Chapter X

Identifying an Appropriate, Pedagogical, Networked Architecture for Online Learning Communities

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Abstract

This chapter addresses the problem of enhancing quality of online learning processes through pedagogic design. Based on our earlier research findings from analysis of two comparable online master courses offered in two masters’ programmes, respectively from Denmark and Ireland (Ó Murchú & Sorensen, 2004), we present what we assert to be a fruitful, student-centred, pedagogic model for design of networked learning. The design model is composed of what we have identified as unique characteristics of online learning architectures that, in principle, promote and allow for global intercultural processes of meaningful learning through collaborative knowledge building in online communities of practice. Inspired
by principles of best practice and Wengerian design criteria for networked learning (Wenger, 1998), the chapter intends to access, discuss, and provide evidence associated with the quality issues of the presented model, and its specific learning architectures.

Introduction

All the world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts.
(Shakespeare)

The overall educational challenge of today’s knowledge society is the enhancement of learning through ICT. It requires creativity, as well as innovation and change in educational thinking to identify educational paradigms that allow for learning processes to unfold in networked contexts, in ways that truly provide quality in processes of learning (Bates, 1999; Collis, 1996; Collis & Moonen, 2001; Miyake & Koschmann, 2002). Consequently, the complex task of generating pedagogic learning architectures conducive to learning in networked environments is becoming increasingly more important (Sorensen, 2004).

However, a high proportion of stand-alone-like educational designs suggests that the necessary innovation and change in educational thinking appear to be the exception, rather than the rule. Many educational designs unfolding in networked contexts mirror the inherent assumption that learning does not involve inter- and intrapersonal human interaction and, “legitimized” by impeding economic considerations, that the task of designing for learning is solely a matter of prediction, formalization, and preparation of software-instructional processes to be used between learner and learning software.

In contrast, extensive research (Bates, 1999; Collins, Mulholland, & Watt, 2001; Collis, 2001; Harasim, 1999; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Koschmann, 1996) indicates the significance, in terms of learning quality and outcome, related to the social aspects of a learning process. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that the potential of network technologies lies in their facilitation of interhuman interaction (Harasim et al., 1995; Mason, 1993; Mason, 1998; Sorensen, 1993; Sorensen, 2004; Sorensen & Takle, 2002). This potential, the true soul of technology (Ó Murchu, 2005), should be sought in their ability — independent of time and space-to enable and facilitate tapestries of networked learning.