implementing paragogy

The paragogical principles:

1. context as decentered center

2. meta-learning as a font of knowledge

5. realize your dream then wake up!

3. peers are equal but different

4. learning is distributed and nonlinear

Purpose of this lesson:

Learn techniques for designing and running a peer-to-peer course.

Learn techniques for fostering organizational learning in your institution or other shared context.

Develop plans for balancing the above with your own learning needs and ambitions.

Audience:

Anyone who is already involved in peer-to-peer education or who aims to become involved with it.

Time to complete:

Initial exercise: about 1 hour
Practice in the field: at least 1 quarter

Requirements:

Can be studied alone, but should be practiced with a group.

Introduction

Peer-to-peer or "peer-based" learning is what happens when a group of people with different backgrounds and aims agree to come together for a learning activity, most likely without a teacher and without an explicit learning plan (at the outset). There are both benefits and hazards to this kind of learning. This lesson is aimed at persons who are interested in helping facilitate such learning experiences, to get the greatest benefit and diminish the overall hazard. You might be an official "facilitator", or an administrator, or a peer learner aiming to help your learning group achieve more. The lesson is based on a half a year of experience at P2PU and continues to grow and develop -- in working through this lesson, you will have the opportunity to contribute to the theory of "paragogy".

Implementing paragogy

This lesson is based on my experiences in several "enrichment" courses at P2PU, in Autumn 2010 and Winter 2011. Some of the courses went well, and others didn't, and I was curious about why. Charles Jeffery Danoff and I wrote up some of our inital thoughts on this topic in a short paper called *Paragogy: Synergizing individual and organizational learning* [1], but we needed another round of experiments to put our ideas into practice. This lesson integrates what we've learned in our second round and will help you work through the process of designing a peer-to-peer learning experience. In turn, your feedback on this process will help take the theory of paragogy to the next level! More information on how to submit feedback will be provided below. For now, your first task is to begin designing a new course.

Task 1: Select your topic wisely We've found that some of the most successful learning experiences enhance projects that were "going to happen anyway". For example, Marisa Ponti and I were planning to write a book chapter on the topic of *Open Governance and Learning*, and we decided to convert out abstract for the chapter into a syllabus for a 6 week course.[1] Our conversations were going to happen anyway, but now they have expanded to include a lively discussion with a diverse group of interested participants, including some contributions from noted experts in the field.[2]

For contrast, consider the *Short Calculus* course I ran contemporaneously with the one I just mentioned.[3] I had to hunt hard to even find candidate participants for this course, and it did not come as much of a surprise when participation turned out to be very low.

Principle #5: Realize your dream then wake up! The topic you pick should help

you realize *your* dream. Ideally as you sketch out the topic in a bit more detail, you'll be able to find others who share the same dream to a reasonable extent. In addition, once the course has progressed far enough, you should get a sense that you've reached its potential.

Task 2: Engage your peers in the design process early on Whether its by talking with the friends with whom you share an interest, or running a survey to get feedback from interested participants online, making the design of the course into a collaborative process may encourage "buy in", and, more pragmatically, will help you decide what features are really important for this group of people to work together on the topic. Do you need live meetings, or will an asynchronous discussion do just fine? What sort of background do people have with the topic?

For purposes of this exercise, it's enough to write down a few questions that you'll want to ask would-be participants before the course starts.

Principle #3: Peers are equal but different Peer learners work together to create the key resources in the course – learning opportunities that come from interaction.[4] You'll want to foster an egalitarian culture: remember that in peer learning there isn't anyone who dictates what others have to do. However, this doesn't mean that the course should be a structureless blob. Some participants will want more overt structures given to them, others will want to create new ones. Does your course accommodate people with these and other personal characteristics?[5]

Task 3: Make the scope and structure clear You don't have to provide everything, but as a course (co-)organizer, you are likely to be largely responsible for finding (or creating) the initial set of resources for the course. P2PU has been described as follows: "think of it as book clubs for open

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[1] http://p2pu.org/general/open-governance-and-learning

[2] http://open-governance-and-learning.posterous.com/

[3] http://p2pu.org/math-future/short-calculus

[4] http://p2pu.org/general/node/15138/forums/25213#comment-10565

[5] http://p2pu.org/general/node/11464/forums/25663

educational resources." That pointer may be helpful (or potentially confusing).

The question to sort out here is what "shape" your course is likely to take. Is it even appropriate to think of it as a "course", or would it be better to think about it as some other sort of structured activity? Be as explicit as possible. It is OK to put your "answer" in the form of further questions to ask to course participants before the course begins or at its outset. However, note that if part of the course is "building the course", you must make sure that the course participants are really up for it, and make sure the overall course design is sufficiently flexible to accomodate changes.

For example, in the first week of the *Mathematics for Game Designers* course, many of the particpants declared that they mainly wanted to write code – but many of these people were not heard from much *after* the first week.[6]

Principle #4: Learning is distributed and nonlinear Given the ongoing difficulties I've had organizing mathematics courses on P2PU, and the comparative success of programming and other computer-related courses[7], I've spent a lot of time thinking about what I might be doing "wrong" as a course organizer. Then I think back to my original goal for these courses, namely, to buildi a useful bridge between P2PU and PlanetMath.org.[8] This can only happen slowly. In particular, it seems essential for PlanetMath to offer much better support for *independent* mathematics learners. There is then a serious question here about how much "peer learning" is useful in mathematics learning, and how it can be built in.

The key point is that you *may* find an important part of your course's critical mass elsewhere – but thes "external" resources need to be right. Remember Principle #5 – your own ambitions are likely your best guide to a topic to organize around.

Task 4: Define your objectives I'm personally not a great fan of the term "learning objectives", because in light of Principle #4, I think they can be too hard to specify. However, I do think there is significant value to be obtained by being clear about your objectives in general.

In one of the key documents of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, A. T. Ariyaratne tells a story of how working with a group of villagers to clarify their real objectives resulted in them getting out of a tangle of red tape and resolving their problem directly [2]. In the course you may need to get to the (third) "norming" stage in Bruce Tuckman's theory of group development in order to find shared objectives, and this may not happen overnight.[9]

However, for the purposes of this exercise, it is enough to come up with some your *own* most important objectives for the course, possibly including a rough time-table. You can later invite course participants to go through a similar exercise.

Principle #2: Meta-learning as a font of knowledge Frankly, I have not been doing this long enough to know precisely what works and what doesn't work. Indeed, one of the themes of paragogy is that even after a rich career in peer-to-peer learning one would still be learning a lot – that's part of the point! It may be helpful to address the question "what do I hope to learn *about the learning process* through my work in this course?"

One way to amp up your meta-learning is to acknowledge the need to support it explicitly. This lesson plan reflects on several courses I was organizing or co-organizing, but has been developed as an assignment in another course where I've been (twice!) a participant, *Collaborative Lesson Planning*.[10] P2PU maintains various structures to help – a good place to ask questions is the gen-

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[6]http://p2pu.org/math-future/ mathematics-game-designers

[7]http://p2pu.org/webcraft

[8]http://planetmath.org

[9]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuckman% 27s_stages_of_group_development

[10]http://p2pu.org/general/ collaborative-lesson-planning-0

eral community mailing list, or the research list.[11,12]

Task 5: Report back This lesson will be under ongoing development as long as feedback keeps coming in: you can get in touch by emailing the author directly (contact details below). Since at present I'm just "playtesting" this lesson, I'd be particularly curious to know what flaws or omissions you see in it, and in what ways you've found it useful. If you run the courses you've designed with the help of this plan, I will be *very* curious to know how they go, and your feedback will be hugely valuable in improving this lesson plan for next time. I hope that by including this participatory component, I've also made a good example of a "paragogical" lesson plan!

Principle #1: Context as decentered center In paragogy, we recognize that we are not "merely" teachers or learners, but are actually co-creating the learning context as a whole. This is a good time to reflect on your context, generally speaking. What role does learning play in your life and in the life of your communities? What was it that brought you here? Why *this* learning and *this* context?

Paragogy complements didactic and other teaching modes (particularly andragogy [3]) by drawing attention to the "central" role of context, and the way it shapes, constrains, and supports learning activities, and the way learning, in turn, can help people shape the context in which they live.

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[11]http://groups.google.com/group/p2pu-community

[12]http://groups.google.com/group/p2pu-researches

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[3] M. S. Knowles. The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy. Chicago: Follett. (1980)