Abstract

The Bandurian concept of learner agency was originally embedded in a paradigm where behavior, self and environment influenced each other significantly. However, evolution of the concept has focused almost exclusively on individuals as the locus of agency ignoring the potential contribution of context. It is argued that learning environments should be considered truly reciprocal with individuals through mutual and iterative influence by contextual elements and by individual learners. It is postulated that learner agency be broadened to a more inclusive concept of learning agency. This concept is explored empirically with data collected on an e-learning university campus from 125 students about their
approaches to learning, perceptions of their learning environments, and epistemological reflections on themselves as learners. Results indicate that students' behavior cannot be explained by individual characteristics but by the influences of the technology-rich learning environment and peers, suggesting that individuals' approach to learning arises from mutual interactions between individual and contextual agency.

Introduction

Over the last two decades of the last century, research into student learning in higher education was both extensive and intensive. However, it focused on traditional learning environments (TLEs), tending to provide explanations that not only assumed participation in formal lecturer-dominated or defined on-campus environments but also were based on traditional learning theories. While this research has been going on, higher education has been undergoing an accelerating transformation driven by technological innovations and the emergence of a knowledge-based society. This transformation has seen considerable private and public sector financial investment aimed at developing new learning environments (NLEs). These environments are characterized in this chapter by an increasing reliance on information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly the use of the Internet, less reliance on traditional face-to-face teaching, and a greater use of peer-based learning tasks.

NLEs can be thought of as lying on the continuum between TLEs that are campus based, and virtual learning environments (VLEs) that support education through the use of technology, namely e-learning. They involve both e-learning and campus-based participation. They also provide an environment that allows exploration of the impact of significant changes in the pedagogical and resource practices associated with TLEs, including the impact of e-learning on student experiences of the environment. In the NLE that informs this chapter, pedagogical practices also explicitly valued community and interaction, and through this, the actual social, cultural, and material context of learning.

Regrettably, the development of VLEs has been based largely on advocacy of the potential in adopting ICTs in the education sector rather than on an empirically-based understanding of its effect on student learning. The aim here is to explore a new way of conceptualizing learning within NLEs that (1) integrates recent views on the role of learners and learning environments in learning that challenge some of the traditional theories and (2) is supported by empirical evidence in the form of a case study. This conceptualization may offer some useful challenges for those who are focused on VLEs, as well as those focusing on NLEs. It uses as a starting point, a concept central to traditional views on learning—learner agency.
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