Chapter 12
Situated E-Learning: Empowerment and Barriers to Identity Changes

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ABSTRACT

E-learning can free us from bound concepts of who we are. However, our digital identities relate back to varied real world situations within which we live. Situated implications of identity changes are frequently not understood by e-learning systems. This chapter provides a detailed review of situated learning concepts and identity reformation accounts within five case-study situations (i.e. within healthcare, prisons, developing worlds, field based, and virtual worlds) with varied e-learning technologies (i.e. Web2, virtual learning environments, mobile, tabletops\(^1\), and virtual worlds). Issues of situated identity, practices, and the impact on real world contexts are reviewed. Findings identify that e-learning systems must be designed to support variations in situations, student awareness, and reflection around implications of identity reformation. A theory and practice approach supports understanding e-learning impacts and future dilemmas. The chapter also provides a review on issues of support and coping mechanisms for impacts from situated learning identity changes.

1. MAIN ARGUMENT

Over recent years there has been a greater emphasis on understanding student perceptions within e-learning system design and development. However, often e-learning designers, developers and educators lack clarification of the impact a student’s situation has on their interpretation of e-learning. In contrast we often have poor explanations of how e-learning impacts on the students’ situations. This chapter seeks to raise awareness of these issues with case-study descriptions.

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Physical, temporal and social psychological contexts can seriously impact on a student’s identity, their ability to learn and reform their identity. Traditionally face-to-face students can detach their student identity from other identities through physically separating them. ‘I’m at university now so I’m a student, I’m at work now so I’m an employee, I’m home now so I’m a daughter / son / mother / father’. A negative result of this division can sometimes be a reduced impact on the students life long learning. Some students, for example, may only learn to pass an exam with little impact on themselves and their identity beyond that. E-learning has the potential to step across the academic boundaries into the students’ lives and multiple other identities. However, there are positive and negative implications as education steps across the theoretical boundary into a student’s life. As time-pressured academics we frequently have not had the time or the means to consider the widespread implications of this socio-psychological change. This chapter argues that as the boundaries between situations, lives and digital identities blur we must have a deeper understanding of impacts in order to support student adaptation to likely changes. With a situated identities perspective on e-learning, academics can provide students with coping mechanisms for the likely clashes they may encounter after identity reformation. With this in mind a conclusion to the chapter will be presented that supports the reader in creating plans for situated good practice focusing on supporting online identity reformation within e-learning.

2. INTRODUCTION

Different approaches to e-learning have the potential to free us from predefined concepts of who we are. Often these forms of real world identity constructions are based around restrictions imposed by our physical, situational and social context. Prisoners are literally confined to identity stereotypes imposed by the institutions within which they are incarcerated. Disabled and disadvantaged students can be trapped in static concepts of themselves by their physical and financial circumstances. Work pressures can also limit our ability to perceive of ourselves beyond the limits of our current post. Education has the potential to change not only concepts of our own identity but also how others perceive us. E-learning, in particular can enable this transformation through its ability to take the learning to the students situation.

The tools, technologies and practices associated with e-learning can provide greater access to education at a distance wherever we are and whenever we want. These resources also provide potential students with an opportunity to recreate their real world identity through supported staged exploration and development of their digital identities. This is a difficult process for a student to undergo as they are required to balance and merge multiple digital identities with their real world identities whilst all are in constant flux through the learning process. The development requires a constant interplay between online identities and real world identities within different situations. It must also be understood that these developmental changes are often impacted by real world situated and sociocultural barriers to the transformative power of learning. Without additional situated support, concerning digital impacts on real world identity reformation, students can feel isolated from the educational process and the identity changes needed to empower their real world identity. This chapter will review several reported situated e-learning case-studies that the author has investigated with a specific reflection on the concepts of identity reformation. It is hoped that through reflection of these case-studies a deeper understanding of the impact of digital identities on situated real world identities will ensue.
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