

Evaluating Educational Software Environments

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Abstract

We present an outline of a checklist, the TUP-model, that covers the technological, usability, and pedagogical aspects of the educational environment so that more complete evaluations may be created. We base our model on our experience in usability evaluations and work with teachers in evaluating educational environments.

1. Introduction

Teachers selecting software environments for use in their own educational settings face a daunting task with the ever increasing number of educational environments available. By educational (software) environments we mean any software system or other electronic material that is used in an educational setting. Trying to find reviews of the plethora of environments available is even more challenging. Comparing the systems using the found reviews is currently even more difficult as there are no existing widely used evaluation methods.

2. Existing checklists

A number of generic checklists have been created for the evaluation of pedagogical and usability aspects or technical issues of software environments. In most cases generic checklists are adequate enough as creating domain specific checklists is a time-consuming and expensive task which is often left undone. Of the various checklists that have been created to help in the evaluation of educational environments we will take a brief look at the Delta checklist [7] and the constructivist checklist [2].

The constructivist checklist is directly tied to the underlying theory and focuses almost exclusively on the pedagogical aspects of the system being evaluated. The Delta checklist takes a slightly broader perspective with a strong emphasis on evaluating multimedia and visual appearance.

Ravden and Johnson [5] have created a method for evaluating the usability of a computer application. Our experiences with a slightly modified checklist [8] enable us to argue that the checklist is usable with end-users.

We have also used the Delta and modified Ravden and Johnson checklists with teachers creating the evaluations. The experiences obtained from these efforts have prompted us to begin the development of a new evaluation model.

3. The TUP-model

The experiences we have of using various checklists in the evaluation of educational environments has shown that they all concentrate mainly on one aspect, mainly the pedagogical aspect. Thus we propose to create a checklist that takes into consideration the instructional, technical, and usability aspect of educational environments. Some earlier work in this field exists (e.g. [6] and [3]). Of these the work done by Squires [6] is a step closer to our approach in which he extends heuristic checklists to include the evaluation of the environment's suitability to a given learning situation.

Our proposed checklist concentrates equally on the three aspects, thus the TUP-model. The three aspects are strongly interrelated, as shown in Fig. 1. As can be seen, both usability and pedagogy build upon the foundation of the technological aspects. Usability and pedagogy are interdependent and all three aspects have the functionality of the environment at their core.

It is important to note is that the whole evaluation is based on a single scenario of use. While use scenario's description belongs to the pedagogical aspect, we feel that it must be kept in mind during the whole evaluation. This means that undue generalizations must be avoided and the answers should relate to the use scenario.

For each of the three aspects we need to consider several different issues. In the technical aspects we must consider the availability, maintainability, and ease of initial setup and administration of the environment. In addition, the environments security and respect for the privacy of its users must

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