Chapter VI

Cultural Agents: Who They Are and What Role They Play

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Abstract

Teaching function is a strategic factor in the improvement of teaching and learning. In online education teaching function involves cultural, pedagogical, and didactical mediation. Thus conceived, the business of teaching aims to improve the aptitudes, intelligence, and personal qualities of the students, by engaging with the competence already in their possession, raising to consciousness their implicit knowledge, and favoring group interaction. By dint of cooperation, the students acquire important opportunities to construct, understand, and share knowledge and information. The teaching function conceived as a mediating function leads us towards the assumption of the socio-constructivist paradigm, which may be considered the key development of post-modern pedagogy.
Introduction

Online education is now shaping up as a completely new domain of pedagogical knowledge. This sector appears to be characterized by a multitude of elements which make it unique, compared to both traditional teaching practices and previous types of distance learning. Online education seems to be able to maximize the advantages of traditional forms of communication (group interaction and two-way communicative exchange between teachers and learners) while overcoming its limitations (the need for all the participants to be physically present). At the same time it enjoys the advantages of previous forms of distance learning (exploitation of the materials at times and in ways chosen autonomously by the learner), without having to suffer the isolation which they involve.

Online education is held to be particularly effective in facilitating learning in virtue of three possibilities that it provides:

1. The involvement of a number of sensory channels (multi-media) which particularly enrich communication
2. The use of a number of communicative possibilities (in real time or deferred), which implement the relationship not only between the teacher and the individual learner, but all the players in the educational process concerned
3. The high level of interaction with the study materials, which can be produced by the learning community itself, in such a way that the learning environment is modeled by the actions of the individual learners, with important effects on motivation and the acquisition of competence, which is thus richer, deeper, and more stable

The possibilities provided by online education, rather than streamlining and simplifying (or even making obsolete) the work of the teacher, actually make it more complex (and certainly more interesting). In the presence of a wealth of instruments and technological potential, the choices made by the teacher are crucial for developing the systematic and combined use of the available media and providing diversified forms of learning support; as such, the teacher’s choices constitute the real strategic factor determining the quality of the training on offer. When we speak of the teaching function, we refer to a series of features that characterize the provision of teaching and training services by an institution whose mission is education, accomplished via one or more people, with recourse to appropriate technologies (Damiano, 1976). The advent of online education has led to a reappraisal of this teaching function, which has seen the rise to pre-eminence of an important feature, that of the mediation of learning.
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