Chapter 16

The Student Perspective: Can the Use of Technologies Transform Learning?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores students’ perspectives on the transformations that the use of technology has brought to higher education. The use of technologies in higher education facilitates flexible learning environments but the benefits to students who engage with these technologies will only be realised if the design is pedagogically sound. The pedagogic approach employed by lecturers when designing their e-learning platforms or learning management systems has the capability to transform learning. The author’s discipline is Information Technology and Business Information Systems; from experience and case studies there is ample evidence to suggest that the use of technology does not always necessarily meet user requirements. Students are the end users of the technologies that educators use to enhance students’ learning experiences. This chapter was undertaken to obtain students’ perspectives (as the end users) on the uses of technologies in higher education to assist educators in improving the pedagogical design of their e-learning platforms. The responses received from students clearly indicate they are of the opinion that the use of technologies in higher education beneficially transforms learning but will never replace lecturers. In essence, the benefits that can be achieved through the use of technologies are totally dependent on the ways they are employed pedagogically by lecturers.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly technology is pervading all areas of education. As part of the Dublin Institute of Technology’s Strategic Plan, a Learning Technology Team was established in 2003 to roll out the institutional virtual learning environment. Students are the end users of the information systems that educators use to enhance students’ learning experiences. This chapter was undertaken to obtain students’ perspectives (as the end users) on the uses of technologies in higher education
to assist educators in improving the pedagogical
design of e-learning platforms alternatively known
as learning management systems.

The use of technology has modified the ways
that some lecturers distribute course materials to
students, i.e., no longer do all students transcribe
notes from blackboards/whiteboards. Course
materials are disseminated online through files of
course notes, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts,
video casts and web links. The use of technology
has also brought alterations to students’ ability to
communicate with lecturers and fellow students,
through the use of e-mail, discussion boards, online
chat rooms and wikis. In addition, technology has
changed the ease with which students can access
further information to read outside of the course
material and conduct research through the use of
online journals and databases.

Academics are very often encouraged to create
an online presence without ever having studied on-
line themselves or even considered the pedagogical
impact that technology can have on the students’
learning experience. Salmon (2000) stated that
the use of the World Wide Web for learning and
teaching was set to dramatically increase, and
the onus was on all lecturers using technology
to ensure that they familiarised themselves with
the pedagogical skills necessary to ensure that
the technologies used effectively enhanced the
learning experience of students.

An important point to note is that technologies
are simply tools at the disposal of educators. The
beneficial transformations in learning that can be
achieved through the use of technologies depend
on the skill levels and commitment of the educa-
tors, similar to all professionals’ effective use of
tools. When employing the use of technologies to
transform learning a number of issues need to be
considered, amongst them student perspectives,
the learning experience, teacher–student and
student–student relationships, learning outcomes,
and so on, to ensure that the lecturers’ pedagogi-
cal skills are utilised to best effect. Should any
educators believe that their pedagogical approach
does not require enhancement from the use of
technologies that is their prerogative.

Broad, Matthews, and McDonald (2004)
proposed that despite students’ prolific use of
new technology, there is no need for academics
to presume that students are disposed towards
academic use of the Internet in the higher educa-
tion sector, and they question whether the use of
technology in education is supported by sound
educational rationales and that ‘this strategy has
not yet been pedagogically proven’ (p. 135). All
the effort that lecturers, who employ the use of
technologies with their students, put into creating
suitable content is wasted unless students actively
engage with and gain some benefits from using the
material provided. As a result of a study conducted
by Lòfström and Nevgi (2007) at the University of
Helsinki, Finland, the authors suggest that ‘Experi-
ences of relevance and meaningfulness are central
facilitators of learning. In this context, meaningful
learning entails learner activity and intentionality,
application of constructivist principles, collabora-
tion, dialogue, reflection, connection to context
and transferability of knowledge’ (p. 315). Edu-
cators should keep this in mind when designing
material for use with technological devices.

McLoughlin’s (2000) experiences from work-
ing in the Teaching and Learning Centre at the
University of New England in Australia, lead her
to suggest that despite the prolific availability
of online teaching tools there is no established
approach on how to develop quality learning
programmes that make the best use of these tools,
which can only be achieved by educators forming
a deeper understanding of how technology can
affirm and extend the principles of good teach-
ing. Slevin (2008) from Roskilde University in
Denmark, states that concentration upon practi-
cal problems associated with the opportunities
afforded by modern technology draws attention
away from the theoretical concerns posed by e-
learning. Apart from reading books and articles
on the use of technologies in higher education,
educators who attend e-learning and teaching