ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the case of a blended university course will be described in detail. The main focus of this description will be on how some constructivist principles – such as knowledge building, active and self-directed learners, collaborative learning, communities of learners and practice - can be applied to compose the architecture of a blended university course. The course carefully integrates online activities with face to face meetings. Several educational models are also combined to guide the design of individual, small-group and collective activities able to exploit issues such as digital identities, E-Tutor, online role-play, and E-Portfolio. Principles of constructivism were always followed when setting activities and meetings. The description provided is mainly useful for teachers and educators interested in implementing a blended course with clear references to constructivist pedagogy. In addition, theoretically founded roles, tasks, and activities are outlined. The thoughtful mix of pedagogical models, online and face to face activities, individual-dyads-small group and collective learning contexts is the strongest point of this course.
INTRODUCTION

When applied to education, constructivism calls for a radical redesign of educational goals. Rather than supporting the increase of students’ knowledge, the focus should be on the activity the person can perform in a content domain. Students should not only acquire information, but they should be encouraged to put in practice what they learn. In this way, they can develop respect and confidence in the power of their mind and extend that power to think more generally about themselves as cultural agents and about their relationship with the environment in which they are surrounded by (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996). To obtain such results, it is necessary to improve the awareness of connections between human activities and the sociocultural contexts within which these activities take place. This means also becoming more aware of the cultural power technology plays which should not be considered merely as a content delivery mechanism, but rather as artefacts able to support human capacity for developing new culture (Engeström & Escalante, 1996; Wartofsky, 1973). Our contemporary culture is based – at least in developed countries – on advanced technology (i.e., web-based environments, digital objects, etc.) and therefore academic and educational contexts are called upon to develop positive, cultural models of how to use this technology. The natural disposition of youth to be excited about new and creative ways of using the Internet should be utilized as leverage to empower educational models based on recommendations constructivism offers.

We believe constructivism does not necessarily imply the complete replacement of previous educational models. On the contrary, well established models can be renewed and can offer hints to constructivism especially when new technologies and new forms of peer interaction – also face to face interactions - are introduced. The ultimate result is an architecture for teaching where constructivism has been developed into a rich and well designed pathway, which blends face to face with online meetings, where students perform many types of activities and build a wide array of products. This chapter offers a detailed description of such a course, which we believe would be particularly useful for teachers interested in implementing a blended course with clear reference to constructivist pedagogy.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Constructivism and the Blended Approach

The constructivist view of education stresses how important it is to have active learners, able to self-direct and, eventually, re-direct their own learning processes. Active learners understand new information by doing something with it and are keen to enjoy group work because this enables them to compare different points of view and to reflect upon the multiple aspects of reality. In fact, constructivism sees individuals treating information and experiences by inevitably assigning meanings; therefore, learners are constantly involved in a process of sense making (Bruner, 1986; Cole, 1996; 1991; Gergen, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). In short, the goal of education should be to equip students with an adequate and sophisticated apparatus for sense making and sustain learners’ self-perceptions as active knowledge builders. Technology seems to be able to support and empower this type of learner (Crook, 2002; Salmon, 2002; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994).

The general guidelines and goals defined in the light of socioconstructivism need to be detailed when applied practically to a course. In the case of the course we are going to describe here, we found the blended approach (Alvarez, 2005; Bonk & Graham, 2006) a useful way to apply constructivism to higher education. In other words, the general principles inspiring the architecture of the course are indeed based on a constructivist vision.
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