Chapter XIII
Critical Survey of Information Technology Use in Higher Education: Blended Classrooms

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ABSTRACT
Reception and use of information technology by lifelong learners within a “blended” learning environment needs to be articulated within a constructivist paradigm. Increasingly, the term reflective practice is appearing in the vocabulary of adult education discourse. Educators have become familiar with the concept of reflective practice through Donald Schön’s writings. Schön’s work is founded on a tradition of learning supported by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. As a learning group, lifelong learners are receptive to constructivist learning interventions where facilitated activities provide learners with opportunities to enact and collaboratively construct meaning as interventions unfold. This case study reviews learning enactments through an online discussion forum in an evening diploma in European Art History, University College Cork, Ireland.
INTRODUCTION

In Ireland, the majority of lifelong learners are part-time students trying to maintain work and family commitments. Ireland’s participation in the European Union’s Bologna Declaration (1999) is establishing a higher educational qualification framework that predicts flexible career progression paths and greater educational opportunities by 2010. If course providers are to fully integrate non-traditional learners within higher education they need to consider opportunities afforded by learning technologies to enhance self-directed inquiry.

Studies in the application of learning technologies in higher education continue to focus on an 18-30 age group. The reception and use of information technology by lifelong learners still needs to be articulated within a constructivist paradigm. The Internet facilitates student and teacher access to many inquiry-based learning experiences. Online social networking, as mediated through discussion boards and chat rooms, allows for information collaboration and knowledge construction outside of the formal educational institution. Judith V. Boettcher (2007) argues that online tools are particularly valuable in this context because they provide a public forum in which the cumulative, step-by-step process of concept formation, refinement, application, and revision is fully visible to student peers as well as their mentors. Boettcher suggests that discussion forums, blogs, journals, and small group work are all excellent strategies for allowing learners to enlarge their mental models, to clarify concepts, and to establish meaningful links and relationships.

Malcom S. Knowles (1970, 1975 & 1984) acknowledged the importance of prior experience and self-direction in adult education. Increasingly, the term reflective practice is appearing in the vocabulary of adult education discourse. Broadly speaking, reflective practice is a mode that integrates thought and action with reflection for the benefit of improving one’s professional practice. Over the past two decades, educators have become familiar with the concept of reflective practice through Donald Schön’s writings about reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983, 1987). Schön’s work has an historical basis in a tradition of learning supported by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, each of whom advocated that learning is dependent upon the integration of experience with reflection and of theory with practice. Lee S. Shulman’s paper on signature pedagogies in the professions (2005) implicitly owes a debt to the work of Donald Schön. Signature pedagogies are composed of three elements: surface structures, deep structures and implicit structures. The surface structure, applies to the acts of teaching and learning. The deep structure refers to the values of the discipline (e.g., what makes a lawyer or a doctor?). The implicit structure or hidden curriculum is revealed through performances of student understanding. In his seminal paper, Shulman mentions in passing the transformative potential of learning technologies upon a traditional curriculum design, but he does not expand on this. (Shulman, 2005, pp. 52–59).

This case study reviews learning enactments, through an online discussion forum on an evening diploma in European Art History at University Cork, as a means of demonstrating that lifelong learners, as a learning group, are receptive to constructivist learning interventions where facilitated activities provide learners with opportunities to enact and collaboratively construct meaning as interventions unfold.

Since 2004, the Centre for Adult Continuing Education, University College Cork, has seen the potential for using online resources to enhance disciplinary understanding within “blended” learning environments whereby online is integrated with class-based teaching and learning (Cronin, 2005, 2008; Young & Cronin, 2005).

The two-year, part-time diploma in European Art History aims to provide lifelong learners
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