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Recommended Citation

Donnelly, R. (2005). Contemplating the Evolving Role of the Tutor in Blended Problem Based Learning in Higher Education. *International PBL Conference*Lahti, Finland, June 9-11.

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Contemplating the Evolving Role of the Tutor in Blended Problem Based Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract

- A hugely important area in any form of face to face and PBL delivery is the role of the tutor; in an e-learning environment, it is even more crucial. The role of the tutor in blended PBL is both special and crucial for effective learning outcomes and enjoyable learning experiences for students in higher education. As an educational developer and tutor in higher education, whilst working with academic staff, I encounter issues in postgraduate modules that use blended problem-based learning delivery methods.
- In this professional context, blended learning refers to a merging of classroom and online activities that must be integrated by the tutor in ways that allows them to facilitate learning as a coherent and effective whole. Within this, the research argues that it is important to consider and explore what tutoring strategies are appropriate for different learning paradigms. For instance, electronic PBL (e-PBL) utilizes an online learning environment (OLE) that will create a puzzlement that engages a group of learners in inquiry activities consistent with the goals of the course. The tutor's role is not at the content, but at the metacognitive level, where they model, scaffold and support learner thinking.
-

Abstract

- However, as the tacit knowledge of face to face learning interactions is not available to us in the online world, the move to facilitating online problem based learning has the effect of unbundling traditional roles and functions for both tutor and learner.

- The tutor's role in a blended PBL module will be explored in this paper, specifically their facilitation of interdependence amongst the learners by building a cohesive and supportive class. The premise for the research is that a tutor who values a cohesive, supportive and productive blended PBL class will accentuate exchanges of positive affect; they will encourage collective and achievement orientations toward learning; they will show appreciation for the uniqueness of each particular learner; they will facilitate open and diffuse discussions about the problem.

Research Questions

Deeper Questions

What is involved in the act of learning (within blended PBL)?

What is the nature of facilitating lecturers' learning?

Working Questions

What is the tutor's role in sustaining/propagating the best features of e-learning and problem-based learning ?

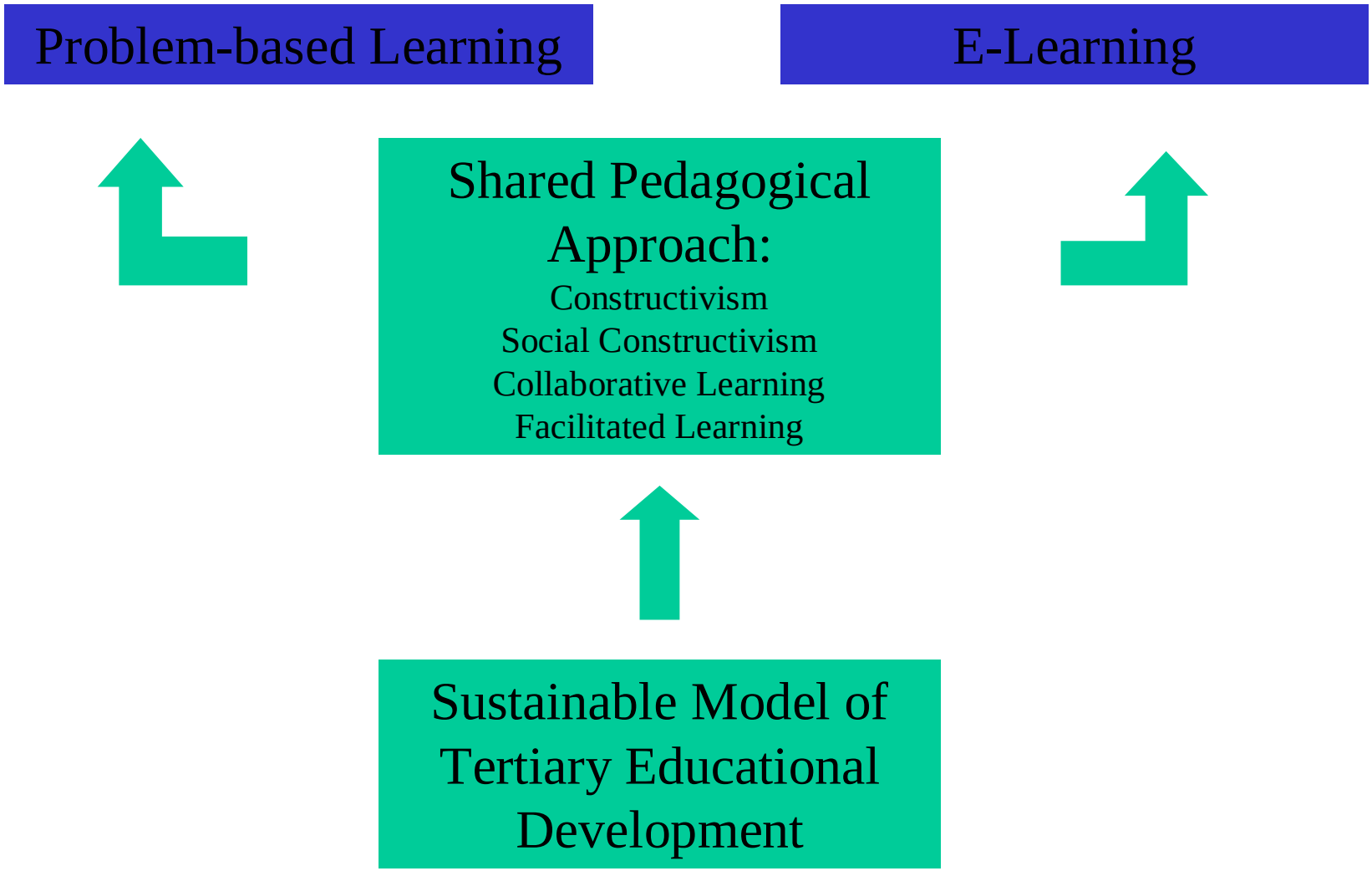
How replicable is this model of best practice in educational development?

Definitions

Blended learning refers to a **merging** of classroom and online activities that must be integrated by the tutor in ways that allows them to facilitate learning as a coherent and effective whole.

Blended PBL: an **online** environment has been created to complement a series of **face-to-face** PBL tutorials with a puzzlement that engages a group of learners in inquiry activities consistent with the learning outcomes of the module. The tutor's role is not at the content, but at the metacognitive level, where they model, scaffold and support learner thinking both f2f and online.

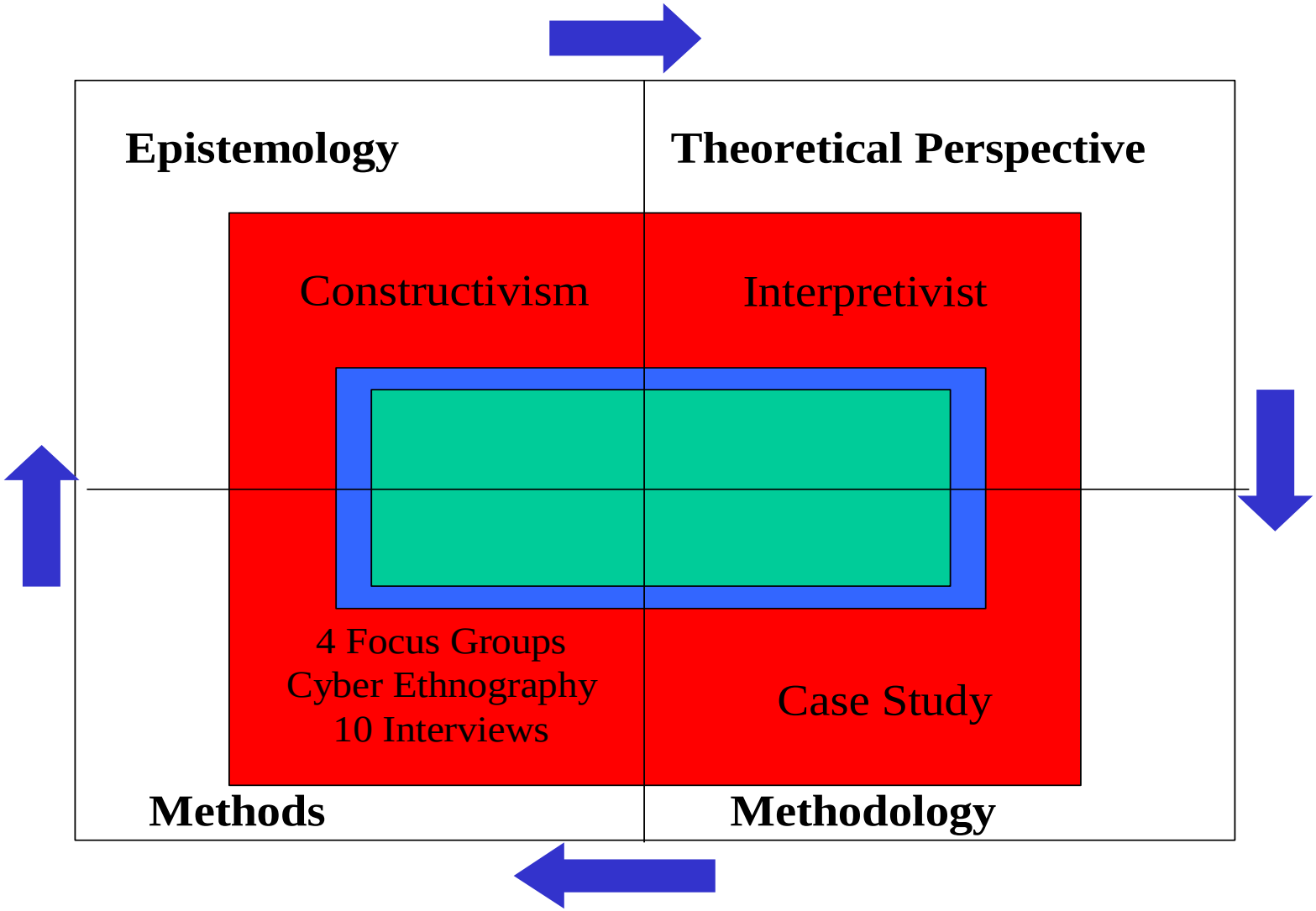
Objectives


Problem-based Learning
E-Learning
Shared Pedagogical Approach:
Constructivism
Social Constructivism
Collaborative Learning
Facilitated Learning
Sustainable Model of Tertiary Educational Development

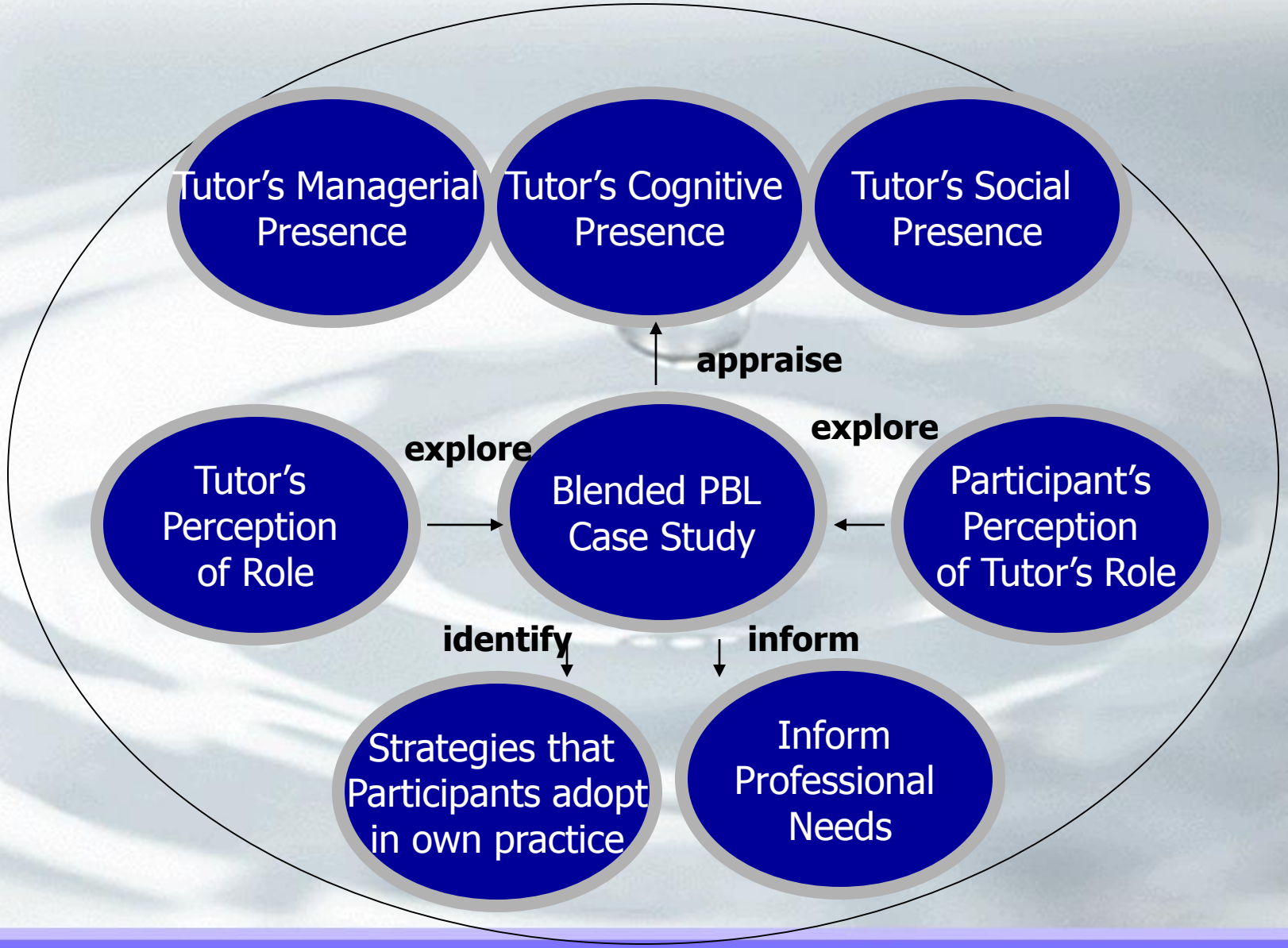
Context and Rationale

- Why blended PBL?
  - A catalyst for rethinking education
  - Flexibility and tutor input into both content and delivery of content / Can be individually tailored by tutors – thus allowing for embodiment of key goals.
- Why DIT?
  - First course of its genre in Republic of Ireland
  - Little evidence of such a course in existence internationally
- Why this course?
  - Accessible sources of data
  - Exploration of an ideal of working with enthusiastic, motivated lecturers in educational development.

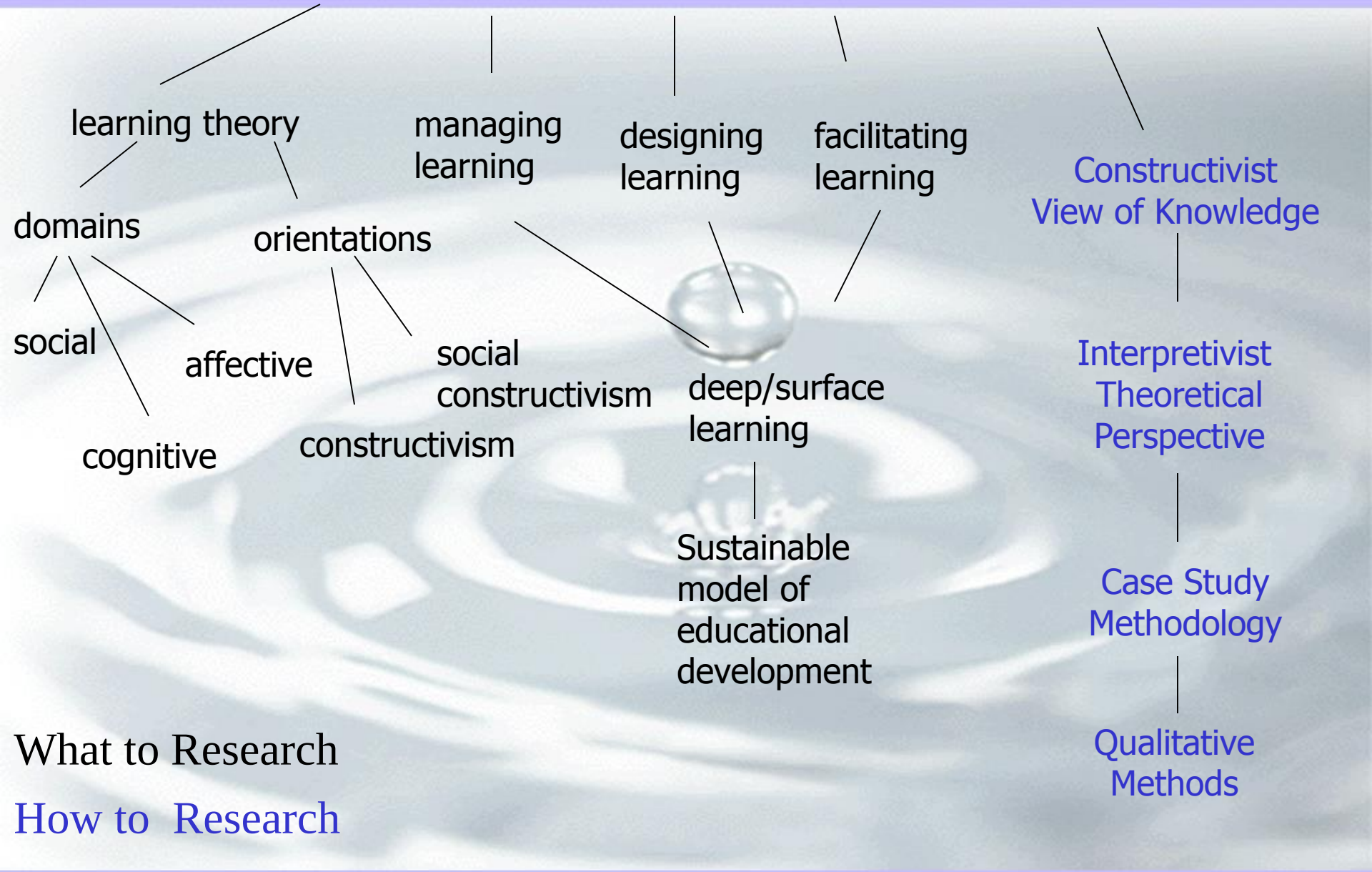
Arriving at a Unified Design



High-level RTM for the field of this study:



Tutor's Role: Embodying Blended Problem-based Learning



Relevance Tree for the field of this study

Ethical Stance

- Formation of ethical statement
- Permission of Head of Lifelong Learning & colleagues
- Informed consent obtained from 10 module participants and 4 ancillary tutors (RGU and Univ of Queensland)

Data Collection

Phase 1

November 2004-February 2005 (Over 10 Weeks)

Case Study on 10 module participants and 4 module tutors

Natural Setting: ethnography/cyber ethnography

- ✓ Situated theorizing
- ✓ Online Transcripts from Discussion Boards & Chatrooms
- ✓ Video recordings of face-to-face PBL tutorials

Research Intervention:

- ✓ 2 recorded Focus Groups (start and end of module)
- ✓ Qualitative module review and evaluation questionnaires

Data Collection

Phase 2

September 2005 (Over 4 Weeks)

6 months after close of module

- ✓ Individual (recorded) semi structured interviews with all 10 course graduates in their teaching contexts with video clips as a trigger for discussion

Seeking to Explore

- ? If the focus of the learning is embodied in the design of the materials does this make it easier to build a sustainable model?
- ? Does E-learning and PBL allow ease of replication both in teaching teachers initially and in replication
- ? What is the role of the tutor in all of this?
- ? The **deeper question** of whether novel pedagogical approaches actually does empower learners

The Problem:

Pedagogy before Technology

"…although the technology and resources exist, I think that maybe what's missing is the pedagogy."

Denis Bancroft cited in Yvonne Healy, 'Caution on E-learning', *Irish Times – Education and Living,* (Tuesday 17/04/01).

Pedagogy?

skills teachers use to impart the specialized knowledge/content of their subject area(s).

systematized instruction or principles that promote student learning

Pedagogy?

the study of teaching methods

the principles, practice, or profession of teaching

Within the Problem

a means to an end…

educational rather than technological…

to add educational value…

A series of scaffolded interactive online activities aiming to show how technology can be used most effectively as a teaching tool

Module Evaluation

"Visiting speakers & tutors online; they were so enthusiastic and professional and modelled how a good tutor should behave ."

"I now know the true meaning of Pedagogy for my context."

"…forced me to be aware of how I should design my online course materials accordingly."

"I now know how much I need to Learn - the absolute necessity of deepening my understanding of pedagogy!"

"…now using the language of web-based learning."

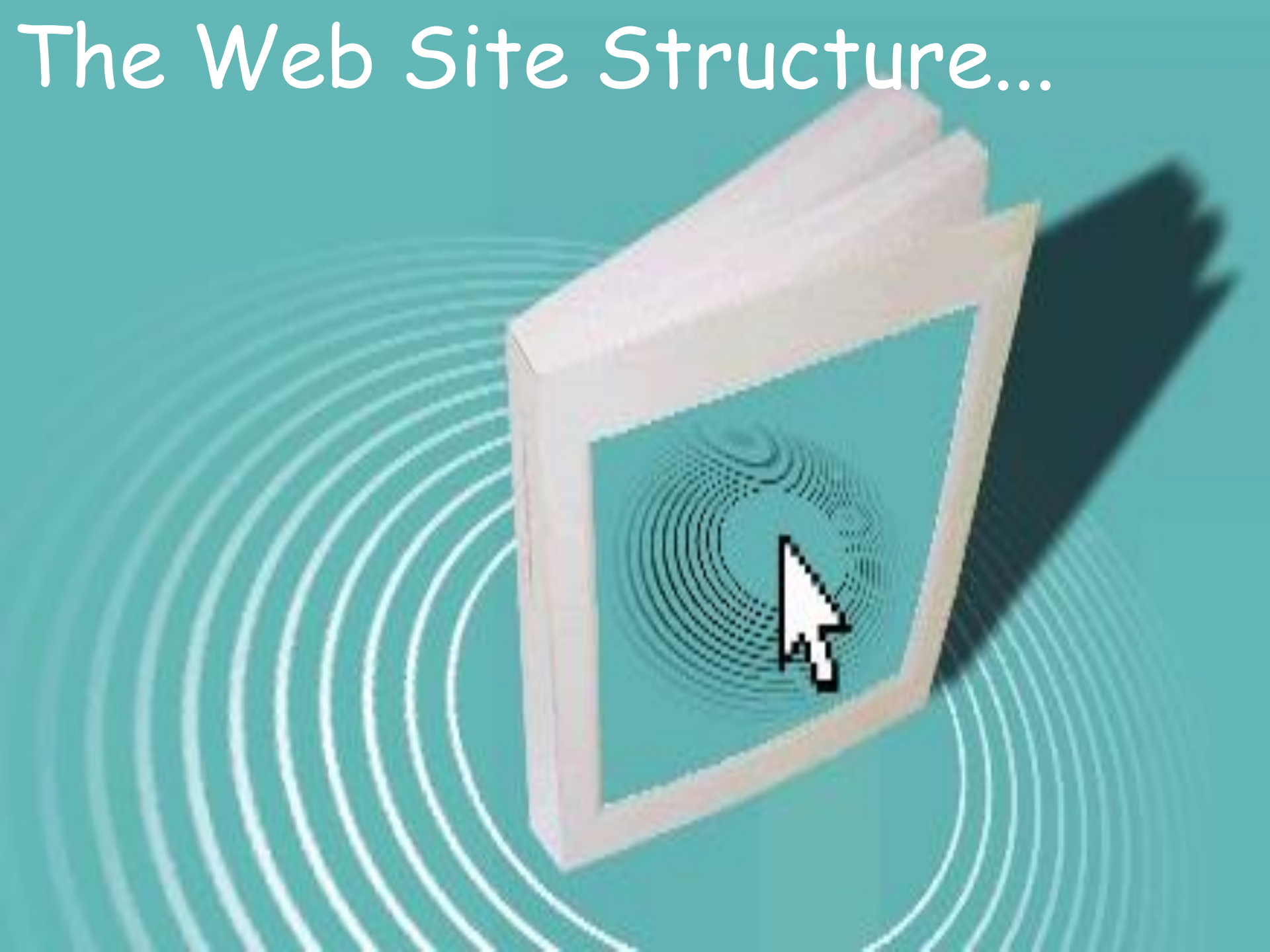
"The human element of e-learning and the diverse issues it brings."

"The fact were experiencing the medium at the same time as discussing it helped a lot ."

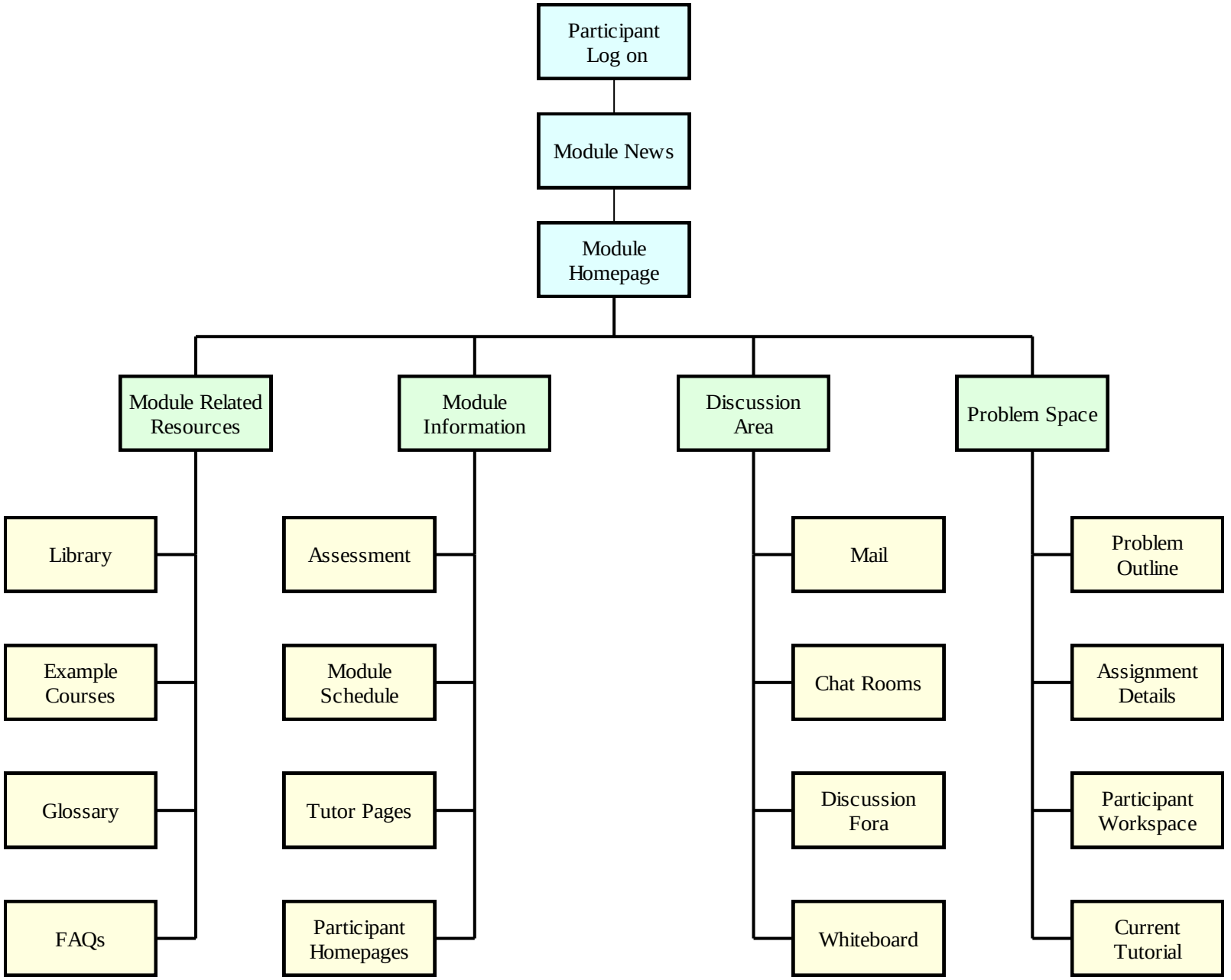
I DON'T WORK ON A TEAM AT WORK SO IT IS GREAT TO HAVE A GROUP OF INTERESTED PEOPLE TO DISCUSS MATTERS WITH

"The blended approach as experienced showed a good connection between the literature and book based models and after 6-8 weeks showed real benefits to the learners"

The Web Site Structure...



Online Learning Module



Initial Findings

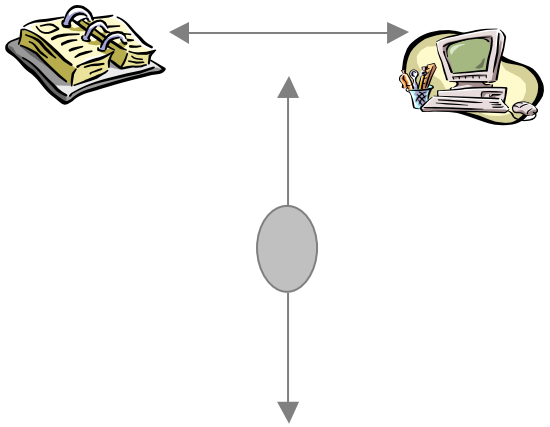
F2F

Online

SOCIAL-INDIVIDUAL

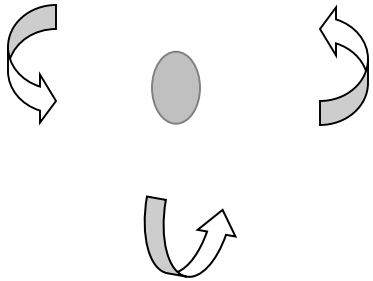
Reciprocal One to One:
Tutor to Individual Learner

MANAGERIAL



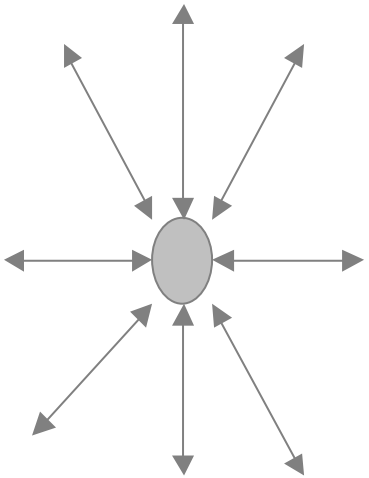
Tutor-Learner-Resources

COGNITIVE



Model, Coach, Fade

SOCIAL-COLLABORATIVE



Multi Way Communication:
Tutor: all learners

Continuum of Blended Communication Strategies: E-moderating and PBL

Instruct

Inform

Negotiate

Collaborate

Facilitate

Tutor Centred: Online

Making statements
Giving information
Making suggestions
Telling
Instructing
Proposing
Talking
Explaining
Interrupting

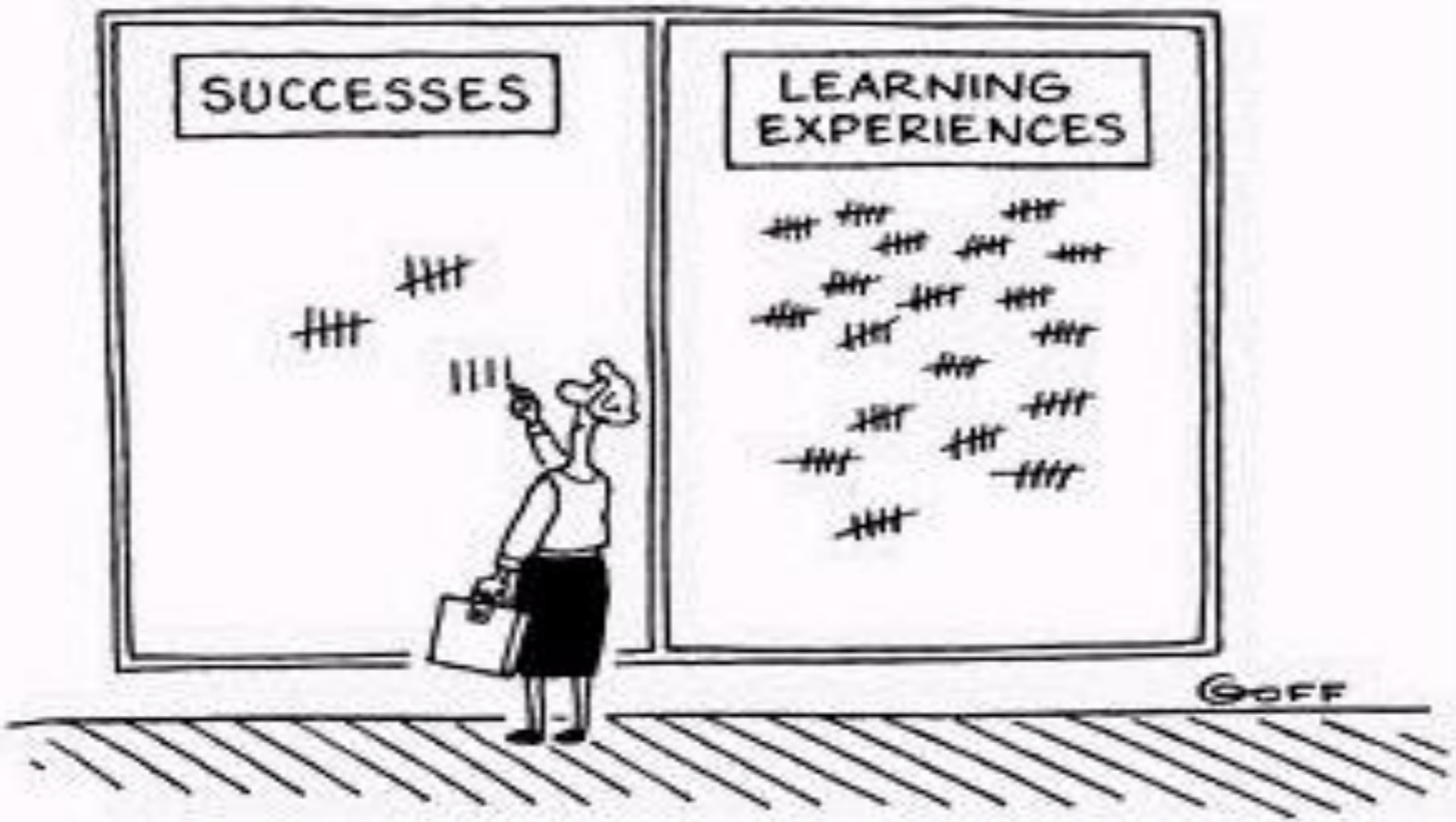
PBL LEARNER CENTRED: Blended: Online and F2F

Starting point for Engagement: reveal key questions to illuminate topic, clarifying, provoke ideas, continuous feedback,

Creating space for engagement: asking open questions, provision of alternate perspectives, social and affective ?

Scaffolding: building on others comments, recapping,
Motivating: acknowledging, accepting, listening, supporting

Closing: reflecting, evaluating

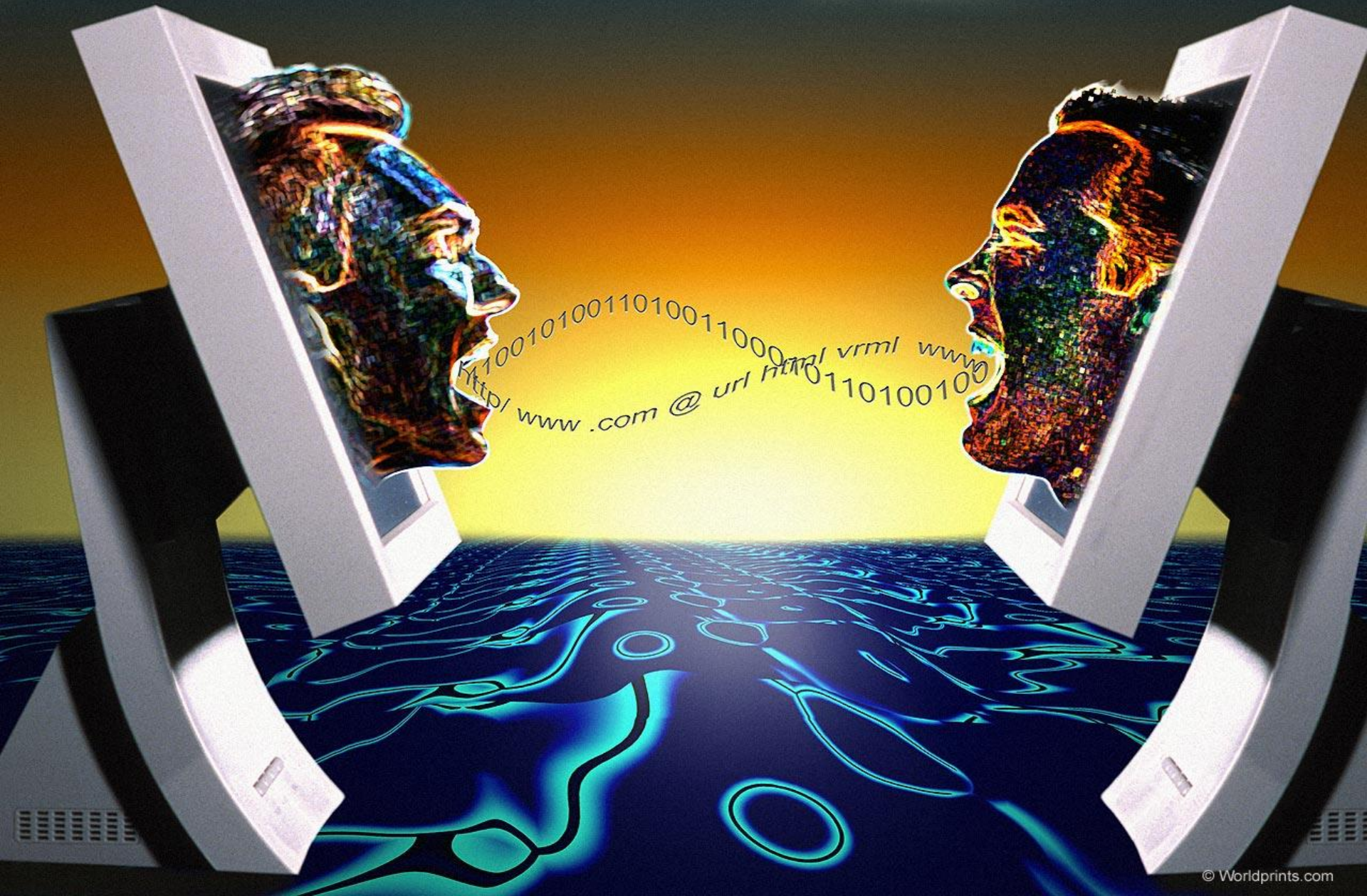

SUCCESSES
LEARNING EXPERIENCES
GOFF

Module: The Future?

Implementing change is:

"…a process of interaction, dialogue, feedback, modifying objectives, recycling plans, coping with mixed feelings and values, pragmatism, micropolitics, frustration, patience and muddle."

Everard and Morris, *Effective School Management*

Contact Details

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