Chapter XIV
Using Multipoint Audio–Conferencing with Teaching Students:
Balancing Technological Potential with Practical Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to explore e-learning and e-teaching from a social perspective in order to show how the use of new technologies, like older technologies before them, must be considered in the light of human activity. It is hoped that such a perspective will allow the reader to better understand how, in one example at least, the use of new technology and the context of that use are integral to each other. The chapter considers how multipoint (i.e., multiple people) audio-conferencing might be used with higher education (HE) students undertaking work- or placement-based learning at a distance from their university base.

INTRODUCTION

Much of what is written about the use of new technologies in educational settings has focused on the technology itself and what the hardware and software offer users (often potentially) the opportunity to do. Much less emphasis has been placed on the way in which such technologies form part of a wider set of resources used in social settings by people. In part, this is because of the prevalence of a cognitive perspective on learning theory in general in which resources and the practical, emotional, and attitudinal aspects of their use are separate. Though such a cognitive approach can be of use, it often loses the complexity of the interconnections between the people, objects, and situation.

The exploration of e-teaching and e-learning from a social perspective is illustrated by an example taken from an initial teacher training (ITT) course in the southwest of England. This course is, to a large extent, focused on placement-based learning, in which student teachers are involved in practical teaching in schools to develop their professional expertise. Extended placements mean that students live and work away from their campus and must be taught at a distance; the nature of this learning is the development of professional, rather than academic, knowledge. By describing how the audio-conferencing process was used, the chapter illustrates the potential, but also the dilemmas, of such an approach, and shows how technology needs to be considered by educators as just one element in a complex social network. To this end, it aims to be pragmatic in that it illuminates some practical aspects of the use of e-conferencing. Though taking teacher training as the focus, much of what is said can be seen as common to other work-based learning situations, and the chapter will be of interest to anyone involved in such work.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

Students training to work in primary (elementary) schools in England must work toward national standards of competence (Training and Development Agency [TDA] for Schools, 2007) to achieve their qualified teacher status (QTS). For school-based elements of their course, they are usually placed with a particular class and hence a particular teacher. In addition to the ongoing support of this professional, the teaching of students on school-based placements is also undertaken by having school staff, who are trained by the university as mentors, act as university link tutors supporting them. The project reported here aimed to supplement this link support through remote desktop audio-conferencing, which meant that in addition to making just a few visits to individual

schools, a group of students could also meet with a university tutor every week in a virtual conference.

The technology (both hardware and software) used for these meetings created a distinctive virtual environment within which the students and the tutor could learn together. However, this environment is situated within a number of other environments in the real world and must interact with them. As John and Sutherland (2005) have pointed out, any learning is not a function solely of the technology, nor can any technology "automatically guarantee learning" (p. 406). On the other hand, users are not independent of the features of the technology in use since, as Adams (2007) demonstrates, the internal structures of any technology are "quietly and persistently informing our every digitally-enhanced action and experience" (p. 232). Understanding how new technologies can be used to the best effect may be supported by theoretical models, but what is also necessary is "describing and reflecting on the lived experiences of teachers and students engaged in technology-enriched environments" (ibid.). In the context of work-placement learning, one cannot simply articulate how multipoint conferencing supports students' thinking since it is implicitly tied to a consideration of (at least) how learning might be understood in general and the features of the particular context (schooling, national standards for a teaching qualification, higher education [HE], etc.) within which the work is being undertaken. Just as importantly, studies of teaching and learning situations have shown that simply enacting superficial features of teaching does not necessarily change underlying patterns of learning behaviour (e.g., Pratt, 2006; F. Smith, Hardman, & Higgins, 2006; H. Smith & Higgins, 2006), which are often deeply historically and culturally embedded (e.g., Alexander, 2000) and strongly tied to the perceived aims of the programme, particularly the assessment regime (e.g., Rust, 2002).

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