Looking through a glass onion : Assessing the affordances of an augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) proposal for engineering student online experimentation

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Structured Abstract

BACKGROUND OR CONTEXT
Experimental learning, traditionally conducted in on-campus laboratory venues, is the cornerstone of science and engineering education. In order to ensure that engineering graduates are exposed to ‘real-world’ situations and attain the necessary professional skill-sets, as mandated by course accreditation bodies such as Engineers Australia, face-to-face laboratory experimentation with real equipment has been an integral component of traditional engineering education. The online delivery of engineering coursework endeavours to mimic this with remote and simulated laboratory experimentation. The current implementations of both remote and simulated laboratories tend to be specified with a focus on technical characteristics, instead of pedagogical requirements.

PURPOSE OR GOAL
This work develops and subsequently evaluates the affordances of an online augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) environment that is established with wearable technologies such as video glasses.

APPROACH
While, first-year electronics students were experimenting in a face-to-face venue with real-time supervision, one volunteer group of three students were asked to complete their identical experiment in a separate venue while being supervised, in real time, via augmented reality glasses over the university’s local area network (LAN). Both the face-to-face and the online sessions were video recorded in order to identify the occurrences of kikan-shido (a Japanese term meaning ‘between desks instruction’), thereby ascertaining the pedagogical affordances in both style of laboratories. The investigation draws on the outcomes of an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) seed grant (SD13-3122), that facilitated the identification of face-to-face experimental venue affordances. For this investigation the seed grant outcomes will be used to compare the face-to-face venue and the augmented reality online proposal in order to obtain a value for the latter setup.

DISCUSSION
The identified kikan-shido occurrences did reflect on the affordances of both venues. Unlike other data collection methods, the great advantages of video recorded data are that each step of its analysis is fully documented; facilitating independent re-coding and participant bias is eradicated.

RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPLICATIONS/CONCLUSION
Augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) provides real-time online supervision for students who are experimenting with real equipment and real instruments while being exposed to the same affordances that a face-to-face counterpart offers. In 2016, this investigation will continue with mixed reality experimental learning and haptic gloves (MiREL+) on-line venues with virtual equipment and instrument.
Full Paper

Introduction

Experimental learning, traditionally conducted in on-campus laboratory venues, is the cornerstone of science and engineering education. In order to ensure that graduates are exposed to ‘real-world’ situations and attain the necessary professional skill-sets, as mandated by engineering education program accreditation bodies such as Engineers Australia (www.engineersaustralia.org.au) face-to-face laboratory experimentation with real equipment has been an integral component of traditional engineering course work (Lowe, Murray, Li, & Lindsay, 2008; Sarukkalige, Lindsay, & Anwar, 2010). To satisfy accreditation requirements, the common practice has been to offer off-campus students equivalent remote and/or simulated laboratory experiments in lieu of the ones delivered, on campus, in face-to-face venues (Nedic, Nafalski, Ozdemir, & Machotka, 2011). Laurillard (2009) observed that the delivery of online courses tend to have a focus on technology, instead of pedagogical requirements.

In 2013, the successful submission for an Australian Government Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) seed grant funded the development and verification of a research framework to explore the affordances of face-to-face experimental learning environments where students may have access to real and/or simulated equipment (Banky & Blicblau, 2015). This recently completed project attempted to ensure that education, rather than technology, is the driver for the development of online experimental learning environments.

The provision of quality experimental learning venues has been identified as one of the greatest challenges for distance-education providers (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2005; Sivakumar, Robertson, Artimy, & Aslam, 2005). The ability to delve deeper into venue offerings by benchmarking the pedagogical affordances of existing and future remote engineering laboratories will be extremely beneficial to the tertiary education sector.

Purpose

The purpose of this work was to assess the affordances of a real-time supervised augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) proposal for off-campus engineering student experimentation. Augmented reality is an observer’s view of the real world that is complemented by computer-generated inputs, thus enhancing the viewer’s perception of reality. The application of augmented reality in this instance facilitates “online gesturing” by a remote supervisor.

Furthermore, the acquired data from this pilot investigation may be used, by content providers, to fine tune existing and/or future cyber facilities, in order to potentially obtain a vital advantage in the very competitive market of online STEM education.

Approach

“You know the place where nothing is real
Well here’s another place you can go
… Looking through a glass onion.” (Lennon & McCartney, 1968)
Data collection

Following the receipt of ethics approval from Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC), the data collection involved observing first-year electronics laboratory classes where students carried out their experiments, under real-time supervision, using real components and test instruments (a typical workspace is shown in Figure 1). The laboratory experiment the students were scheduled to undertake involved their introduction to the basic behaviour of a capacitor, and then to investigate the frequency characteristics of a simple resistor-capacitor (RC) circuit.

![Figure 1: Example of face-to-face electronic systems experimental work space.](image)

In this study, seven face-to-face laboratory sessions, with a maximum of twenty students in each, were observed. In a physically separate space, as shown in Figure 2, a volunteer group of two students were asked to perform the same experiment, as their peers in the face-to-face laboratory venue. The supervisors of these sessions were expected to guide all the students irrespective of their location during the session. With the use of augmented reality glasses, shown in Figure 3, from META Co. ([www.getameta.com](http://www.getameta.com)), the volunteer students were supervised remotely in real time, over the university’s local area network (LAN). The configuration of this interconnection is shown in Figure 4. Since the supervisors were physically separated from the volunteer groups, the classroom collaboration software utility, NetSupport School ([www.netsupportschool.com](http://www.netsupportschool.com)), facilitated communication between the various computers, which were used to collect the data.

Furthermore, the augmented reality feature of the glasses enabled the online mimicking of gesturing by the laboratory supervisor. This facility, together with bidirectional audio and unidirectional video links, provided the means to guide the students, who were physically separated from the class, while conducting their experimental work.

The activities of all participants, including the supervisors, were recorded for later analysis. A control group of two students in the face-to-face venue were asked to wear video glasses while the demonstrator interaction was captured with a fixed video camera directed towards the control group. The computer screen recording utility, Camtasia Studio® ([www.techsmith.com](http://www.techsmith.com)), was used to record the remote group’s activities, as well as the supervisor’s interactions with them.
Figure 2: “Remote” experimental workspace for the volunteer group of students.

Figure 3: Augmented reality glasses used in this investigation from META Co.

Figure 4: Configuration of remote supervision setup.
The foundation of the data analysis is to identify in the video data the occurrences of *kikan-shido* events (a Japanese term meaning ‘between desks instruction’) as detailed by Clarke (2006). The process utilised a three-layered interpretive model for media-rich research into social interaction, attributed to Wortham and Derry (2006). This model ensures a traceable path from the analysed data, through any intervening depiction(s), back to the recorded data. One of the benefits of this technique is an implied link between the various data forms and the raw data. The identification of data in the video recordings was logged with the aid of Studiocode® (commercially available video analysis software from Studiocode Business Group (www.studiocodegroup.com)). These logs and the video recordings of the data collection sessions will result in permanent records that will permit a researcher and/or any other expert(s) and/or interested parties to repeatedly review the affordances depicted in the video recordings, thereby facilitating coding or re-coding at any time (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Furthermore, in order to ensure internal code-recode reliability, the team adopted Miles and Huberman’s (1994) recommendations that a random portion of each recording was independently re-coded on at least two occasions several days apart, requiring 100% agreement by the different researchers.

**Benchmarking**

An affordance measuring tool (Banky, Blicblau, Egodawatta, Vuthuluru, & Vcelka, 2015) was used to benchmark the implemented augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) environment with respect to the face-to-face laboratory venue while the students conducted the same experiments in both settings. The term “affordance” describes how an object, or an environment impacts on the actions of its user and is attributed to Gibson (1977). Therefore, affordances must be context specific. In our context, the affordances of the laboratory environment includes teaching and learning activities such as real-time monitoring of student work, real-time collaboration between all the participants, etc.

The underlying methodology for this benchmarking activity is founded on the assumption that: *if affordances impact on activity then identified activity reflect on a venue’s affordances.*

**Preliminary Results**

The analysis of the recorded data has commenced, however it is still proceeding at the time of writing this paper. For now, the preliminary results for the identified *kikan-shido* events, as described in Figure 5, are summarised in Table 1. The completed analysis outcomes will be detailed at the conference.

**Discussion**

As mandated by ethics approval, the collected video data was de-identified for analysis. The analysis procedure focused on identifying and noting all supervisor-student *kikan-shido* occurrences, thereby ascertaining the affordances of both the face-to-face and the AuREL venues - the latter having been created with the glasses from META Co.

Since in this study, all the student groups were conducting the same experiments, and the AuREL environment was designed to facilitate the affordances of the face-to-face venue, it is the expectation of the research team that the *kikan-shido* events observed in both delivery modes (AuREL and face-to-face) will be the same, as evidenced in Table 1.

Figure 5 summarises the relationship between a *kikan-shido* occurrence ("M", “G”, “O” and “S”), as defined in O’Keefe, Xu and Clarke (2006, p. 77), and the corresponding types of affordances within experimental learning environments.
Table 1: Preliminary results of video data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified kikan-shido event</th>
<th>Face-to-face</th>
<th>AuREL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M1 - Selecting work</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M2 - Monitoring Progress</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3 - Questioning Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4 – Monitoring Homework Completion</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1 – Encouraging Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2 – Giving Instruction/Advice at Desk</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3 – Guiding Through Questioning</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4 – Re-directing Students</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G5 – Answering a Question</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G6 – Giving Advice at Board</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G7 – Guiding Whole Class</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O1 – Handout Material</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O2 – Collect Material</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O3 – Arranging Room</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S1 – School Related</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S2 – Non-School Related</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Mapping kikan-shido events, to face-to-face venue communication affordances (Banky, et al., 2015, p. 24)
Anecdotal observations from participants included the following:

- remotely supervised students felt “ignored” by the supervisors when their requests for assistance were delayed due to the supervisors helping groups in the face-to-face venue;
- goggles were heavy and difficult to wear for long periods of time;
- better training for supervisors in the use of the augmented reality gesturing feature;
- have dedicated supervisors for online supervision;
- overall, a great application that worked well and shows promise with some minor adjustments.

As already stated the great advantage of video recorded data, when compared with other data collection methods, is that each step of its analysis is permanently documented. Furthermore, the data collected in this way was free from participant bias that must be present with: student/staff experience surveys (Bodner, Wade, Watson, & Kamberov, 2013; Corter, Esche, Chassapis, Ma, & Nickerson, 2011; Lang, 2012), focus groups (Jarmon, Traphagan, Mayrath, & Trivedi, 2009), and selected participants’ reflective journals (Jarmon, et al., 2009; Lang, 2012).

Conclusions

Augmented reality experimental learning (AuREL) provides real-time online supervision for off-campus students who are experimenting with real components and real instruments while being exposed to the same affordances that a face-to-face environment offers. In both cases students can communicate with each other, as well as with their supervisor/demonstrator. The important issue for engineering academics, “hands-on” learning with real devices by their students (Loftus, 2013), is facilitated in an AuREL implementation.

It is anticipated that in 2016 an investigation into mixed reality experimental learning with haptic gloves (MiREL+) will commence. The use of haptic gloves will enable the “touching and feeling” of simulated holographic equipment in a real or virtual surrounding. In this proposed experimental learning environment, students will use virtual components and instruments, while being supervised remotely in real time.

The upside of such an environment is that potentially all experimental learning, for all science-based courses can be mimicked online with a student having access to: a smart phone as an audio visual display, a suitable headgear to hold the phone in place, an interface-able haptic glove with the ensuing system connected to a data communication highway such as the National Broadband Network (NBN). Even if the universities subsidise such equipment for each student, the recurring costs associated with such a scheme are anticipated to be magnitudes less than capital and consumable costs that are currently required to provide on-campus infrastructure to facilitate the necessary experimental learning in the sciences, engineering and bio-medical training.

References


learning venues (or how to audit the teaching styles supported by your laboratory spaces).


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