ICT and Gender Issues in the Higher Education of Entrepreneurs

Ambika Zutshi, Deakin University, Australia
Andrew Creed, Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Rapid technological innovations are currently occurring in higher education with differential effects on academics, students and ICT. This article, through literature review and author experiences, highlights the potential misperceptions of gender and related learning styles resulting from increased adoption of ICT in higher education. The authors emphasise the need for a collaborative approach between educators, learners, and the people and organisations that drive technological innovation, which contrasts the competitive forces that now abound. The authors also acknowledge the implied positions in dialogues about gender. One response is to initiate understanding at the strategic level and utilise the advances in ICT technologies that enhance connectedness in the educational experience. To improve the education of entrepreneurial managers and leaders, future policies must address the effects and accessibility of online education to meet employer and global technological requirements with equitable outcomes.

Keywords:   Education, Entrepreneur, Equity, Gender, ICT, Innovation, Management

ICT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Computer usage has become an integral part of the higher education system and this is a reflection of increases not only of information and communication technology (ICT) diffusion (Cortada, 2008) within the global workforce, but also overall technology awareness, acceptance and application in the community (Zhang & Maruping, 2008). From the factory floor to the highest levels of management, and through the burgeoning e-entrepreneurship sector, workers require an awareness of the applications of IT and accordingly it has become imperative that we, as educators, play a part to transfer these skills to our students. For educators today, age, gender, background, experience, and level of education can rarely be cited as excuses for not knowing how to manage ICT. We simply have to get on with the task of skilling people for their roles as contemporary entrepreneurs, managers and leaders. The challenges we confront are linked with the foundational differences between individuals.

The objective of this theoretical article is two-fold. First, by incorporating information
from the literature and author experiences as higher education academics, to explore the subtle equity issues that can occur when using online technology in the education and professional development of female and male learners. The second objective of this article is to raise awareness and generate debate of the potential differences in online interaction amongst the genders so that universities can make policies and implement practices that do not limit learning opportunities on the basis of gender. To foster the next generation of competent entrepreneurs and managers, it is imperative that educators have a good understanding of the effects of ICT on learning. In this article the authors have drawn upon management and education literature and focused on one component of the task environment: the customers in the form of university students (see Figure 1). This has been combined with the impact of the technological environment; part of the general environment (see Robbins & Coulter, 2009; Waddell, Devine, Jones, & George, 2008) on the collection and dissemination of information amongst the academics and students.

Figure 1 presents some of the internal and external environmental constraints faced by the higher education sector. Online teaching offers a number of advantages, such as, cost-effectiveness, if managed carefully, flexibility for educators and learners, instantaneous communication and access to a myriad of web resources (Whip & Lorentz, 2009; Steinbronn & Merideth, 2008; Bach, Haynes & Smith, 2007; Hudson, Hudson, & Steel, 2006). Universities are, accordingly, attempting to ensure that their students, regardless of their chosen field, graduate with basic online technological skills. Nevertheless, in the light of increased enrolments during tighter economic times (Gill & Marcus, 2009) and the increasingly diverse generation of students, it is important not to make assumptions about computer skills and, rather, to improve equity awareness in relation to the technology. Universities must strive for equality of academic and student usage and application of information and communication technology (ICT). For the purpose of this article we have defined ICT as the range of information technology tools, such as discussion threads, blogs, wikis, Twitter and email that assist communication through digital media. Please note that the words ‘equality’ and ‘equity’; and ‘IT’ and ‘ICT’ have been used interchangeably in this article.

Within the external environment there is direct pressure from the task environment upon the successful operation of a university, which is in addition to the impact of the other general environmental factors. The quality of higher education depends on achieving a balance of these factors (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2007). In the task environment, employers, as occasional strategic allies of universities, are demanding that the graduates joining their organisation have a good working knowledge of the ICT that is a component of the general environment. An increasing number of universities are thus initiating policies around expanding ICT applications in their courses (Rossi 2007; Tsai & Beverton, 2007). This is the result of the interplay noted between task and general environments, and is recognition of the generational shift that has occurred amongst university students that has been noticed by employers. The shift has encouraged commentators, such as Prensky (2001) and Buckingham (2006) to label the new generation as ‘digital natives’, and ‘millenials’ respectively. Nevertheless, one should still recognise that some people come later to technological awareness and proficiency, and are known as ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). The students can now “choose when, where, how, with whom, and for how long they engage in learning exercises” (Simpson 2001, p. 4). Regardless, the ubiquity of technology and the expectation that it will be used in business and personal life compels educators and education administrators to wrestle with new online applications.

For universities to be truly successful in their efforts to exchange knowledge with enterprises globally and practice “lifelong learning” (Hicks, Reid, & George, 2001; Keogh, 2001; Selwyn, Gorard, & Williams, 2001) it is essential that efforts are made to reduce the
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