Cognitivisim approaches learning from a learner-centred perspective. From this perspective, learners need to develop deeper understandings, not just produce the right behaviors (Wortham, 2003). Since these deeper understandings cannot be imposed on learners, they must construct their own mental models with sufficient guide from the teacher. Cognitivism views learning as a change in the learner’s understanding, hence the focus is on elaboration, thus the teacher plays the role of a coach or a facilitator. As a facilitator, he has to provide clues and teach mnemonic strategies [@REF Fortin Rosseau in PLE BG p24], to introduce context. As a coach, he has to constantly evaluate the learner’s knowledge to keep the learner as active as possible. Tardif (1992) lists some basic principles that characterize the cognitive learning approach as follows:

* Learning is an active and constructive
* Prior knowledge a crucial factor in learning and believes that knowledge is essentially cumulative.
* Learning permits a link between the new pieces of information and the information already in memory.
* Learning is basically the acquisition of a repertoire of knowledge, cognitive & metacognitive strategies.
* Learning leads to declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. Examples of declarative knowledge include knowledge of multiplication tables; knowledge of the role of a verb in a sentence; definition of terms; etc.

Robert Mills Gagné, an American educational psychologist best known for his "Conditions of Learning" identified five major types of learning namely:

* Verbal Information
* Intellectual Skills
* Cognitive Strategies
* Motor Skills and
* Attitudes.

Gagne published an article in 1962 in which he discussed 3 Principles of Learning [@REF, see if you can grab Military Training and the Principles of Learning article and ref it]:

1. Provide instruction on the set of component tasks that build toward the final task.
2. Ensure that each task is mastered.
3. Sequence the tasks to ensure the optimal transfer to the final task.

One of Gagné's major contributions to the theory of instruction was the model "Nine Events of Instruction" (@REF, @Brush).

* Gain attention
* Inform learner of objectives
* Stimulate recall of prior learning
* Present stimulus material
* Provide learner guidance
* Elicit performance
* Provide feedback
* Assess performance
* Enhance retention transfer

**CONSTRUCTIVIST, SOCIAL, AND SITUATIONAL THEORIES [@TODO Rename to just constructivism?]**

Constructivism as a learning theory views knowledge as a “constructed” entity [@Ref Learning Theories, PDF]. This totally contradicts the view that knowledge is absolute and given. According to the constructivism paradigm, human learning is an active attempt to construct knowledge based on previous knowledge and the present context. Therefore, every person will construct their own unique set of knowledge. In other words, no two people will start with exactly the same knowledge base, and no two people will construct exactly the same knowledge structures from given experiences or information. Knowledge is seen as a constructed entity and by reflecting on our experiences, we construct our own understanding of the world we live in [@REF Learning Theories, PDF].

**CONSTRUCTIVISM IN LEARNING**

Constructivism approaches learning from a learner-centred perspective also. However, learning to the constructivist is “discovery and construction of meaning” and knowledge cannot be poured in, from one person to another. Also, it holds that knowledge does not become part of the learner after memorisation of external objective information but is continuously built as the learner interacts with the outside world thus producing his own interpretations about it. Many pedagogical approaches have grown from constructivism. According to DeVries et al. (2002), in most pedagogies based on constructivism, “the teacher's role is not only to observe and assess but to also engage with the students while they are completing activities, wondering aloud and posing questions to the students for promotion of reasoning”. This promotes learning by experimentation and exploration, not by being told what will happen. According to Richardson (2003), the constructivist pedagogy involves the following characteristics:

* Student-centredness, evident in attention to the individual and respect for students' backgrounds
* Facilitation of group dialogue that explores an element of the domain with the purpose of leading to the creation and shared understanding of a topic
* Planned or unplanned introduction of formal domain knowledge into the conversation through direct instruction, reference to text, exploration of a web site, or some other means
* Provision of opportunities for students to determine, challenge, change or add to existing beliefs and understandings through engagement in tasks structured for this purpose
* Development of students' metawareness of their own understandings and learning processes

**Social constructivism**

Social constructivism proceeds from Vygotsky’s social development theory. In summary Social Development Theory argues that social interaction precedes development; consciousness and cognition are the end product of socialization and social behavior [@REF Learning-Theories.com, <http://www.learning-theories.com/vygotskys-social-learning-theory.html>]. Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). According to Vygotsky, humans use tools that develop from a culture, such as speech and writing, to mediate their social environments (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2011). It follows from the ideas of Vygotsky and others that learning occurs as a result of a social activity. This is why the environment within which learning occurs plays a very important role in social constructivism. According to Stenberg (1998) [@REF from PLE p.28], the best learning environment permits dynamic interaction between learners working towards tasks, and allows learners to build knowledge from this interaction, rather than absorbing it from a “teacher”.

Social constructivism emphasizes the benefits of collaborative learning (Fruchter and Emery, 1999)[@REF from PLE p. 28] thus permitting learning that is distributed in space and time. The role of the educator in this context is to provide what is refered to as “scaffolding”. Scaffolding refers to guidelines and hints which help the learner build strong, complex and relevant ideas (Vygotsky, 1978). The learner progressively removes this scaffolding and tends towards self-directed learning replacing it with his own ideas and plans. This does not happen in isolation however, the educator and the learner collaborates to develop these ideas and plans incrementally.

\*\*\*Just keeps first

If behaviourism treats the organism as a black box, cognitive theory recognises the importance of the mind in making sense of the material with which it is presented. Nevertheless, it still presupposes that the role of the learner is primarily to assimilate whatever the teacher presents. Constructivism — particularly in its "social" forms — suggests that the learner is much more actively involved in a joint enterprise with the teacher of creating ("constructing") new meanings (Atherton, 2011).

**COMPARISM OF LEARNING THEORIES**

These learning theories while based on different assumptions and focusing on different perspectives of explaining learning bear close relationship to one another. Learning styles and behaviours may be viewed as existing on a continuum bounded by these theories as show in figure xx [@REF Figure?] below. Notice from the figure that the continuum is not explicitly bounded by any of the theories. This is because ongoing researches in learning theories are still uncovering new ways of explaining learning among different categories of learners (such as children, adult, distance learners, etc). While it may be said that most educational models in use today combine concepts majorly from cognitivism and constructivism, that does not mean that the behaviourist theories are not still applicable. For example according to Perraudeau (1996)[@Ref from PLE Group, p. 28], “to develop high intellectual level abilities such as analysis or problem resolution, the teacher will tend to privilege constructivist and cognitivist approaches, whereas for information memorization, a behaviorist approach can be better”.

-------Behaviorism ---------Cognitivism---------Constructivism-------

Figure x.x [@TODO, label figure] [Call it the Spectrum of Learning Theories or continuum?]

The table below gives a general comparism of the various learning theories discussed so far. For each learning theory, we highlight how knowledge is viewed, what is described as learning, key concepts and focus.



[@TODO: Draw this table in Fireworks Later]

LEARNER CENTRED THEORIES

The discussions above has been centered around learning theories generally. However, I must return to the focal point of my work here. Personal Learning Environments should be able to cater for learning among a wide variety of learners and I dare say there are many of them. Learner centred theories focus on the learners and what they bring to the instructional environment. By using these theories as a guide, instructors as well as instructional designers can work with different learners on the basis of their individual characteristics. Space constraints would restrain me from digging deep into the literature of learner centred theories but I would surely do justice to it in the final dissertation report. For now, a descriptive overview should suffice as a background.

Leonard, Noh, and Orey (2007), describe some learner centred theories among which are Adult Learning, Creativity theory, Motivation Theory, Multiple Intelligence and Learning Styles. I am very interested in Adult Learning theory also known as Andragogy. Andragogy embodies learning strategies that are focused on adults. Merriam & Brockett (1997) [@REF, Look for it at EPOTT], define adult education as, “activities intentionally designed for the purpose of bringing about learning among those whose age, social roles, or self-perception define them as adults.” My interest in andragogy stems from the fact that it shares some beautiful characteristics with a Personal Learning Environment. According to Leonard, Noh, and Orey, “there are five factors used to describe an adult learner”:

* Having an independent self-concept and who can direct his or her own learning.
* Being problem-centered and interested in immediate application of knowledge.
* Being motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.
* Having accumulated a reservoir of life experiences that is a rich resource for learning.
* Having learning needs closely related to changing social roles.

These are factors that also describe learning via a PLE. I share the view of Grabowski and Smith (2003) who believe that “all styles of learning are applicable to both early childhood and adult learning, with differences presenting themselves in regard to the use of the style based on the learning environment”. Several learning theories that apply to andragogy can be directly applied or at least with minor modifications to designing Personal Learning Environments. Among these are action learning, experiential learning, project-based learning and self-directed learning (Leonard, Noh, and Orey, 2007).

LEARNING SPACE

In defining the term “learning spaces”, Malcolm Brown, started out with a question. I would borrow a leaf from him in this regards. “What does the term learning space mean? Why not use classroom instead?” (Brown, 2005). Learning spaces encompass the full range of places in which learning occurs, from real to virtual; classroom to chat room. According to Brown (2005),

“Just a decade ago, classrooms were the primary locus for learning in higher education. Other spaces included the library, the faculty office (for individual mentoring), and perhaps the café in town. But classrooms were by far the single most important space for learning.”

However, a great deal has changed over the years with regards to learning theories, styles and activities. Advancements in learning theories have led to a rethink in designing learning environment. The word “room” (as in classroom, lecture room, etc) are no longer descriptive enough as learning can now happen everywhere. As a result of this the term “Learning Space” is increasingly being used to describe places where learning occurs. Information and Communication Technology has also contributed to changing the notion and location of learning as we shall discuss later, thus leading to the evolution of not only modern physical learning spaces but also virtual spaces. Spaces have impact on learning as Oblinger (2005) puts it,

“Space—whether physical or virtual—can have an impact on learning. It can bring people together; it can encourage exploration, collaboration, and discussion. Or, space can carry an unspoken message of silence and disconnectedness.”

This is nothing new though modern approaches are being applied, the environment in which learning occurs have always been a recurring factor in the learning theories discussed previously.

TRENDS IN LEARNING SPACE DESIGN

“Learning Spaces often reflect the people and learning approach of the times, so spaces designed in 1956 are not likely to fit perfectly with students in 2006” (Oblinger, 2005). Consequently, there has been moves to redesign learning spaces not only to conform with the advancements in Learning theories but to also conform to the new generation of students which Oblinger and other choose to call the “Net Generation” (Oblinger, 2005 @REF EDU NET GEN). According to Oblinger (2005), there are 3 driving forces behind the move to redesign learning spaces viz:

* Changes in students
* Information Technology and
* Our understanding of learning

This view is also corroborated by Brown and Long (2005, @Ref Learning Spaces, ch 9). According to them, “Three major trends inform current learning space design” viz:

* Design based on **learning** **principles** (Theories), resulting in intentional support for social and active learning strategies.
* An emphasis on human-centered design and
* Increasing ownership of diverse devices that enrich learning.

Obviously this agrees with Oblinger’s view, however, Brown & Long proceed to add that “these trends have been catalyzed by constructivism, digital technology, and a holistic view of learning”. Neill & Etheridge, share a similar view. According to them, “in developing a flexible learning space, attention should be given to pedagogical, physical design, and information technology issues” (Neill & Etheridge, 2008).

It would not be profitable to discuss the impact of learning theories and changes in student in isolation, so we take both together. We begin from Oblinger’s last point (and Brown/Long’s first). According to Nadel (2003),

“Theories of learning have been applied most often in educational institutions. The relationship between cognitive science and education has benefited both scientists and practitioners. Scientists have used educational settings to develop and test their theories, and practitioners have used new knowledge about learning to design more effective education.”

The use of the term “educational institution” by Nadel gives the reader a mental impression of colleges and universities only, however, this is not the case as theories of learning have been practically applied to almost everywhere learning occurs, from the family home in training weeks old toddlers to executive corporations in staff training. The constructivist learning paradigm as earlier discussed focuses on the learner rather than teacher. Thus in constructivism, we drop the “transmitter-centric” mode of learning in favour of the “active construction of knowledge” by the learner. We drop the focus on “teaching” in favour of the focus on “learning”. This emphasis on learning according to Brown & Long (2005, @Ref Learning Spaces, ch 9), means that we must also “think about the learner” in designing learning spaces. Learning Spaces, according to them, “are not mere containers for a few, approved activities; instead they provide environments for people”. Consequently, it would be wise to design learning spaces not as an architectural master-piece alone but also bearing in mind how these spaces accentuate the needful learning requirements of today’s learners.

This must be what Torin Monahan had in mind when he used the term “**built pedagogy**” to refer to “architectural embodiments of educational philosophies.” In other words, “the ways in which a space is designed shape the learning that happens in that space (@Ref Nancy Van Note Chism, CH2, Learning Spaces). Consider the following example from Chism:

* A room with rows of tablet arm chairs facing an instructor’s desk in front of chalkboards conveys the pedagogical approach “I talk or demonstrate; you listen or observe.”
* A room of square tables with a chair on each side conveys the importance of teamwork and interaction to learning.

Present day students do not like the idea of sitting in front of an instructor like dummies and listening “attentively” to the teaching. Their attention quickly shift from the instructor to other items such as their mobile devices. Such learners would definitely not fancy the first example given by Chism above. Describing this kind of learners, Oblinger (2005, @REF Learning Spaces) see them as favouring “active, participatory and experiential learning”. This kind of learning according to Neill & Etheridge (2008), “requires a flexible space”, as such the second example would appeal to them since it is more natural to the learning styles they exhibit in their personal lives.

Environmental, Educational, Human Factors and Social Psychology which I refer to as the four amigos of learning space design are the areas of psychology that most directly relate to classroom design and learning environments. According to Graetz (2005, Learning Spaces, Ch6) “previous research on the effects of such environment variables as **light, temperature, and noise** on learning has yielded some predictable results that are addressed through traditional classroom design”. This research revealed salient points such as the fact that learning appears to be affected adversely by inadequate light, extreme temperatures, and loud noises as concluded by Graetz. Research such as this informs the design, re-design and renovation of learning spaces to enhance and encourage flexible learning experience.

Information Technology is also another very potent factor shaping the trends in learning space designs. Trends in Information and Communication Technology continuously redefine the meaning, boundaries and styles of learning. The recent proliferation of low-cost devices as well as the integration of platforms have given learners a whole new universe of learning – learning that is distributed in time and space. We focus on this in the next section when we discuss virtual learning spaces. One big problem with technology is the pace of change. The unrelenting pace of technology change, according to Brown & Long (2005) “can make IT decisions rapidly obsolete”. Interestingly, “While platforms and applications come and go, the psychology of how people learn does not” (Brown & Long, 2005). This is why the field of “Instructional Technology” focuses on adapting the changing technology to fit the psychology of learning. Rather than designing learning to suit the technology, the trends with regards to technology focuses on:

* Designing Technology to support Learning such as (@Examples Here Please)
* Adapting Technology to encourage active, collaborative and experiential learning such as the use of Web 2.0 tools, podcasting, mobile devices, etc.

So far, we have considered flexibility in terms of the ability to reconfigure the physical space such as re-arranging classroom furnishings. O’Neill (2009) is quick to add to that “the ability to reconfigure technology” within the learning space. This is an important consideration in designing or adapting technology for learning spaces. O’Neill (2009) goes ahead to posit that “Flexibility and reconfigurability are directly linked to the quality of the teaching and educational experiences”. The essence of flexibility in this context cannot be over-emphasised as learners place more demands on the boundaries of flexibility in learning. According to Collis & Moonen (2001), the following are flexibility areas in teaching;

* Flexibility in time like finishing and starting a course
* Flexibility in content (like content sequencing)
* Flexibility in entry requirements
* Flexibility in instructional approach and resources
* Flexibility in delivery and logistics

It can be seen from the above that the ability to reconfigure technology is key to achieving most of the point listed. Flexibility also gives the learners access to a range of choices on “how”, “when” and “where” to learn. Such options correspond with the present day learners who prefer to learn anywhere and everywhere. This also allows us to cater for a wide range of learners possessing diverse cultural backgrounds, learning styles and approaches. A survey on “Classroom Design and Technology Assessment” conducted by O’Neill (2009) showed that “the easier it is to modify classroom technology, the easier it is for faculty to communicate and collaborate with students and the better the image of the school with students”. The findings from the survey led to O’Neill recommending the following in optimising flexibility of technology:

1. **A Virtual World**: The technology provided to support learning in the classroom should be easily updated, accessible for all users, and have the capability of providing immediate learning opportunities for both students in the room as well as external participants who may be remotely logged in. It should accommodate both the virtual and physical worlds.
2. **Maximize Safety**: Ensure that technology devices and their input devices are specified and arranged to minimize awkward postures and support flow of teaching and learning tasks.
3. **Zone the Technology**: Consider placing whiteboards or other display technology at several locations within the classroom to support several concurrent activities.

[Would be nice if I can reproduce some diagrams to show space arrangement and reconfiguration]

One thing to note here is that even though technology enhances learning, it can also constrain it by introducing distractions and obstacles to the learner if not carefully applied. As such, I believe a balance is what is needed among the three factors listed by Oblinger and others. According to Jonassen & Land (2000), “Technology foundations determine what is technologically possible, but grounded practice requires determination of how capabilities should be exploited”.

The current trends in learning space design show the following as desired characteristics of learning spaces according to Chism (2005, Learning Spaces Ch 2):

* Flexibility
* Comfort
* Sensory Simulation – Colours, Lighting, Ambience
* Technology Support and
* Decentredness

A flexible learning space “better enables innovative approaches to teaching and learning when compared to the traditional classroom” (Neill & Etheridge, 2008). With the right approach, “the entire campus can become a learning space” (Mitchell, 2004). The 3 trends discussed here underlie this emerging reality (Brown & Long, 2005) while the desired characteristics stated above are the features these trends would produce to support active, participatory and experiential learning.

[[A combination of what what see chrome for the graph and use wisely, Also from PDF maximizing flexibility and learning]]

VIRTUAL LEARNING SPACES

Enough diagrams to reproduce @ <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/00001651.htm>

While physical spaces are tangible and fixed in time and space, virtual learning spaces are the direct opposite of these features. Also, whereas physical spaces exist around us, virtual spaces exist on machines and devices. Arguably, for the modern day learner, more learning happens on virtual spaces than on physical space. Virtual learning spaces the direct offsprings of the intercourse between technology and learning.

As a reminder, I would like to bring to your notice as discussed previously that the term “Virtual Learning Space” doesn’t in any way suggest that the “learning” is virtual and not original or authentic. I earlier posited that I would preferably refer to it as “Virtual Spaces for Learning” but for purposes of consistency with the literature, “Virtual Learning Spaces”. Please not that it is the “environment” that is virtual, not the learning. Virtual Learning Spaces is more commonly known as Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). While there is no single definition for a virtual learning space, most writers seem to agree on the meaning of virtual learning spaces by specifying their purpose, components and characteristics. This is not surprising considering the fact that virtual learning spaces are relatively new and changing rapidly, expanding to include new concepts and triggering the discovery of new concepts themselves. Most writers agree that virtual learning spaces are **designed** to support and enhance learning through the use of computers, multi-media devices, mobile devices and other technology based tools. According to Dillenbourg, Schneider & Synteta (2002)

* A virtual learning environment is a designed information space.
* A virtual learning environment is a social space: educational interactions occur in the environment, turning spaces into places.
* The virtual space is explicitly represented: the representation of this information/social space can vary from text to 3D immersive worlds.
* Students are not only active, but also actors: they co-construct the virtual space.
* Virtual learning environments are not restricted to distance education: they also enrich classroom activities.
* Virtual learning environments integrate heterogeneous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches.
* Most virtual environments overlap with physical environments.

A good example of a Virtual Environment that meets most of the defining characteristics listed above, is “Second Life”. Second Life is a very popular virtual world and has been used by many institutions for teaching and learning purposes. “It is designed to support creativity, collaboration, commerce and entertainment” (Graetz, 2005 @REF, I think it chapter 6). Other examples of VLEs include….. etc.

It seems to me that while enough attention has been apportioned to physical space design, there has been little focus on Virtual Spaces. This is bad as the “net generation” are virtual space natives who “spend an increasing amount of their time peering at computer screens” (Graetz, 2005). Designing Virtual Spaces is however not rocket science. According to Graetz (2005), “virtual environments have physical characteristics that are just as real as those of a dormitory room or a brick-and-mortar classroom”. It follows therefore that similar trends discussed above for learning space design which have been applied to a greater extent in designing physical spaces can be adapted for designing virtual spaces. It should be noted also that while design and implementation possibilities are limited by physical space, such limitations do not exist in virtual spaces [@Is this really True?].

The availability of infinite space in virtual spaces raises another concern – usability!

Virtual Spaces are continually being improved to support active, collaborative and experiential learning. The goal in improving virtual spaces is not to use them as replacements for physical spaces as some might envisage, rather both spaces are meant to be complementary. As Graetz (2005) puts it,

“First, campuses can expect the boundaries between virtual and brick-and-mortar learning environments to continue to blur. Students and instructors will need access to their virtual learning environments while seated in their brick-and-mortar classrooms”.

Graetz (2005) went ahead to state that learning institutions should accept that virtual spaces are actually classroom and as such apply the same care and considerations in designing and supporting them just as they do for physical spaces. Graetz also considers “usability of these virtual spaces” as being of utmost importance. Using the popular definition model for usability, Graetz identifies five criteria for defining a usable system namely, Learnability, Efficiency, Memorability, Errors and Satisfaction. The issue of usability of learning spaces is what we turn our attention to next.

USABILITY OF LEARNING SPACES

Usability as defined by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 9412 @Ref, find ref for ISO9412), is "the extent to which a product can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use”. This is a somewhat high level definition which will be broken down as we proceed. Usability is a “Quality” attribute and therefore cannot be defined by a single sentence. In order to define clearly what usability implies in any context, some form of concrete criteria or attributes must be defined through which usability can be measured. A popular model for doing this is based on five quality components or criteria listed as follows:

* LEARNABILITY
* EFFICIENCY
* MEMORABILITY
* ERRORS
* SATISFACTION

[Can I squeeze in a diagram here to capture these five pentagorians]

Jakob Nielsen is basically a household name when it comes to usability engineering so we turn to him to get a clear picture of what five criteria above implies, briefly. However, before we focus on applying meaning to the attributes, we pause to note that usability itself is a “narrow concern compared to the larger issue of system acceptability” (Nielsen, 1993). The diagram below shows the position of usability with regards to system acceptability.

Diagram Here from Nielsen p.25

System acceptability according to Nielsen (1993), “is the question of whether the system is good enough to satisfy all the needs and requirements of the users and other potential stakeholders.” I must quickly add here that such a system that would be able to “satisfy all”, would be a utopia. Usually, there is an acceptable level of satisfaction that a system is required to meet. In the framework of social acceptability proposed by Nielsen and corroborated by Ben Shneiderman (@REF, on wikippedia, track him), Usability, is a defining component of “Usefulness” and is composed of the five attribute identified above which are described below:

* LEARNABILITY: How easy it is for the user to accomplish the basic task on first attempt. According to Nielsen (1993), “The system should be easy to learn so that the user can rapidly start getting some work done with it”.
* EFFICIENCY: What is the level of productivity of the use after learning the basics of the system. In other words, how quickly can the user perform tasks. A high level of productivity in desired in this case.
* MEMORABILITY: The system according to Nielsen, “should be easy to remember”. This would enable the user return to the system after a period of not using it and re-establish proficiency without having to learn about the system from first principles again.
* ERRORS: The error rate of the system should be very low. This does not imply that errors may not occur but if and when they do, how severe are they and how easy it is for the user to recover “gracefully” from these errors. For Nielsen, “Catastrophic errors” is a taboo and must not occur.
* SATISFACTION: This is a measure of how “Pleasant” it is to use the system. Among all the criteria, this is the most subjective one and not quite easy to measure.

Similar but related attributes are “Throughput”, “Flexibility” and “Attitude” as identified by Usability Now (@REF properly).

Usability is a very important factor in designing learning spaces because a learning space (especially virtual ones) that has poor usability will generally lead to slow adoption and high dropout rate. Usability testing “can address some of the shortfalls in the learner experience, as well as provide designers with a set of principles and methods that can be used to design courses that will capture and hold users’ interest from start to finish” (Shilwant & Haggarty, 2005). When we also consider the fact that virtual learning environments (VLEs) are not continually used by learners. They are used intermittently, and as such should possess high level of efficiency and learnability; low error rate and be easy to remember. This will ensure that the VLE satisfies the user and most likely meet the pedagogic requirements it was designed for. Shilwant & Haggarty (2005), expanded the attributes for evaluation usability of virtual learning spaces by adding “Motivation” to the list. When Virtual Learning Spaces are designed, great care is usually taken to design the learning processes and components up to standards. However, there is always one missing element, “the instructor” (Shilwant & Haggarty, 2005). The absence of an actual physical environment and sometimes the absence of social interaction can lead to lack of motivation. This I believe accounts for the high rate of drop out in e-learning courses (@REF if you can). In order to ensure that this is compensated for, Shilwant & Haggarty (2005) suggested two methods for achieving usability namely:

* Usability through design and
* Usability through targeted testing.

They proceed to advise that these should be conducted parallel to each other in an iterative fashion for best results. However, this should not be considered in isolation but “viewed through the lens of motivation principles such as feedback, curiosity, relevance, control, challenge and contextualization to achieve built-in motivation” (Shilwant & Haggarty, 2005).

Nokelainen (2006), expanded the traditional usability model by Nielsen (1993) by adding to “Pedagogical Usability” to the “Utility” branch of the System Acceptability tree and renaming usability to “technical usability”(Should I draw an image here?). Nokelainen defines Pedagogical Usability as being “dependent on the goals set for a learning situation by the student and teacher”. It follows thus that evaluating the usability of a virtual learning space becomes more difficult since the technical usability alone is not enough, the environment must also meet the pedagogical demands in terms of achieving the set learning goals. How do we measure and ascertain that these learning goals have been achieved? Zaharias & Poylymenakou (2009) agree that “evaluating the usability of e-learning applications is not a trivial task”. In order to do a successful usability evaluation, the users, task and context must be identified. According to Zaharias & Poylymenakou (2006), in terms of e-learning, “the main task for the user is to learn, which is rather tacit and abstract in nature”. I believe this is why most e-learning tools have poor usability records. They are either not being evaluated for usability at all or the evaluation is not properly done. This is the reason Notess (2001) stated that, “Evaluating e-learning may move usability practitioners outside their comfort zone”. To develop an effective usability evaluation method or framework for virtual learning spaces, the evaluator must familiarize himself with Learning Theories, Learning Styles and educational testing research (Zaharias & Poylymenakou, 2009). Three widely used methods for usability evaluation (Hertzum & Jacobsen, 2001) are

* Think Aloud (TA)
* Heuristic Evaluation (HE) and
* Cognitive Walkthrough (CW).

Other methods include Questionnaires, Direct Observation, Interviews, Focus Groups, etc. No matter the method applied however, all good usability should have 3 things – Visibility, Affordance & Feedback (Norman, 2000).

SUMMARY (If I have the Strength)

Learning spaces are where learning happens. Great spaces foster great learning be they physical or virtual. Learning spaces should be designed to promote learning. Doing this requires that the designers of these spaces understand the principles behind learning which are embodied in learning theories and styles. The users of the spaces must also be considered. Understanding their need and preferences is important.

/\*\*\*\*\*ORPHANS

Another compelling reason for the shift is that, because of information technology ..... Brown and Lippincott, 2003

As faculty explore innovative approaches to teaching and learning, attention should be given to physical space(Neill & Etheridge, 2008).

While physical spaces exist around us, virtual spaces exist on machines and devices. Arguably, more learning happens on virtual spaces than on physical space (@find ref), however, not much has been done in documenting research for building usable virtual spaces. Technology has redefined ……see excerpts

Students in the flexible learning space recognize that the room allows for a variety of uses. This may provide students the freedom to explore different approaches to developing understanding, meaning, and/or solutions (Neill & Etheridge, 2008).

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*/

# Chapter 3: Research Methods

3.1 Project Description, Delivery Strategy & Evaluation

This section identifies what the project involves, what will be done, how it will be done, what tools would be used and methodologies that would be applied. Expected deliverables and evaluation criteria are also discussed.

3.1.1 Project Description

This project involves “improving” the User Interface (UI) for a multimedia, multi-user, collaborative environment. The product to be improved is the “learning spaces” in a Personal Learning Environment (PLE). In doing this, the focus is on “usability” not “visual design”. This approach would involve taking the existing system and evaluating it by gather user/expert feedbacks. These feedbacks would be used to improve the system. Additionally, the feedbacks gathered would be merged with:

* The Product Owner’s vision for the system
* My own visions for the system and
* Ideas from other domain experts where possible

This processed would then be repeated in a series of iterations that would lead to an improved and usable product to be delivered at the end of the project. Tests with user would be conducted to evaluate the “improved” product.

Improving the usability of any system is not a one off task. It is a process (@REF, maybe Nielsen). It involves using a Usability Evaluation Method (UEM) to assess the usability of the system then applying Usability design principles and feedbacks to improve the system. Since usability is a quality attribute (as already discussed in the background section, see chapter 2), it should be measured by defining attributes or components that can be tested to achieve the goal. These attribute have been discussed. They include Learnability, Efficiency,Memorability, Errors and Satisfaction. However, evaluating the usability of learning resources or systems have a subtle twist in it. Technical usability evaluation of such a system identifies functional aspects of the system. Pedagogical usability must also be evaluated which would shows whether the system meets learning requirements. In this case, technical/functional usability would measure aspects such as navigation, error handling and recovery, User Interface Layout, accessibility, etc. Pedagogical usability would require setting learning goals; performing several tasks, then attempting to verify if the set goals were achieved or otherwise. Since learning spaces foster private construction of knowledge as well as collaborative learning, some interesting questions pop up with regards to making the system more usable. Some of which include:

* What is the best way to manage a user’s private space and shared space?
* In a shared space, how do we accommodate changes and undo requests given that several users may be working on the same learning resource.
* How do we place emphasis on relevant materials so that the user can immediately locate it on first visit?
* When a user visits a shared or private space and returns to it later, there’s a possibility that certain aspects or resources on the space have changed. How do we highlight these changes to the user?
* How do we make it possible for users to invent new components for use in the learning spaces?
* How do we improve the flexibility and adaptability of the learning space?

Another key area of consideration is re-configurability and adaptability. A learning space on the PLE would simply be a canvas with UI components for user generated content. However, the layout of the interface must enable the learner to interact with the space in ways native to his/her learning style. For instance, the learner should be able to use the space as a private classroom, a presentation wall, a resource aggregation platform, a mind map board, etc. Additionally, when in collaborative mode, tools that enable participatory learning should be made handy. It would be needless to display the chat widget or icon when the space is being used in private mode, on the other hand, the icon should be readily available in social mode. Since the learning space is web based, aspect of web usability design principles would be applied to improve it.

One area I have been considering is transferring some nice classroom characteristics to the learning spaces. One good example of this is the principle of a “dimly lighted” room during presentation. This can be achieved for instance by applying a soft gradient overlay on the page, excluding the area where the presentation is being made. This gives the impression of a “dimly lighted” room and can be very effective. This has been applied on movie and other multimedia streaming websites such as seesaw (<http://seesaw.com>). Another characteristic is the principle of “immersion”, the ambience and other environmental properties usually repel the learner or immerse the learner in, thus making him/her relaxed in the learning environment. This can be achieved in the learning spaces by applying careful layout design principles and colour blending. The use of “fullscreen mode” also enhances this concept as it enables the user forget about every other part of the web page and be immersed into the learning space. Instant feedback is another learning principle that enhances learning and is strongly tied to the motivation theory. Instant feedback can be a mirage on the web when the user has to wait for the page bearing the feedback to reload thus losing interest and motivation. Web Technologies such as Asynchronous Javascript and XML (AJAX) are designed to handle this limitation.

In a social or collaborative environment, violation of “Personal Space” is always a consideration worth taking into account. In traditional classroom design, “designers are usually adviced to pay attention to the degree to which students feel crowded in a classroom” (Graetz, 2005, @REF, Chapter 6, Confirm this please). Similar notion can be transferred to the design of the learning space by paying careful attention to the crowding of the user interface with widgets. The guiding principle should be, if it is not needed at the moment, hide it! Also, being a virtual space, there is no limitation to the amount of learners that can collaboratively share a social space. However, rather than place a hard limit on the number of learners that can share a space at a time, some other interface design principles can be applied. For example, in chat room comprising many people, it is needless to display the list of participants, instead a collapsible container can be used such that the user can expand it when he wishes to see the list and collapse it again thereafter.

Traditional X/HTML would greatly limit my ability to implement some of these features hence the choice of a Rich Internet Application platform for the job.

Research Methodology

I would follow a 3 phase methodology approach to ensure I achieve the goals of the project. These phases are as follows:

PHASE 1:

This is the “Preliminary Preparation” phase. It includes initial research leading to a broader understanding of the project, identification of related work and tools that can be used to achieve the goals of the project. This process has been ongoing for a period of time now and the submission of this background report would bring this phase to a logical conclusion, after which I would go into a brief period of reflection and evaluation to ascertain that the objectives at this stage has been met. Further discussions with my supervisor would also confirm this and together, we would set the path for progress. The most important artifacts produced in this phase are the project time-plan and the background report. The plan would help me manage the most limited resource which is time while the background report has enabled me to situate my project within a wider research theme thus giving me a broad familiarization with the topic.

PHASE 2:

This phase will officially begin after my exams, though some aspects of it are already in progress. I refer to it as the “Design, Development and Testing” phase. The understanding derived from phase 1 would be used as the basis for design and implementation of the specified software. In keeping up with the project time-plan, tools for the design have already been identified. Learning to use the tool is also in progress. I have already developed a very deep understanding of the proposed tools. The pending tasks in this phase include the system design, which would be done iteratively; implementation, testing and evaluation. To ensure a robust system is developed, Test Driven Development (TDD) would be applied to the development process. The Agile Project Management method would be used to ensure that this part of the project is delivered successfully as described in the next sections.

PHASE 3:

The third and final phase of the project which I refer to as the “Report, Review and Submission” phase would cover the writing of the dissertation report. The dissertation report would cover all aspects of the project including some aspects already covered in this background report. The report would also highlight the conclusions drawn from the project, contributions mades, deliveries and areas for further research. The figure below presents a graphical overview of the phases and their relationship.

[Diagram Here Figure 3.x]

3.1.2 Expected Deliverables

Put this in a tabular format

Sn, Deliverable, Recipient, Due Date, Delivery Method, Remarks

3.1.3 Assumptions, Dependencies, and Constraints

3.1.3 Project Plan

The project plan spans a period of 8 months starting from February 1st 2011 and ending September 9, 2011. This period also include the examinations between May 19th and June 8th. As at the time of submission of this report, 50% of this period would have already been gone. It is therefore very important that the tasks on the project plan progress as outlined in order to ensure I meet the deadline and also deliver a good product fit for a Masters’ Project. To effectively tackle the project, I have divided it into 3 phases as follows:

* Preliminary Preparation phase
* Design, Development and Testing phase
* Report, Review and Submission phase

Each phase is further splitted into “**Tasks**” and “**Milestone**”. At the end of major tasks milestones are delivered. The successful delivery of these milestones on or before the deadline is a clear indication that the project is on course. A list of the milestones is presented below while the project Gantt Chart can be found in the appendices (@Appendix what?).

[@Remember to add project plan in landscape mode to appendices]

LIST OF MILESTONES:

* Project Summary Document (due February 17th, 2011)
* Project Website (due April 7th, 2011)
* Background Report (due May 9th, 2011)
* System Evaluation Report (due August 5th, 2011)
* Dissertation Report (due September 9th, 2011)

3.1.4 Evaluation Plan

This project would be considered successful if all the phases outlined in the research methodology (section 3.xxx @Correct) section are completed within the specified time allocated to them. Generally, this would mean that the target goals have been achieved and the expected deliverables delivered. With regards to the system design and implementation, an evaluation involving testing with users would be carried out and reported accordingly. This evaluation will be based on the usability of the system produced. As discussed earlier, an evaluation framework would be designed such that the technical and pedagogical usability of the system can be evaluated.

The final report will be evaluated by applying the university research guidelines and regulations. The dissertation report is a very important artifact as it documents all aspects of the project and forms the core contribution to the literature. As a result, careful, repeated review must be done to ensure it meets the standards of the university, which are quite high. Allowances have been made for this in the project time allocation (see appendix, @Complete this later).

3.2 Project Tools

The project has been describes, plans have been made but without the availability of the necessary tools, the expected deliverables cannot be met. This section takes a look at the tools that would be used in the project.

3.2.1 Development Tools

The development tools are technical tools that would be used to design, implement and test the software. They include but are not limited to:

FLEX 4

Flex is “an open source framework for developing intuitive web applications that can make it much easier for people to view and interpret data” (Adobe® Inc). I prefer to use the term Rich Internet Applications rather than intuitive web applications as there is usually a controversy as to whether a web application can actually be intuitive or not. Flex can also be used to build mobile and desktop applications. Applications are built in Flex using MXML tags and Action Script®. They can then be executed in the Adobe® Flash® runtime mostly for web environment and the Adobe® Air® runtime for desktop applications. The Flash runtime is widely available on all major internet browsers while, the Air runtime can be easily downloaded online. Flex applications running in web pages do not require a page reload to update information on the user interface. They connect to remote server side applications to retrieve data which are used to update the client interface as required. These features make Flex a very suitable candidate for designing learning spaces as required by this project. The latest version of Flex is version 4, this version features a lot of improvement over previous ones especially in enabling modular development. This is the version that would be used.

Adobe ® Flash Builder

Flash Builder is an integrated development environment for building Flex applications. It was formerly known as Flex Builder and is based on the Eclipse ™ IDE Framework. A plug-in also exists that can be installed into any existing Eclipse ™ based IDE for Flash builder, however, I prefer the fully functional studio. My supervisor has already obtained the studio for me which I am using to learn how to develop Flex applications.

Server Side Scripting Languages

Internet applications usually connect to back-end databases to retrieve and display dynamic information. A Flex application does not connect directly to a remote database. Instead, it is connected to a data service written in the developer’s favorite web language (PHP, ColdFusion, Java, or any other server-side web technology). This design ensures that Flex applications can be used in any scenario. It also makes it very easy to switch server side implementation without needing to change the front end. As at the time of this writing, I have explored Flex application development with PHP, ColdFusion and Java as the back end service. I propose to use PHP ultimately but this decision may likely change.

Web Application Servers

Web application servers would be required to run the server side services. WAMP server can be used for PHP, ColdFusion Server for ColdFusion and BlazeDS for java (@Update this stub).

Version Control System (VCS)

Version Control also known as Revision control or Source control is a way of managing changes to documents, program source codes or other files. Source control is always very relevant in a collaborative environment where more than person may make changes to a file at the same time. Changes are usually marked by a unique code. The file or group of files being managed can be “branched”. This involves making a duplicate copy of the original document and continuing work on the copy while the original remains untouched. VCS are very relevant in an Agile development environment as it enables majority of the agile methodology ideals to be achieved easily such as continuous testing, integration and release. I would be using Git which is a “free & open source, distributed version control system designed to handle everything from small to very large projects with speed and efficiency” (git-scm.com).

PLE

The learning space will not exist in isolation; it is integrated into a Personal Learning Environment. Both systems would thus share some APIs in common. The PLE is also being redesigned so the learning space would be designed to fit into both the old and new PLE. This would not be a major issue as the design of the PLE is well distributed and decentralized to accommodate such kind of integration.

3.2.2 Communication & Collaboration Tools

Communication is key to the success of any project. Interaction and Collaboration are core values of agile and nothing fosters these more than communication. Communication tools have therefore been setup to enable uninterrupted flow of communication among all parties involved. The communication and collaboration media are as follows:

Google Group

A Google group (see <http://groups.google.com/>) called “newple” has been set up to enable discussion among all parties involved in the design and development of the PLE. This group ensures that everyone gets access to crucial information on time.

Skype®

Skype is a software application that allows users to make voice calls and chats over the Internet (see <http://www.skype.com/intl/en-gb/home>). Calls made between Skype® users are free. I can communicate with my supervisor and other people involved via skype.

[@TODO or @TOREMOVE Prepare communication plan tables as done in the Plan Template p.8]

3.2.3 Evaluation Tools

3.2.4 Reporting Tools

Reporting tools would be used to document vital information as the project progresses. The documented information can then be aggregated later, updated and reviewed to form the basis for the dissertation report. The following reporting tools are already in use

Scratch Wiki

The scratch wiki (see @URL) was used to produce my Project summary report, project website and a good part of this background report. The wiki allow me and my supervisor to collaboratively document the project as it progresses. Reports in the wiki can be viewed periodically and used as the basis for defining new pathways in the project.

3.3.1 Project Management Plan

A project management plan (PM Plan) is relevant to ensure that the project is successful. A Project Management Plan “is a formal, approved document that defines how the project is executed, monitored and controlled” (PMBOK Guide Third Edition). In this case however, I am going to make an exception by presenting a semi-formal project management plan. The Agile Project Management Plan discussed below would be used.

Include description for intermediate project goals or milestones

3.3.2 Agile Project Management

Agile Project Management (APM) adapts the ideas from Agile software development into project management. According to the Agile Manifesto and as seen in practice during one of my course modules, Agile Methods generally promote collaborative development process that encourages interaction, individuality, stakeholder involvement, feedback, incremental and evolutionary development, periodic delivery of working products, effective control and quick response to change. Agile Project Management would ensure that the project is managed in an incremental and evolutionary manner until it is successfully completed. My supervisor has already setup the perfect environment for this to thrive as can be seen in the “PEVE” laboratory in Kilburn Building.

3.3.3 Risk Management & Issue Resolution Plan [Contingency Plan]

Every project is prone to risk. Identifying, analyzing, prioritizing, and controlling project risks are important factors that must not be overlooked. Since I would be using the iterative development method, at the end of each iteration, I would be able to identify risks during the sprint demo. I would use the retrospective session to analyse the risks identified and develop plans to handle them. Risk control however, is more desirable than risk management. It is better to prevent risks than manage them. Agile Methodologies such as Scrum are designed to control risk as much as possible. Daily Scrums and Sprint Planning Meetings ensure that risk prone issues are handled before they even surface.

# Chapter 4: Summary

# List of References

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**SCRAPS:**

**Background report - Structure**

The structure should be decided with your supervisor but typically will be something like:

* Abstract (summary of report)
* Introduction (outlines scope of investigation)
* Background (survey of relevant literature, related approaches, sets wider context)
* Research methods (what the project involves, project plan, evaluation plan)
* List of references (using accepted format)

Scrap ends