Chapter 20
Teaching Online:
The Handbook Dilemma in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines adult online education by investigating the complex relationship between technology and community. The aim was to explore online teaching in relation to the handbook dilemma teachers meet in their teacher profession by focusing on participation and sharing opportunities. This study analysed several handbooks that aim to help teachers design and implement online education. The advice in the handbooks was contrasted against two empirical cases. Specifically, the study examined how two cases – online adult education courses and special needs teacher training courses – implemented online education with respect to participation and sharing. The analysis suggests that pedagogy is the crucial point and a planned pedagogy is absolutely necessary for designing and implementing effective online education, education that encourages participation and sharing. The findings showed that some handbooks offer meaningful guidance regarding the development of online education, but other publications were not helpful which creates a dilemma for teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The way students and lecturers interact and communicate with each other in higher education often is seen as a consequence of technology (e.g., de Souza & Preece, 2004). Some researchers argue

that the shift from distance education to online education is very different from the teacher-centred campus education or the early self-instructional distance education correspondence packages (Garrison, 2009). This change in educational conditions has redefined the role and the duties of the teacher. Today, higher education teachers often teach on campuses as well as online. This

new demand on teachers has affected the working conditions for teachers and a new market has made its entrance into the lives of higher education teachers: the production and sale of handbooks for teachers, which give advice to teachers regarding guidance on the design and implementation strategies for online teaching. The market for handbooks is nurtured by their promises of successful teaching in technology-rich environments. One such technology-rich environment is online education. Teaching students in online environments without physical meetings has become commonplace. Today, higher education is in a middle of a transformation process where online education is becoming important for nearly all academic disciplines. Online education is both seen as a means of transferring information from teacher to students (cf. Garrsison, 2009, view of early distance education) as well as a conduit for a community of learners. That is, online students located at different places can become part of a community of learners, an online learning community (OLC). This view of a community assumes that users of an information system necessarily constitute a community, a view that was expressed in the 1990s: "critical to the rhetoric surrounding Internet use is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community" (Jones, 1998, p. 3).

However, recent empirical studies have shown that developing an OLC is more complex than merely connecting people through technology (e.g., Bishop, 2007; Helleve, 2010; Söderström, Hamilton, Dahlgren, & Hult, 2006). Although today technology users are aware of the complex link between technology and community, the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies lends support to the assumption that technology by itself can create a community. Hamilton, Dahlgren, Hult, Roos, and Söderström (2004) conclude that "[t]he technologisation of the learning society assumes that learning environments are technical systems that deliver learning" (p. 844). Williamson develops this view further:

Technology is often touted as a means for providing new opportunities for learning, economic development, and participation in digital-age citizenry – especially for those who have limited access to high-quality learning environments and who have historically been marginalized in decision-making processes. (2011, p. 12)

In many cases, Web 2.0 technologies are portrayed as the tools that will build online learning communities since they promote participation and knowledge sharing opportunities (Hara, Shachaf, & Stoerger, 2009). To manage these new technologies and to create "good teaching with technology", a large variety of handbooks are marketed to teachers. However, the large number of handbooks for teachers also reveals that pedagogy and technology are intertwined in a complex relationship where, in a postmodern sense, no standpoint is more prevalent than the other. Because the rapid speed of technology development continually creates new educational conditions, new handbooks are continually being written. As a consequence, teachers are left to manage individually the jungle of handbooks to find answers to their questions about online teaching. In this article, I will look more closely at this complex relationship between technology and community as it is practised in online adult education. As a way of addressing this question, I intend to investigate the *participation* and *sharing* opportunities in online adult education courses and discuss these opportunities in relation to the handbook dilemma. I report data from two online courses – an online adult education course and special needs teacher training course – that will work as a foundation for my arguments about possible consequences of the handbooks and their relationship to online education as it is practiced in higher education. This article is written in a spirit of inquiry and clarification. My argument falls into four sections. First, I give an overview of online learning and online learning communities with reference to the literature surrounding online

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