Chapter 17
A Phenomenological Interpretation of Students’ Online Technology Experiences With Other Students in Blended Tertiary Environments

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ABSTRACT
This research made a phenomenological interpretation of key stakeholders’ educational online technology (EOT) experiences, to establish their current EOT needs and challenges and provide a basis from which to provide effective support. It analysed the experiences of 10 students and 10 teachers from New Zealand and Australia and interpreted their meanings through an abstraction and articulation of local and global themes. It documents the interpretations of students’ experiences with other students, in reference to their use of four types of EOTs: online conference tools, learning management systems, online social networks, and online collaboration tools. These interpretations, which include descriptions of stakeholders’ EOT challenges, helped to inform a set of recommendations for effective EOT use, to assist TEIs in their efforts to address EOT challenges and meet their stakeholders’ needs.

INTRODUCTION
Educational online technologies (EOTs) have dynamically transformed the delivery of higher education, creating significant opportunities for improved learning and teaching. In “a new era of technology” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 21), their improved functionalities and affordances have engendered significant advances across the tertiary sector. Traditional learning spaces have evolved into vibrant blended tertiary environments (BTEs) where “technology [has become]...an integral part of the educational experience”, and rapidly “affect[ed] the way [in which] educators communicate information to students” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 3).

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Phenomena like these signal exciting events for teachers and students, the key stakeholders in BTEs. Predictions about online learning spaces suggest that virtual universities and off-campus sites will be the future of higher education (Peppers, 2016). Some indicate that the digital delivery of coursework will revolutionise it (Anderson, Boyles, & Rainie, 2012).

Now, as “millions of students [take] online courses” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 21), TEIs are gearing up to support “more dynamic, ongoing [EOT] use” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 21). Their belief in “technological innovation…and integration…on the formation of the future” is increasingly evident (Gupta, 2016). “Technology [has become] an essential component” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 21) with “higher demand[s] for more flexible and convenient methods in obtaining a higher education” (Klaus & Changchit, 2016, p. 231). Those that fail to embrace it “will rapidly become out of touch…and unable to fulfil their critically important mission of preparing students for future success…” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 21).

Despite the remarkable growth and demand for “technology-infused education” (Tomei, 2016a, p. 21) significant obstacles impede the use of EOTs. Some of these challenges include attitudinal inclinations and institutional barriers, inadequacies in instructional design support (Panda & Mishra, 2007) and occur due to a “lack of training” or ineffective or insubstantial training (Merfert, 2016, p. 1). Others include resistance to change, inefficient EOT usage, lack of motivation and technical limitations (Tuapawa, 2016a). These challenges pose a clear risk to the future success of BTEs (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013) and create complications which limit stakeholders’ abilities to perform their roles effectively.

Clear efforts have been made to improve understandings of EOT challenges. These have resulted in considerable research, with varied contributions to the literature. Some studies have focussed on the integration of technologies into blended environments (Moore, 2013), the affordances and effectiveness of learning technologies in higher education (Arenas, 2015), barriers to adoption of online learning (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012), and eLearning challenges faced by academics (Sharma & Mishra, 2007; Islam, Beer, & Slack, 2015). However, while “our research foundation is rich” (Passey, 2013, p. 209), not all problems have been adequately identified and addressed.

The persistence of these challenges suggests that tertiary education institutes (TEIs) have experienced a gap in understanding the reality of key stakeholders’ EOT needs. Over time, these needs have evolved, and in an environment of rapid change have not been understood and addressed effectively. And yet, the ability of a TEI to evolve and adapt to meet their stakeholders’ needs effectively requires that they have current, in-depth understandings of their stakeholders’ EOT challenges, at a level that enables the delivery of informed, relevant and meaningful support.

Using a phenomenological approach, this research aimed to interpret key stakeholders’ EOT experiences, establish their current EOT needs and challenges and provide a basis from which to recommend methods for effective EOT support. Using a 5-step qualitative analysis of data, it studied the EOT experiences of ten students and ten teachers, categorised these to reflect the nature of their interactions with other key entities and then interpreted their meanings through an abstraction and articulation of local and global themes. The global themes helped form a broad set of interpretations about the meaning of stakeholders’ experiences with other students, other teachers and content, and the local themes helped create meanings that were specific to stakeholders’ use of single EOTs.

This chapter documents students’ EOT experiences with other students, in reference to their use of four different EOTs: Online conference tools (Adobe Connect), learning management systems (LMS) (Blackboard, Moodle), online social networks (Facebook), and online collaboration tools (Google Docs). Included in its interpretations are descriptions of students’ EOT challenges, which deliver a realistic portrayal of the phenomena to strengthen understandings of their needs. The interpretations helped to
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