Chapter 11
Defining the Role of Online Education in Today's World

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ABSTRACT

This section of the book is going to provide a definition and the role of online education in today's world. In this section, online education is going to be used interchangeably with similar-minded terms as e-learning, Internet, e-pedagogy, and the application of technology in education and the corporate world. The author will go beyond the role of online education in formal educational institutions and will inculcate the vital role of the Internet in learning, herein referred of to as e-learning, and e-pedagogy, the latter being the renewed interest, and innovative way of incorporation of ICTs in enhancing learning and communication among global players as well as poverty alleviation in rural livelihoods. In essence, the section will deal with the interplay between ICTs and information dissemination, with special emphasis on education provision and the enhancement of communication in an increasingly globalised world.

INTRODUCTION

Education has been around for thousands of years, but computers and the Internet have recently made classrooms available to more people than ever before. Whether one calls it online education, distance learning, e-learning, or by some other name, electronic communication has revolution-

ized teaching and learning, as well as the corporate world through offering enhanced training to both students and trainees (Loveless, 2003). ICT is considered by many teachers to have great potential in the classroom, supporting both students' learning and the work of the teacher (Loveless, 2003:1). It is seen as something to be taken seriously in students' education and teachers acknowledge their responsibilities to equip students and young people to participate in economic and social life

beyond the school walls. ICTs can also cause apprehension to many people for many reasons, ranging from anxiety about acquiring new skills to strongly held views about the educational worth of the activities themselves.

THEORIES UNDERPINNING THE PROVISION OF EDUCATION

Education, just like any other practice and human endeavour, is theory-grounded. There are theories perpetrated by those who seek to understand how people relate to education and factors that enhance or debilitate the acquisition of information. They even attempt to define education as "a change of behaviour at the end of a process" which makes education a determinant in determining human behaviour. This has resulted in proponents of education seeking further ways of promoting the dissemination, acquisition and retention of information. This is how online education has come to play a pivotal role in facilitating dissemination of information, regardless of distance or other impediments, as long as accessibility to technology is realised. Online education falls within the realms of education in general. Accordingly, the theoretical framework that informs the provision of educations applies to the provision of online education.

E-Learning may be fundamentally technology-dependent but this does not mean that it has no theoretical underpinning. The concept e-Learning has emerged from a number of different traditions and fields, notably from the education, psychology, computer science and sociology. 'Educational technology' studies today are largely confined to curriculum and assessment developments, and tools that enhance learning and teaching (Gardner, 2001;78). The search is on for new ways of teaching and learning that address the creation of learning environments, and that support students' acquisition of the learning skills needed for the information age. Central to this philosophy is the

view that the contribution which ICTs can make to learning is not an end in itself; rather it is their role in motivating and facilitating broader learning experiences that is their key contribution.

Knowledge-centred education has taken centre stage in recent times where the emphasis has been on the learner, the learning experience and the mode of instruction. There is much empirical evidence to support the view that ICTs bring significant added value to education and learning when coupled with such approaches. In an attempt to understand how learning takes place, theories have emerged which seek to give meaning to the whole learning process, hence the development of theories by behaviourists, cognitivists and constructivists.

This study is going to be informed by three theoretical underpinnings, namely *behaviourism cognitivism* and *constructivism*. Emphasis has been on a variant of socio-constructivism called 'communal constructivism' whose argument is premised on the fact that learning is a process in which individuals not only learn socially but contribute their learning to the creation of a communal knowledge base for other learners. Online learning therefore affords such individuals the linked community, the knowledge bases, the knowledge-creation tools and the facility to provide their learning for others (Holmes, 2001:77).

BEHAVIOURISM

The central argument of the behavioural school of thought is that certain stimuli will produce specific reactions in a human or animal. Proponents of the 'operant' version of this school further maintain that behaviourism predicts that with sufficient repetition of an experience, specific behaviours can be 'taught' by reinforcing the desired behaviours with appropriate stimuli (Holmes, Tangley and Savage, 2001:56). Behaviourists further note that a person will learn a particular behaviour, which they may in future manifest when presented

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