

Chapter 57

Learning Together: Reducing Distance in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Creatively fostering peer-to-peer (P2P) learning reduces the distance in distance education. E-learners become teachers and learners through animated, adult oriented, self-directed distance education. Ways to mitigate social distance are discussed as are ways to enhance social capital through P2P learning. Factors that increase success in P2P e-learning are unencumbered connectivity, adult oriented facilitation, increased criticality, and learning collaboratively. The dynamic roles of learners, facilitators, and administrators are articulated along with plans for future environments conducive to learning and change. The concept onisagogy, meaning “together learning” is introduced as an approach to accelerate learning, increase satisfaction, and reduce social distance.

INTRODUCTION

Various innovations to reduce the distance in distance education are investigated and new ideas introduced in this chapter. Recommendations emerge from analysis of literature in adult education, e-learning, social capital, and social

learning. This chapter inquires into the relationships between the e-learner and the e-facilitator, the content, the administration. This chapter is prompted, in part, by the need to update understandings of distance and e-learning. In 1996 Moore and Kearsley wrote, “The transaction which we call distance education is the interplay between people who are teachers and learners” (p. 200). This chapter questions the concentration on the

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facilitator-learner relationship at the expense of greater learner-learner enrichment. This review builds on investigations of peer-to-peer (P2P) learning and suggests a new discourse may be helpful and timely in this era of digital technology and collaborative learning (Boud & Lee, 2005). Arising from changes in demographics, technology, and economics, institutes of higher learning are facing challenges to their traditions, systems, and beliefs. Campus maintenance costs are skyrocketing, course delivery systems are evolving, and student bodies are changing, to name but a few of the contemporary catalysts for change.

This review is focused on upgrading peer-to-peer (P2P) learning and how higher education can adapt to increase its social capital by facilitating successful e-learning. Central to the arguments for shifting to greater peer learning are the transformations in networked communications and the benefits arising from social learning. To fail to integrate peer learning and e-learning at this juncture in human evolution is comparable to failing to acknowledge the advent of the printing press and continuing to gather everyone in the town square to hear the daily news.

A very brief historical context is provided, followed by factors that contribute to enhancing the e-learning environment as well as challenges associated with e-learning are discussed. Future directions and recommendations to enhance online peer learning are provided. Many interesting and important topics remain beyond the scope of this chapter like the development of learning materials, evaluation of e-learning, as well as the effectiveness of technologically mediated instruction. Throughout this literature review, the author remains vigilant in avoiding a meta-narrative that suggests that technology will enable 21st Century higher education to alleviate what ails it. Educator and advocate of e-learning Ronnie Carr reminds those who are paying attention to history that "... television and video... didn't transform education, but just became one of a number of components in distance programmes..." (Burge, 2007b, p.

83). While this is not the panacea, technology is proving to hold tremendous constructive potential.

BACKGROUND

E-learning and distance education have emerged through a respectable pedigree in extension and correspondence education as well as through community learning around kitchen tables and radio broadcasts. Extension education enabled the distribution of content across distances. "Even though distance education is as old as the correspondence course and the pony express, it still poses a problem...the student who was comfortable with self-directed freedom to learn. This constituted about a third of the students" (Batdorf, 1995, pp. 18-19). Early renditions of computer mediated learning meant that students were required to read extensively online yet they were insufficiently engaged with dynamic and satisfying approaches to learning (Hanna, 2003). The standard knowledge transfer approach, known as pedagogy was based on a view that learners were less informed than the facilitator and required an infusion of knowledge. This interpretation has been criticized for its inadequate appreciation of learner capabilities (Knowles, 1990; Burge, 2007a). The European notion of *andragogy* viewed adults as capable and knowledgeable, teachers and learners. Through devoting himself to expanding the understanding of how adults learn best, Knowles became the champion of andragogy in North America. Andragogy focused on utilizing the inherent capabilities, responsibilities, and independence of learners. E-learning that transferred the same content and approaches taken in the traditional in-person format seemed to contradict the best practices in adult education and undermine learner abilities.

According to the American based Instructional Technology Council, (2010) several institutions in 2010 celebrated their tenth anniversaries in offering e-learning and online degrees. This signi-

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