Chapter 4.5

Using Social Software for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on discussing the use of social software from a social constructivist perspective. In particular, the chapter explains how social constructivist pedagogies such as collaborative learning and communities of practice may be supported by the adoption of social software tools. It begins by briefly discussing the social constructivist perspective considering certain pedagogies such as collaborative learning and communities of practice. Then, it explains how these pedagogies are reflected in actual practice by using a variety of social software tools such as discussion boards, blogs and wikis. Finally, the chapter presents the implications of using social software based on the impact of certain factors such as teachers' understandings of, and beliefs about, teaching in general. The purpose of this chapter is to support higher education practitioners in theory-informed design by distilling and outlining those aspects of social constructivism that addresses the use of social software tools. It is perceived that a gradual introduction of social software to institutional Virtual Learning Environments, with a strong focus on collaborative learning processes and engagement in online learning communities, will highlight the need for discursive tools, adaptability, interactivity and reflection.

INTRODUCTION

The diversity of perspectives on, and approaches to, the pedagogical use of social software can prove

overwhelming to practitioners and researchers alike. In order to make sense of this, this chapter explains how social constructivist theories such as communities of practice and collaborative learning may be assist in the use of social software. This chapter aims to explain the different pedagogical responses to social software tools and social networks regarding specific characteristics of learning, which may inform practitioners in their use of such tools. This is particularly useful in the context of e-learning where higher educators and researchers seek a clear understanding of the affordances of social software and guidance on how to use and integrate these into their educational practice. This may draw practitioners' attention to the relationship between espoused theories and theory in use (Argyris and Schon, 1974) and also for acknowledging curriculum design as a social practice (Conole et al., 2004).

Teaching and learning using social software may require teachers to rethink their beliefs and approaches in order to develop patterns of learning that at least allow and preferably encourage collaboration as a process of planning, criticising and evaluating. This could also allow learners to personalise their learning within a framework where teachers may monitor their progress. In this context, a better articulation and mapping of different pedagogical processes, tools and techniques may provide a pedagogical approach that can be regarded as more consistent and with teachers' theoretical and practical perspectives for teaching and learning using social software. As Downes (2005) argues, educators and practitioners should recognise that social software is not a technical revolution but is about encouraging and enabling collaboration and participation through applications and tools that can support the social constructivist approach to learning. However, adopting teaching and learning activities with the use of social software in a way that promotes interaction and collaborative knowledge building does not mean that it will result in learning per se. These practices require from the teachers an

awareness of how students learn and this adds an increased responsibility for teaching and learning. Twigg (1994) argues that many students are concrete-active learners, that is, they learn best from concrete experiences where they engage their senses, and their best learning experiences begin with practice and end with theory.

The purpose of this chapter is to support higher educators for theory-informed design by outlining current issues of social constructivism in a way that assists the use of social software tools but also taking into consideration that creating a network of interactions between the instructor and the students may not lead to effective communication and collaborative knowledge building. For example, the design of a group project may not necessarily lead to the desired learning outcome. At best, it would appear that learning benefits can be achieved under certain circumstances. Students have to contribute to the learning process by posting their thoughts and ideas to an online discussion because learning is an active process in which both the teacher and the students should participate if it is to be successful. Research by Sharpe et al., (2005) provides examples, from a learner scoping study, about the roles of the teacher and the learner for ensuring and enhancing the quality of instructional design and how this relates to effective online learning processes. The scoping study highlighted the holistic nature of students' experiences of learning and proposed that learning design should focus on students' motivations, beliefs and intentions and the meanings they attach to e-learning. For example, as is well known, collaborative learning may not suit everyone (Laurillard, 2002, Mason and Weller, 2001). So a plethora of questions remain about how to design online learning activities whose purpose is understandable by the students. The important issue to note, from research in teaching and learning, is that there may be contradictions between what teachers and students conceive as effective teaching. Highlighting such differences may be helpful in assisting teachers to design learning

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