Chapter 3

Seven Traits of Personal Learning Environments for Designing Quality Online Learning Programs: A Systems View of Connectedness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on research findings that illustrate a system view of connectedness across personal, professional, and academic contexts with implications for designing quality online learning programs. Connected learners organically blur the line between formal and informal learning when they call on their social networks and engage in online learning systems towards goals in their personal, professional, and academic lives. The phenomenological study referenced in this chapter is framed by complexity theory and grounded in research on complex adaptive systems applied to educational contexts. Examples of lived experiences illustrate how being connected in a personal learning environment is experienced as immersion in a complex adaptive system. Implications and recommendations for quality online learning programs are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

In a burgeoning area such as online learning, emerging trends continually impact the field. One promising area for quality online programs is the integration of a personal learning environment (PLE) to bridge formal and informal learning. The Horizon Report in higher education identified the integration of formal and informal learning as a solvable challenge and indicated the importance for formal educational programs to realize the dominance of online informal learning opportunities (Adams Becker et al., 2017). PLEs can be used to bring about quality higher education online programs by fostering meaningful learning experiences and supporting the transfer of knowledge to real-world settings through the formal-informal learning bridge (Kennedy, 2018). For managers of online programs, designing for the learner experience has the potential to foster a growing network of successful, connected graduates, which would not only point to a quality online program, but also to a flourishing community of practice. This chapter illustrates learners’ lived experiences of connectedness in PLEs, which are shown to have characteristics of complex adaptive systems.

According to Martindale and Dowdy (2010), the concept of PLEs grew out of the discontent with institutionally-focused learning management systems that tracked learners, the desire for a more learner-centered approach, and the recognition of the importance of lifelong learning. They described how learners worked independently to gather, filter, and organize content to make meaning while also sharing content and their viewpoints through the social web. A PLE implemented alongside a learning management system integrates both social and learning systems, thereby blending both informal and formal learning experiences, and capitalizing on the affordances and benefits of both systems for personalized learning.

In 2015, Dabbagh, Kitsantas, Al-Freih, and Fake researched how students created PLEs using social web technologies with a focus on self-regulated learning skills. They determined that PLEs “are an emerging pedagogical practice that makes it possible for learners to personalize learning based on their needs, interests, and goals, provided they possess the skills to metacognitively orchestrate their learning experience” (p. 179). PLEs are a promising approach for integrating learner-centric, net-native strategies into formal learning.

In student-centered, adult online learning, the Internet provides access to not only online libraries and open journals, but also the social web, breaking news, and media applications that facilitate connections among learners and information, fostering access to a wide range of diverse perspectives. PLEs align with andragogy principles (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) and harness the affordances of the web for learning, which is a key feature of the net-native pedagogy of connectivism (Siemens, 2005). In his seminal work, Siemens (2005) asked, “what is the impact of
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