Chapter 32
Evolving Web Based Technologies and their Potential for Developing Online Learning Communities and Support for Lifelong Learning

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning can be broadly defined as purposeful learning that people engage in throughout the lifespan. The proliferation of knowledge, the information society, and the accelerating use of information and communications technologies combine to create a demand for professionals who are flexible, motivated, and self-directed, as well as multiskilled. Recently, there has been an increasing focus on developing generic skills and competencies as part of tertiary learning. Graduates are expected to meet the demands of employers for social communicative and cooperative skills as opposed to abstract disciplinary knowledge, and therefore, the acquisition of lifelong learning skills is imperative if they are to remain productive, competitive, and open minded. As the current information age is characterised by continual dynamic change, graduates need a dynamic set of attributes or competencies. In order to develop as lifelong learners, tertiary learners need to be exposed to activities and tasks that prepare them for the responsibilities that lifelong learning requires. One key strategy for supporting lifelong learning is through pedagogical approaches that recognise that both formal and informal learning have value, and that both forms of learning can be supported in technology-supported learning environments. The raft of social software tools and applications now available offer greater opportunities to support the lifelong building of knowledge and competencies required for learning in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Longworth and Davies (1996) identify the major differences between education and training and the 'lifelong learning future'. Learning means doing things a different way, providing learners with the tools and techniques they need to learn according to their own learning styles and needs. Learning also means giving ownership and control of learning to the learner and not to the teacher. Lifelong learning is continuous throughout life and focussed entirely on the needs and demands of the learners themselves and demands a system in which everybody has access to the opportunities for learning. Other researcher describe lifelong learning as the activities people perform throughout their lives to improve their knowledge skills and competence, because of some personal, societal and employment related motive (Aspin & Chapman, 2000). The encouragement of critical thinking - learning how to think rather than what to think, the development of skills and competencies, being able to communicate and leering independently cultural within a global learning culture, are all facets of lifelong learning. According to the European Commission lifelong learning must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts. Their millennium program enables people at all stages of their lives to take part in stimulating learning experiences, as well as helping to develop the education and training sector across Europe. Active learning methods, it is argued, can inject relevance into the curriculum, and create the motivation which encourages people of all ages to develop the habit of learning across the lifespan.

BACKGROUND: LIFELONG LEARNING AND GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Recently, there has been an increasing focus on developing professional skills and competencies as part of tertiary learning. Generic attributes go beyond the disciplinary expertise or technical knowledge that has traditionally formed the core of most university courses and describe the qualities that also equip graduates for their role in society and the world of work. Most universities in Australia now state that graduates are expected to meet the demands of employers for social communicative and cooperative skills as opposed to abstract disciplinary knowledge. There is also greater pressure on tertiary institutions to align academic outcomes with the demands of working life and the needs of employers. Therefore teaching and scaffolding lifelong learning skills is imperative if graduates are to remain productive, competitive and open minded. As the current information age is characterised by continual dynamic change, graduates need particular attributes or competencies. In order to develop as lifelong learners, tertiary learners need to be exposed to activities and tasks that prepare them for the responsibilities that lifelong learning requires, such as scholarship, global citizenship, production of new knowledge and understanding through inquiry, critique and synthesis, and communication skills (Field 2005).

Candy (1994) defined the key to lifelong learning qualities as an inquiring mind, helicopter vision, a sense of personal agency and a repertoire of learning skills. These skills have been endorsed by many tertiary education institutions worldwide and are embedded in their mission statements, vouching for the quality of education received and of the competence of graduates to enter the workforce. Longworth and Davies (1995) emphasise the need for individuals to be multi-skilled and flexible and to have the capacity to take up more than one career in a lifetime. The skills identified

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