Chapter 3.15
On Using Wiki as a Tool for Collaborative Online Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of the wiki and its role as a cognitive tool to promote interaction and collaborative learning in higher education. The importance of the software to enable student created content, storage, and sharing of knowledge is reviewed. This chapter provides an evaluation of some of the affordances and constraints of wikis to promote critical thinking within a blended learning context. It assesses their potential to facilitate collaborative learning through community focused enquiry for geographically separated students and nomadic learners. One particular focus of the chapter is the development of new digital literacies and how students present their written work in wikis. The chapter also examines group dynamics within collaborative learning environments drawing on the data from a study conducted at the University of Plymouth in 2007, using wikis in teacher education. Finally, the chapter highlights some recent key contributions to the developing discourse on social software in what has been termed ‘the architecture of participation.’

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Interactive digital media are assuming an increasingly important role in all sectors of education, with many universities developing e-learning strategies. The importance of interaction in distance education has been strongly emphasised (Moore, 1989; Swan, 2002) and the use of technology to mediate communication between separated individuals is well documented (Shin, 2003; Gunawardena, 1990). Technology supported distance education can encourage and enhance collaborative learning processes (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999) where students actively seek out engagement with others because it is both useful and satisfying (Horizon Report, 2007). There is evidence that purposeful interaction can increase learner knowledge (Ritchie

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& Hoffman, 1997) but may be intensely personal
and welcomed more by some students than others
(Godwin, Thorpe & Richardson, 2008).

The use of technology to support and facilitate interaction, if applied appropriately, tends to pro-
duce good learning outcomes, and new web based
tools are increasingly available to the distance
educator. The advent of Web 2.0 for example, has
provided teachers with unprecedented opportuni-
ties. Web 2.0 based technologies are replete with
rich social opportunities. For a growing number
of teachers and students, social networking and
social software have become fertile environments
within which communities of learning can flourish and learn from each other (Wheeler, Yeomans
& Wheeler, 2008; Ebersbach, Glaser & Heigl,
2006). There is also evidence that the practice of
enabling students to generate their own content
can encourage deeper levels of engagement with
course content through the act of authoring,
simply because the awareness of an audience,
no matter how virtual or tentative, encourages
more thoughtful sentence construction (Jacobs,
2003) and deeper critical engagement (Wheeler,
Yeomans & Wheeler, 2008). Writing in blogs
and wikis for example, compel students to care-
fully manage their impression (Goffman, 1959)
encouraging them to think more clearly and criti-
cally about their arguments, and to articulate their
ideas coherently and persuasively on a publicly
accessible web space for an undetermined and
invisible audience.

Furthermore, there is a need to incorporate collabora-
tive learning practices more deeply within
all forms of education (Jonassen et al, 1999).
Coupled with this need is a growing awareness
that teacher roles need to be redefined in a new
knowledge economy. There is an established
trend toward a form of learning where teachers
abdicating their roles as instructors, and adopt a
more supportive role (Harden & Crosby, 2000;
O’Neill & McMahon, 2005). There is a tension
here. Teachers fulfil a particularly important role
as without teacher support, students can flounder,

lose motivation, or even drop out of the course. At
the same time, the reduction in tutor-led instruc-
tional methods encourages students to take more
responsibility for their learning. A fine balancing
act is thus required where teachers facilitate and
support learner participation, intervening where
necessary, rather than providing sustained instruc-
tion. Students are increasingly adopting new roles
as producers, commentators and classifiers (Hori-
zon Report, 2007) within Web 2.0 based learning
environments. They are participating more in the
construction and organisation of their own knowl-
dge rather than merely reproducing content as
exemplified in instructional practices (Jonassen,
et al, 1999) and this occurs increasingly outside
the boundaries of contiguous education.

This shift in emphasis, although grounded
in social constructivist theory, also has drivers
in new technologies (Richardson, 2006), and a
post-modernist belief that knowledge should be
discursively constructed across a multiplicity of
sites (Gale, 2003). Such an approach to pedagogy,
although arguably no longer radical, none the less
constitutes an important part of the essence of
blended learning, and has implications for a grow-
ing population of younger learners who appear
to have a natural affinity to digital technologies
(Prensky, 2006). It is also apparent that younger
learners are more often on the move than earlier
generations, and tend to engage in a ‘patchwork’
or portfolio of careers, job hopping as the need or
interest dictates. Students are also more physically
mobile than their forbears, and use cell phones and
handheld devices to connect to their network of
peers. Such nomadic wandering demands a new
range of flexible learning skills and consequently
a new culture of educational provision.

LEARNING AS A NOMAD

Nomadic learning has been defined as ‘a form
of learning in which a learner has continuity of
service across different sessions and, possibly, dif-
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