Chapter V

Some Insights into the Impact of ICTs on Learning Agency and Seamless Learning

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Abstract

The learning capacity of individuals is becoming recognised as the most valued commodity in a knowledge and information society and this has fostered an increased attention on the innovation, transfer, and management of knowledge. To explain these processes, it is necessary to move beyond what has traditionally been conceived of as a learning environment and to develop alternative models that acknowledge and accommodate the learning competencies required to successfully engage with a contingent and dynamic learning culture, the changing nature of knowledge, and the
influence of the cultural background of learners. Such models need to explain the lifelong and continuous nature of learning as learners move seamlessly among a range of diverse learning environments. This chapter proposes the concept of learning agency which incorporates the intelligence inherent in learning environments as a mechanism to explain seamless learning within and across environments, particularly those that are rich in technology.

Introduction

The rapidly changing international social, economic, and political order has fostered an increased attention on innovation, transfer, and management of knowledge. While many believe that the emergence of the centrality of knowledge to society’s growth is a consequence of economic reform and the proliferation of communication technology (Jentzsch, 2001), others argue that it is also an outcome of a gradual evolution of our social, political, and economic models (Lankshear, 1997). Irrespective of what might have triggered the focus on learning and knowledge creation, both the above assumptions imply that a very diverse and complex mix of concepts, principles, and variables may influence what constitutes knowledge, information technology, learning context and processes, learner motives, and social and political imperatives. This diversity and complexity challenges us to re-conceptualise learning and teaching.

As a consequence of the above complexity and the contingent nature of our society, the learning capacity of individuals is increasingly being recognised as the most valued commodity in a knowledge and information society (Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Hargreaves, 2003). The search for models to support contingent yet sustainable learning, accelerated deep approaches to learning and the development of an understanding of the distributed and complex nature of learning has resulted in intensive research focussing on understanding human cognition and the meaning-making processes (e.g., Collin & Tynjälä, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This increased research activity, while contributing new insights, has tended to be narrowly defined and focussed on specific aspects of problems rather than investigating how the various aspects complement and/or hinder each other. For example, despite the development of the actor-network theory and its application in research (Latour, 1988, 1993; Somerville, 1999), it has not been used to explore the relationships between learners’ motives, beliefs and values, and their engagement with the various aspects of the actor-network systems. Similarly, the acknowledgement that learning permeates all aspects of our lives has resulted in the emergence of constructs such as “learning society” (Nonaka & Teece, 2001), “knowledge
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