Chapter 28

On Using Wiki as a Tool for Collaborative Online Blended Learning

Steve Wheeler
University of Plymouth, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of the wiki and its role as a cognitive tool to promote interaction and collaborative learning in higher education. The importance of the software to enable student created content, storage, and sharing of knowledge is reviewed. This chapter provides an evaluation of some of the affordances and constraints of wikis to promote critical thinking within a blended learning context. It assesses their potential to facilitate collaborative learning through community focused enquiry for geographically separated students and nomadic learners. One particular focus of the chapter is the development of new digital literacies and how students present their written work in wikis. The chapter also examines group dynamics within collaborative learning environments drawing on the data from a study conducted at the University of Plymouth in 2007, using wikis in teacher education. Finally, the chapter highlights some recent key contributions to the developing discourse on social software in what has been termed 'the architecture of participation.'

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERACTION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Interactive digital media are assuming an increasingly important role in all sectors of education, with many universities developing e-learning strategies. The importance of interaction in distance education has been strongly emphasised (Moore, 1989; Swan, 2002) and the use of technology to mediate communication between separated individuals is well documented (Shin, 2003; Gunawardena, 1990). Technology supported distance education can encourage and enhance collaborative learning processes (Jonassen, Peck & Wilson, 1999) where students actively seek out engagement with others because it is both useful and satisfying (Horizon Report, 2007). There is evidence that purposeful interaction can increase learner knowledge (Ritchie...
On Using Wiki as a Tool for Collaborative Online Blended Learning

& Hoffman, 1997) but may be intensely personal and welcomed more by some students than others (Godwin, Thorpe & Richardson, 2008).

The use of technology to support and facilitate interaction, if applied appropriately, tends to produce good learning outcomes, and new web based tools are increasingly available to the distance educator. The advent of Web 2.0 for example, has provided teachers with unprecedented opportunities. Web 2.0 based technologies are replete with rich social opportunities. For a growing number of teachers and students, social networking and social software have become fertile environments within which communities of learning can flourish and learn from each other (Wheeler, Yeomans & Wheeler, 2008; Ebersbach, Glaser & Heigl, 2006). There is also evidence that the practice of enabling students to generate their own content can encourage deeper levels of engagement with course content through the act of authoring, simply because the awareness of an audience, no matter how virtual or tentative, encourages more thoughtful sentence construction (Jacobs, 2003) and deeper critical engagement (Wheeler, Yeomans & Wheeler, 2008). Writing in blogs and wikis for example, compel students to carefully manage their impression (Goffman, 1959) encouraging them to think more clearly and critically about their arguments, and to articulate their ideas coherently and persuasively on a publicly accessible web space for an undetermined and invisible audience.

Furthermore, there is a need to incorporate collaborative learning practices more deeply within all forms of education (Jonassen et al, 1999). Coupled with this need is a growing awareness that teacher roles need to be refined in a new knowledge economy. There is an established trend toward a form of learning where teachers abdicate their roles as instructors, and adopt a more supportive role (Harden & Crosby, 2000; O’Neill & McMahon, 2005). There is a tension here. Teachers fulfil a particularly important role as without teacher support, students can flounder, lose motivation, or even drop out of the course. At the same time, the reduction in tutor-led instructional methods encourages students to take more responsibility for their learning. A fine balancing act is thus required where teachers facilitate and support learner participation, intervening where necessary, rather than providing sustained instruction. Students are increasingly adopting new roles as producers, commentators and classifiers (Horizon Report, 2007) within Web 2.0 based learning environments. They are participating more in the construction and organisation of their own knowledge rather than merely reproducing content as exemplified in instructional practices (Jonassen, et al, 1999) and this occurs increasingly outside the boundaries of contiguous education.

This shift in emphasis, although grounded in social constructivist theory, also has drivers in new technologies (Richardson, 2006), and a post-modernist belief that knowledge should be discursively constructed across a multiplicity of sites (Gale, 2003). Such an approach to pedagogy, although arguably no longer radical, none the less constitutes an important part of the essence of blended learning, and has implications for a growing population of younger learners who appear to have a natural affinity to digital technologies (Prensky, 2006). It is also apparent that younger learners are more often on the move than earlier generations, and tend to engage in a ‘patchwork’ or portfolio of careers, job hopping as the need or interest dictates. Students are also more physically mobile than their forbears, and use cell phones and handheld devices to connect to their network of peers. Such nomadic wandering demands a new range of flexible learning skills and consequently a new culture of educational provision.

LEARNING AS A NOMAD

Nomadic learning has been defined as ‘a form of learning in which a learner has continuity of service across different sessions and, possibly, dif-