SAT: You can run a SOLE session over Skype... or can you? (Mike Lyons)

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This presentation will explore some aspects of Self Organized Learning Environments, or SOLEs. It will include overviews of how a SOLE session is run, how self organization manifests in nature, and how Microsoft's Skype in the Classroom initiative can be utilized to expand the scope of a session. Finally, the feasibility of self organized learning over distance will be questioned and discussed.

In self organized learning environments, groups of children are given an inquiry based learning task in the form of a "Big Question". The children work together looking for answers on the internet, and then report their findings. The teacher's role is non-essential; it is limited to posing the Big Question and providing encouragement. In other words, self organized learning is a pedagogical method where children construct knowledge without the intervention of a trained adult (Mitra & Crawley, 2014). That such a thing is possible is a controversial assertion, and it has quite naturally been the subject of debate, especially since Sugata Mitra won the TED prize in 2013 for his work on SOLEs. It may be that the popularity of the method has been driven by exposure on TED and social media (Harmer, 2014) rather than supported with significant research. The position of this presentation is that SOLEs do work, and the potential of self organized learning is enormous: but that there are also limitations.

We see self organization commonly occurring in nature. Emergent systems by definition take on new properties independent of the chaos from which they emerge. Something can come from nothing. Sugata Mitra's "Hole in the Wall" experiments, and the research that followed, indicate that self organized learning is indeed an emergent phenomenon (Mitra & Dangwal, 2010). We will give an introduction to the SOLE method and will then look at other examples of emergence in nature, how it happens and what it implies.

While SOLEs have been tried in communities and classrooms around the world, these are local environments where the participants are in proximity to each other. The method is largely untested in virtual environments or over distance. This presentation proposes that connecting students from different cultures can further enrich the pool of ideas that lead to learning. We will consider how Skype can be used to connect students and the practical problems in doing so. There will be a brief introduction to Microsoft's Skype in the Classroom initiative which can expedite the process of connecting students (Education.microsoft.com, 2017).

Self organization can be seen happening over distance in the form of social media. Learning

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Mike Lyons
11 December 2017

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over distance is also possible, as evidenced by the success of the Open University. But it is unclear whether the SOLE method is feasible when the students are not in proximity to each other. We will pose our own Big Question: "Can self organized learning happen over distance?" The conference audience will be invited to share their knowledge and opinions.

REFERENCES

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Extra content

Presentation Poster

https://1drv.ms/p/s!AsicUelnCAyihjGaLD6KcOLvokew

Mike Lyons
10:36 on 12 January 2018

Alternate Poster:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH9KBkxXxgM

Mike Lyons
10:39 on 12 January 2018

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Denise McDonough
9:19am 18 December 2017 Permalink

Hi Mike, I am looking forward to hearing more about this topic. Don't the stronger children dominant the group as they often mature at differnet rates? I will check out the TED talk.

Do you have any images or multimedia to add?

It might be cool to add a snip of his voice.

BW, Denise

Mr Jonathan G Brown
3:20pm 18 January 2018 Permalink

Hi Mike,

What skills / experience are children expected to have to tackle the 'Big Question?' For those learners that are new to SOLE, how much modelling does the teacher / facilitator do?

Mike Lyons
10:54am 19 January 2018 Permalink

Thanks for your questions so far.

Denise asked: "Don't the stronger children dominant the group as they often mature at differnet rates?"

Jonathan asked: "What skills / experience are children expected to have to tackle the 'Big Question'?" and "For those learners that are new to SOLE, how much modelling does the teacher / facilitator do?"

I will have a Q&A at the end of the presentation, and will answer your questions there.

For now, I'll try to give abbreviated answers.

Denise, yes, there are inevitably dominant members of groups. This is not necessarily a bad thing. The dominant kids scaffold for the others.

Jonathan, stories abound about how little is required to make a SOLE work. The facilitator should do as little modeling as possible.

Steve Penney
2:30pm 20 January 2018 Permalink

Hi Mike

Very interested in your SOLE ideas.

How do you define the outcomes / track progress made by the students?

Mike Lyons
10:40am 21 January 2018 Permalink

Steve, that's a very good question.

Generally speaking the outcomes of a SOLE cannot be defined without compromising the essence of the activity - self organization. If the students go in an entirely different direction from the one the facilitator expects, that's fine. That's more than fine; it's a thing of beauty!

In my SOLE sessions here in Japan, students have to present their findings in English. They are evaluated on their English and presentation skills.

Richard Sharp
10:42pm 1 February 2018 Permalink

Hi Mike,

In your SOLE sessions, can the topic of the 'big question' given to the group be unrelated to English? Does it just need to be a subject which can engage the students in discussion and help them to develop their communication skills?

You mention that students are evaluated on English and presentation skills (in their presentation of the activity findings). Is that an individual assessment where students obtain their own grade, or is there a group presentation and group award?

By the way - if you like Sugata Mitra there's a good BBC podcast featuring him at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04gvm7n (BBC Radio 4, The Educators, Sugata Mitra, 22.09.2014, 28 Mins).

Mike Lyons
12:23am 2 February 2018 Permalink

Richard,

It would certainly be good to discuss in my presentation what makes a good Big Question. I will add a slide to that effect. You are spot on anyway; a Big Question needs to be one which engages the students in discussion. It also should be challenging - more challenging than most teachers would ever dare. And obviously, it should be intrinsically moivating, something that piques curiosity.

As for presentations, different teachers will have different rubrics. In my case, I give a little feedback on group dynamics, but most of it goes toward individual students.

Thanks for the BBC link; I hadn't heard this one before.

Katherine Hinchey
4:57pm 4 February 2018 Permalink

Is it correct to say that the Big Question is a social object? And, have there been examples of SOLEs using social media (not Skype) to extend the membership beyond the walls of their physical classroom?

Mike Lyons
1:04pm 5 February 2018 Permalink

Katherine,

Is it correct to say that the Big Question is a social object? - In my limited understanding of a sociocultural theory, when a community gives meaning to a piece of knowledge, the knowledge may be called a social object. There may be an argument that questions posed by teachers are given meaning by the interplay between the teacher and students, but I could not give you a definitive "yes".

Have there been examples of SOLEs using social media (not Skype) to extend the membership beyond the walls of their physical classroom? - No not yet. Probably SOLEs would only work with synchronous communication. But by the way, a lot of SOLEs take place outside any classroom; Sugata Mitra's original Hole in the Wall experiments were conducted on the streets of a Delhi slum.

Dr Simon Ball
3:48pm 17 February 2018 Permalink

Hi Mike
Well done on a great presentation! Sorry you didn't think the videos were working - I guess there was just a lag in getting to you, as they worked really well at this end! Here is a summary of the comments and questions you received following your presentation (including those you may have addressed verbally). Please respond in whatever way you choose.

Best wishes

Simon

- I am amazed how quick my youngest could learn to play online games before she could read!
- I find tha children have excellent leadership and teaching skills when it comes to showing adults (i.e. me) how to play games on games consoles - especially when connected online.
- How important is the self motivation of the children
- are SOLEs scalable for ongoing use as part of a formal learning curriculum?
- What context would you want to use SOLE over skype internationally?

Claire Richardson
10:20pm 17 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Well done Mike. Your presentation really helped to clarify what SOLEs are for me. There also seem to be links between your project and Jonathan's work on collaborative learning in high schools. Do you think you will try to run a SOLE over skype internationally? Would love to hear the result.

Great big questions.

Mike Lyons
12:59am 18 February 2018 [Permalink](#)

Hi Claire

Thanks for the comment. I think there may be something essential to self organized learning that only manifests when students are in proximity to each other. A SOLE at distance hasn't been tested yet. I've proposed an experiment to SOLE Central (the group of researchers working with Sugata Mitra at Newcastle University).

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