

Chapter 97

Destabilizing the Activity System of Online Teaching Through Critical Theory

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rapid and prolific uptake of online learning across higher education, the promised positive impact of digital technologies on the quality of learning has mostly failed to materialize. The need for change or reshaping of teaching practice in online environments is well documented, and there is much literature encouraging educators to exploit the affordances of digital media to provide rich learning experiences. However, efforts to affect the needed changes in practice are not very successful. In the present chapter, the authors adopt a framework of activity theory and integrate it with principles of critical theory and transformative practice to better understand why change in teaching practices in online environments has been difficult to realize. The authors also provide a theoretical framework that may be applied to driving change in online teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the rapid and prolific uptake of online learning across higher education, the promised positive impact of digital technologies on the quality of learning has mostly failed to materialize. While online learning serves well the purposes of efficiency and flexibility, there are many implementations that have not served so well the purposes of learning effectiveness. At best most implementations of online teaching are simply “stretching the mold” (Collis & Van Der Wende, 2002, p. 7). A few genuine success stories aside, the vast bulk of online learning fails to provide rich and effective learning experiences to

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students. Much of the online ‘experiences’ are no more than electronic page turning and a translation of traditional transmission approaches to the digital medium. The need for change or reshaping of teaching practice in online environments is well documented, and there is much literature encouraging educators to exploit the affordances of digital media to provide rich learning experiences. However, efforts to effect the needed changes in practice are not very successful.

Changing online teaching practices requires deep seated transformation in beliefs not only about the role of the teacher and the learning, but also about why technology is being used and how technology is mediating the interactions among teacher, learner, and course. As is the case for other sets of beliefs, belief related to online learning is the result of many factors including one’s own past experiences, and social expectations and norms. Thus, changing practice in online teaching is a complex process involving not only the individual but interaction with others in the social system. Of course, change in belief is not transformative unless the change manifests in activity. Such a view of change in online teaching aligns well with the core concepts found in activity theory. Hence, in the present chapter we adopt a framework of activity theory, and critical theory to better understand why change in teaching practices in online environments has been difficult to effect, and, we place emphasis on critical theory as a perspective that needs to be adopted in order to effect change in practice.

Online Teaching and Learning: A Brief History

The current problem ineffective implementations of online learning stems partly from the traditional, teacher-centered transmission models of teaching in which higher education teaching remains mostly embedded, and also the history of use of digital technologies in learning. The use of technology in learning and teaching has its roots in computer based training, initially using mainframe computers in the 60’s and 70’s, and later, in the 80’s to mid 90’s, expanding to desktop computers (Torrissi, 2012). Computer based training was exactly that - ‘training’, and digital content manifested as sets of multiple choice interactions aimed at mastery of content. At that time, the nature of the technology was such that it could not support much more in the way of sophisticated interaction, and, teaching was very much entrenched in the ideas of the industrial age during which gaining an education meant acquiring the fundamental skills required in mostly factory work.

The advent of media rich multimedia technologies in the 1990’s saw the beginnings of media rich and more interactive learning materials delivered mostly via CD ROM or on Hard drive. Although much of higher education remained locked in content driven, transmission models, there were some earnest attempts towards constructivist, active learning approaches in the multimedia medium, such that it soon became known as Interactive multimedia. The spread of multimedia learning environments at this time was restricted predominantly because of the difficulty of wide distribution and thus the highly interactive, media rich approaches did not saturate educational contexts in the way we see the internet doing today. The soon to follow invention of the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) solved the distribution problems, but, early WWW technologies and limited bandwidth did not support highly interactive, media rich learning environments, and so, online learning took a ‘step backwards’ of sorts with online materials being restricted to essentially electronic page turning. If the limitations of the technology were a strong force shaping the form of online learning, and even stronger force bore down on the form of online learning – the transmission model of learning in which much of higher education was deeply entrenched (and remains mostly entrenched to this day). The factors leading to this state of affairs can be conceptualized in terms of the action of the combined forces of the limitations of the technology, the

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