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## **Chapter XXIX**

# **Community Informatics— Enabling Emancipatory Learning**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, a philosophical framework used in the development of an online course is provided. This philosophical framework is largely based on sociological theory that argues the need for a student-centered approach to learning in the modern age. The authors argue that this is an appropriate approach for the present and the future, which they consider will increasingly need to address changing learner needs and demands. A learner-centered approach can provide for self-paced learning, peer assessment, and opportunities for interactions with fellow students, work colleagues, and other peers. To date, there have been few examples of the integration of information technologies with emerging trends in distance and lifelong learning.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter, a new philosophical stance and framework for online teaching, which emphasizes the importance of placing the student at the center of the learning process is articulated. This is achieved by directly engaging the student in “one to one,” “one to many,”

and “many to many” forms of learning by maximizing the benefits of a relatively low-level information technology platform. The philosophical stance has its origins in social theory and addresses the emerging demands of learners to accommodate the pressing needs for flexibility in time management and location.

The future learning environment will be increasingly ubiquitous and require the full capacity of information technology operating asynchronously and at a distance to engage the needs of “lifelong” and “life wide” learners while minimalizing the extra demands of teachers and facilitators. It is also expected that students would come from increasingly wider backgrounds with different aspirations for learning and learning styles. There has also been an increasing trend that students demand alternative forms of interaction with their teachers, other students, and the educational institution’s administration. Online courses have a great inherent flexibility to cater for a wider range of students’ needs and demands, particularly with respect to different interaction possibilities. Unfortunately, while there have been many examples of online teaching and learning, there is a dearth of new philosophical frameworks that maximize the inherent capacities of information technologies to guide the delivery of courses.

## BACKGROUND

It is well documented that the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) in the context of teaching and learning can increase the possible use of a greater range of teaching and learning options for on-campus and distance education modes of course presentations, through open learning, online, and resource-based learning, etc. Furthermore, in the provision of distance education, the use of learning centers, small groups, or individuals can bring new learning opportunities into local community advantage. This can assist in the development to “learning communities” by widening access in local communities to education and training opportunities, increasing interpretation of knowledge in a local context, and supporting existing educational systems (Longworth, 1999).

The use of ICT by regional (territorial) communities as a technology strategy or discipline is defined in this chapter as “community informatics” (CI). As indicated by Gurstein (2000), CI can link ICT at the community level with emerging opportunities in community development and lifelong learning. As such, this term brings together the concepts of ICT and that of community development based on individual growth within a framework of shared learning, sharing experience across cultural and geographic boundaries and interpreting information from within a community context to create applicable knowledge.

In conjunction with the developments in the use of ICT to improve equity of access for distance education, there has also been an increasing realization of the need for educational institutions to provide a leadership role in society for democratic process and to address issues of equity (Harkavy, 1998).

In this chapter, the role of online approaches for distance education from a theoretical stance is addressed. The dangers of unitary approaches that the use of ICT can promote are exposed, and an approach is outlined that can assist local communities in benefiting from a wider interpretation of knowledge available through online distance education.

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