Chapter IX

Computer Supported Collaborative Learning and the Central Research Questions: Two Illustrative Vignettes

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Abstract

This chapter examines the theoretical and conceptual issues involved in gathering evidence to build a database for the design of virtual higher education (computer supported collaborative learning — CSCL — and networked learning — NL). After briefly surveying the current state of CSCL/NL research and its lack of theoretical synthesis, we propose three high-level research questions as a way of focusing our efforts on finding answers. We then offer two vignettes of empirical case studies from our own
research. These studies are used to illustrate the challenges to be faced, and possible approaches to be used, in addressing the questions. In particular, we look at the way theory and praxis (theory-informed practice) might be more effectively engaged through “theory-praxis conversations,” in order to make effective use of empirical data in building the evidence base that will be needed to design and build virtual higher education over the next 10 years.

Preamble

In the brief for this book, we were asked to be bold in our ideas, challenging in our approach, grounded in the literature, and to be creative in ways that will enhance learning. This is a tall order indeed. We are pleased to be asked to address this challenge, but we will leave it to others to decide how we have measured up to its demands. Because we are engaged in education, we are accustomed to this level of challenge: attempting to enhance learning through technology presents researchers and teachers with many such challenges. The context for the ideas and research presented here is a form of education referred to as computer supported collaborative learning\(^1\) in the U.S. and networked learning in the UK and Europe (to some extent). In particular, we will focus on CSCL/NL research and praxis (theory-informed practice) using small examples (vignettes) of data from higher education settings in the UK and South Africa. Before proceeding, it may be useful to say something about two underlying ideas in our work. The idea of “evidence” is central to our educational thinking in this work. To be able to draw explicitly on an international and publicly available body of understanding that informs the design of education is, we think, one of the important ways in which we may hope to systematically improve the quality of CSCL/NL education through research. One of the high-level challenges we face is to build such an evidence base for CSCL/NL designers and educators to draw upon. Readers who are interested in pursuing this idea of evidence and education, in more depth, might also refer to the excellent account provided by Elliott (2001). Some of the central research questions surrounding the building of the CSCL/NL education evidence base form the main focus of this chapter. Using the evidence base efficiently in the educational design process is a related challenge (not discussed here), and details of some of these issues may be found in the work of Goodyear and others (Goodyear, 2001; Goodyear, Avgeriou, Baggetun, Bartoluzzi, Retalis, & Ronteltap, 2004a; Goodyear, De Laat, & Lally, 2005).

The second important underlying idea is that of education. We see education as an act of ethical intervention in our teaching and learning processes, to enable
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