Chapter I

Introducing Concepts

Words are our tools, and, as a minimum, we should use clean tools: we should know what we mean and what we do not, and we must forewarn ourselves against the traps that language sets us. (Austin, 1979)

Introduction

This chapter is mainly concerned with introducing and defining some of the key terms that will be used throughout the book. In particular, it contains an exploration of conceptions of learning projects, teachers, e-learning and e-learning environments, each of which is defined in a specific way that is a refinement of some popular usage.

A representative list of the kind of technologies that may be found in a typical online learning environment is provided, primarily for those who are familiar with the Internet, but who have not yet explored the potential of e-learning. This also helps to illustrate a few of the many ways that the affordances of an environment can radically shape the behaviour of its inhabitants. The chapter concludes with a brief but important discussion of the distinctive nature of the networked computer as, simultaneously, a tool, a medium, and an environment.
Learning Projects and Learning Trajectories

The central theme of this book is the choices that people (e.g., teachers, learners, authors, administrators, others) make in the pursuit of learning. It is about a process that might broadly be described as education, whether it is self-taught, distance taught, traditionally taught, or otherwise. To an extent, learning is the stuff of human existence, or as Vaill (1996) describes it, a “way of being” (one which Vaill believes to be far from innate, especially within organisations and institutional settings). In a sense, to be is to learn. It is almost impossible to live one’s life without continually learning, whether it be the big things (how to walk, that hot things burn you, how to relate to others) or the little ones (this door is a bit hard to shut, the bus station is in the next street, the price of this jar of peanut butter is lower than that in the other shop). As Illich (1971) says: “Most learning happens casually, and even most intentional learning is not the result of programmed instruction.” It is true in most settings, including in the workplace. Eraut (2004) writes, “Most workplace learning occurs on the job rather than off the job.” Dewey (1916) has a similarly general view with regard to the commonplace act of communication: “Not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative.” This rich view of learning realistically captures the complex reality of learning as a situated experience, deeply interwoven with the tapestry of existence. However, it fails to differentiate acts that are recognised as intended to bring about learning as opposed to those in which learning is either incidental or so deeply embedded in practice that it cannot be extracted from it.

Learning Activities

The fact that people do frequently engage in intentional activities that are meant to result in a change in behaviour, attitude, knowledge, and so on, deserves recognition and examination. If people wish to learn, then it is usually the case that they wish to learn well, or at least efficiently, with as little anxiety and effort as possible. The focus of this book will therefore be on those intentional choices that are meant to bring about learning. These will generally be referred to as learning activities. A sequence of learning activities form part of what will be described as a learning trajectory. The term is closely akin to what Tough (1979) defines as a learning project:

...regardless of what the person is doing if he is trying to learn, trying to change through that activity, then we call it a learning project. People do learn in other ways. There are lots of activities that lead to learning. But if that is not the person’s primary intention then we do not include it in our definition of a learning project.
The Magic Bullet: A Tool for Assessing and Evaluating Learning Potential in Games
Katrin Becker (2011). International Journal of Game-Based Learning (pp. 19-31).
www.igi-global.com/article/magic-bullet-tool-assessing-evaluating/50554?camid=4v1a