

Online Pedagogy as a Challenge to the Traditional Distance Education Paradigm

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Abstract: This paper briefly discusses the educational context at The University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia where many courses are delivered solely online. It provides a comparison between online and traditional distance education and reflects on how online pedagogy challenges traditional distance education pedagogy. The pedagogy of print-based distance learning materials has tended to incorporate instructional design strategies aimed at providing an independent learning experience. Internet technology has created opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning which represent an alternative to traditional, autonomous approaches to the delivery of academic content.

Introduction

In recent years, use of the Internet has developed phenomenally, and worldwide access to communication and information technologies presents educators with opportunities to create learning environments different from those possible with preceding technologies. The Internet provides instant access to a huge range of resources (information and human), with the ability to search across and within web sites and the facility to work collaboratively with colleagues at a distance.

The traditional paradigm of education and training has been based on standardisation, conformity and compliance. Typically, teaching has been conducted by giving large groups of learners the same content in the same amount of time, and for on-campus students, at the same time. Learning is often directed by a trainer or teacher, with learners having little opportunity for self-directed learning or interaction with peers. However, changing expectations reflecting the move to a knowledge society mean that learners are demanding customisation of their education/training and employers are requiring graduates who display initiative, adaptation to diversity and problem solving abilities.

Traditional Australian Distance Education Context

The traditional distance education paradigm, within the Australian context, has been that of the “Birdsville student” - a remote student, an independent learner, with a standalone package of study materials. The independent learner model is similar to what some refer to as “content-learner” interaction (Miller & Miller 1999) with learners having little or no interaction with others. To use the opportunities provided by the Internet, there is an obvious need for the design of learning environments which use the interactive capabilities to the best advantage and are not merely the transformation of print-based material to online delivery.

Online Pedagogy – Design of the Learning Environment

At the USQ, an institution with twenty-five years' experience in the delivery of distance education, online pedagogy is aimed at shifting learners from passive to active learning, from teacher-centred to learner-centred environments and from decontextualised tasks to authentic, meaningful experiences. The online environment creates an opportunity for interactive and collaborative models of learning, including the creation of learning communities involved in interactive activities using electronic discussion areas. It also enhances the independent learner model by providing media-rich resources and the opportunity to self-manage learning in a flexible mode (McDonald & Reushle 2000). Many of these learning strategies have not been available in the traditional print-based delivery of distance education which, for access and equity reasons, has often been designed within the framework of independent learning.

The collaborative learner model acknowledges the importance of the co-construction of knowledge through collective learning and peer exchange, often referred to as a many to many learning experience with less of a focus on instructor contribution.

In educational literature (Bates, 1999; Jonassen, 2000), it is argued that learning within a constructivist environment promotes meaningful learner engagement and critical, creative and complex thinking by learners. This paper has a focus on communication technology, while noting that other technology-based learning/teaching tools such as Jonassen's (2000) 'Mind Tools' also support 'engaged' learning by students. The idea of constructing knowledge using technology, rather than using technology as an information-gathering tool, is an important aspect of online pedagogy. Conversation and collaborative tools (such as online discussion groups) enable communities of learners to negotiate and co-construct meaning for problem solving and knowledge construction. Online discussion groups can provide a permanent record of discourse, a collective memory resource for subsequent reinterpretation. Buckingham-Shum et al. (2001) discusses different learning media and techniques used for closing the gap between distance students and their tutors. However, they note that the Internet is widely acclaimed as a medium to revolutionise distance teaching, but its primary role to date has been the convenient publishing of 'digital paper' plus simple hypertext, and that convincing examples of shared, networked multimedia are still relatively scarce.

Conclusion

Interaction is an integral component of learning, and communication technology has provided opportunities for educators to implement this at a distance. If the "ideal" educational experience is the Oxford style interactive tutorial, is this where instructional design efforts for the online environment should be focused – on re-creating this interaction using electronic communication technologies?

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