

## Chapter 4.2

# Stories of Engagement with E-Learning: Revisiting the Taxonomy of Learning

**Geoffrey Lautenbach**

*University of Johannesburg, South Africa*

### ABSTRACT

I argue that although university lecturers delve into the “shallow waters” of e-learning, they do not do so in sufficient depth and resign themselves to the perpetuation of cognitivist, behaviorist, and objectivist forms of knowledge without discovering more about the medium that could possibly liberate their restricted epistemologies. In this article, I explore possible reasons for varying engagement with e-learning, assuming that these reasons are located within the dimensions of the unit of analysis of the study; namely, lecturers’ changing theories of knowledge and teaching in first encounters with e-learning. Using Lee Shulman’s table of learning (Shulman, 2002) as a heuristic, I use excerpts from personal narratives to highlight the epistemological and pedagogical transformation of nine lecturers as they engage with educational technologies in their work.

### INTRODUCTION

The concern of the larger study upon which this paper is based is the uptake and use of e-learning by lecturers in an education faculty at a university. Although e-learning forms only a part of the changing face of education, I identify the changing epistemologies and pedagogy of lecturers as a central issue in this process of transformation. According to Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991), the successful implementation of learner-centered teaching depends to a large extent on development of the teacher (lecturers), which is not a top-down process but one in which the lecturer is very active; hence, the focus on the active participation of the selected lecturers in this study. To this end, nine lecturers of diverse technological ability consented to offer their stories about their engagement with e-learning in a number of narrative interviews.

One would assume that the incorporation of technology into higher education arguably should be a main priority for higher education practitioners, yet despite the cognizance of this necessity, e-learning uptake has been slow. Lecturers' limited engagements with e-learning were evident even in the early stages of the study. I now argue that the personal learning experiences and, to a degree, the teaching experiences of lecturers are directive indicators of their e-learning uptake. Moreover, I argue that these personal learning opportunities only become learning "events" for lecturers (and similarly also for the students) when they begin to fully engage with other lecturers, the larger community of lecturers using e-learning worldwide, the policies and strategies that guide them, and the divisions of labor that influence them as they engage with the tools of e-learning in order to ultimately change their inherent theories of knowledge and teaching (this is the activity system that is described in greater detail in the larger study). In this article, I see the lecturers' experiences within this activity system as the building blocks of their epistemological assumptions. I suggest, furthermore, that lecturers can only make meaning of their initial engagement with e-learning and the subsequent changes in their ways of teaching and thinking about teaching in general when they see the broader picture of how engagement with e-learning is not only on a physical level, but also strongly related to their geographical, historical, and cultural context.

I have also stated elsewhere that elements of lecturers' *resistance to or embracing of* technology in education are found in personal experiences, and it is in the "narrative situatedness" of lecturers' stories that I have found reasoning about their engagements with e-learning (Lautenbach & Van der Westhuizen, 2005a, 2005b; Lautenbach, Van der Westhuizen & Luca, 2006). Most faculty who embarked on a blending of online and face-to-face mediation and course presentation were doing so as novices at the time. By embarking on the study, I intended to capture temporally and spatially

contextualized pictures of what happened in what has been, institutionally, a comprehensive adoption of blended learning. In telling their stories, lecturers exposed tensions within the activity system (Barab, Barnett, Yamagata-Lynch, Squire & Keating, 2002; Engeström, 1987, 1999; Kuutti, 1996; Leont'ev, 1978) that are critical to understanding what motivates specific actions within the system and, more generally, in understanding the dynamic nature (evolution) of the system in general (Barab et al., 2002). It is the description of this social interplay through lecturers' narratives that best illustrates the intricacies of emerging or "fossilized" epistemologies that, in many cases, have led to changes in the way these people teach using technology.

## THE UNIVERSITY AS A PLACE OF ENGAGEMENT WITH E-LEARNING

The uptake or adoption of e-learning is seen by university management and many lecturers as an essential component of what I call "professionalization of practice." Despite this, imperative adoption of e-learning is typically characterized by *nonuptake*, *adopt-and-abandon*, and *adopt-and-sustain*. I question the nature of the terms "adoption" and "uptake" and would rather, from this instant, refer to "engagement" as proposed by Lee Shulman (2002) in his table of learning. Rhem (2002) describes Shulman's interest in presenting a new taxonomy as something that more clearly reflects recent advances in understanding—"the world where people work"—and especially the place of "engagement." By using this new taxonomy, I resist the impulse to categorize or simplify the complex phenomenon of varying engagement with educational technologies, but at the same time, I make use of this heuristic to structure my findings.

Shulman's (2002) table of learning echoes the *taxonomy of educational objectives* devised by Benjamin Bloom (1956). In contrast, however, it

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