Chapter VIII

Rethinking E-Learning: Shifting the Focus to Learning Activities

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Abstract

“Technology alone does not deliver educational success. It only becomes valuable in education if learners and teachers can do something useful with it” (OECD, 2001, p. 24). This quotation could be used as a bon mot for this chapter. Our main goal is to rethink e-learning by shifting the focus of attention from learning resources (learning objects) to learning activities, which also implies a refocusing of the pedagogical discussion of the learning process. Firstly, we try to identify why e-learning has not been able to deliver the educational results as expected 5 years ago. Secondly, we discuss the relation between learning objectives, learning resources, and learning activities, in an attempt to develop a consistent, theoretical framework for learning as an active, collaborative process that bears social and cultural relevance to the student. Finally, we specify our concept of learning activities, and argue for the educational advantages of creating large learning resources that may be used for multiple learning activities.
Setting the Scene:  
E-Learning Reconsidered

At the height of the dotcom bubble, around year 2000, many politicians and heads of educational institutions firmly believed that e-learning, online learning, virtual university education, or as sometimes called by real enthusiasts, “webucation,” was the future solution to university education. In 1997, Peter Drucker, a business guru, predicted that “universities won’t survive … as a residential institution” (The Guardian, 2004). Others, arguing along the same lines, foresaw that universities would become content providers and learning facilitators to for-profit producers of “learningware.”

In the US, several universities formed commercial companies, alone, or in collaboration with other universities and cultural institutions. Among these were New York University (NYU) Online, and Fathom, formed by Columbia University, together with 14 universities, libraries, and museums: but they stopped before launching e-learning courses. One of the few successful e-learning providers in the U.S. is the University of Phoenix. Their success seems to be related to a focus on a limited and specialised market within IT, business, and health.

In March 2000, in Lisbon, the European Council adopted a grand-scale plan named e-Europe — An information society for all, with the goal to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” by 2010 (European Commission, 2000). To achieve this, ICT and e-learning should play an essential role, and increase the participation in higher education to approximately 50% of a youth generation. In May the same year, the European Commission published a communication named eLearning: Designing Tomorrow’s Education (European Commission, 2003).

Parallel to these political initiatives, but without coordination from the side of the Commission, many national projects for e-learning were launched in the first years of the century, for example, the UK e-University, the Digital University in The Netherlands, the Bavarian Virtual University, the Finish Virtual University, and the Net-University in Sweden.

In 2005, 5 years later, the UKeU has ceased operation. What the Minister of Education then launched, as a worldwide twenty-first century successor of the Open University, never attracted financial support from commercial partners, and only recruited 900 students, at a time when 5,000 were expected. A huge investment spent on developing a dedicated, new, learning platform, and a focus on the supply side (selling courses from partner institutions) instead of on student needs, seem to have been the basic reasons for the collapse. A market analysis was never performed.
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