

Inclusive online learning

Prof. Simon Rogerson

Maggie McPherson

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The notion of inclusivity in an educational context is not a new one. As far back as 1792, Condorcet (as cited by Brown, 2000), stated that education "must be general and include all citizens" and that it should "insure that people at every stage of life have the facilities to preserve and extend their own knowledge". This is very much in accordance with current thinking in terms of widening participation and notions of lifelong learning. However, despite that fact that we have made great strides in the right direction, we are by no means there yet. That is probably why continuous professional development in IS/IT has not taken full advantage of these facilities particularly when the service provider and learner are geographically distant.

E-learning has been proposed as a means of reaching out to learners that previously were denied access to learning. Yet, even a cursory glance at discussions on the advances afforded by technological innovations indicates that this is a hotly debated topic. According to Whitworth (2005), e-learning is becoming an increasingly integrated part of both the cultural and technological environment of the modern university, but this constitutes a significant alteration in these environments. Indeed, making use of technology within the learning environment represents a considerable change in terms of educational practice and culture, and the pace of change introduces a new level of complexity for both staff and students.

Up to now, some e-Learning developers and designers seem to have made the assumption that everyone has access to a connected computer, which in reality is far from the case. Fortunately, there is increasing evidence that mobile computing can alleviate some of the constraints of personal computers and limited bandwidth by moving directly into satellite services, wireless and mobile devices. For example, many Asian countries (spurred on by problems caused by SARS) have adopted this strategy and skipped some of the access problems related to e-learning and, as a result, have a significantly higher rate of usage of educational technologies than in North America and Europe. Trotter (2005) reports on a plan in progress to wire up to 300 universities in the Asia Pacific area by the end of next year. The intention is to allow students and lecturers to experience a more flexible learning and teaching environment by providing remote access to educational resources, including research libraries. Even countries that lag behind in bridging the digital divide are catching up in this regard. For example, India launched EDUSAT, its first satellite dedicated to education services, late last year.

Nevertheless, access is not the whole issue of inclusivity. Novak and Hoffman (1998) asserted that a combination of low income and education contributed to the lack of access of a number of groups as largely identified as 'undigital'. Thus, it should be noted that simple digitizing of educational content will not necessarily address the problems faced by those who have neither the technical skills nor the ability to take part in opportunities afforded by e-learning. Many groups, such as the poor (especially in rural areas), those from ethnic minorities, and single parent households, are not thought to be in a position to take advantage of these wonderful new educational opportunities. This then compounds an existing socio-economic divide between the "haves" and the "have nots" of the world, and this is an issue that does not affect the 'developing world' alone.

Even for those fortunate enough to be included in the digital society, unlimited access to information poses a very real problem. Over 30 years ago, Alvin Toffler (1971) signalled that we faced an overload of information, and termed this "future shock syndrome". His theory was that the human brain could only absorb and process a finite amount of information, and if exceeded, thinking and reasoning becomes adversely affected, decision-making flawed and, in some cases, impossible. No wonder then that, when faced with information of which they are unable to make sense or fail to see its usefulness, many people today feel overwhelmed and even become ill.

Despite the take-up of educational technology within many colleges and universities, early adopters of e-Learning have often created courses based on the norms and practices of traditional boundary-limited campuses. To provide a sound basis for an educated society, it is necessary to turn information into knowledge and it is important to ensure that students of today learn how differentiate between what is valid and useful and what is irrelevant and unsubstantiated. This demands the ability to sift and manage information as never before. Thus, e-learners not only require the development of skills of discernment of content and quality, which is best achieved through active learning, but also need easily assimilated and suitable mechanisms for information management. In this way we will avoid the promotion of inappropriate bite-learning.

Since Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) comprise the components in which learners and tutors participate in online interactions of various kinds, including online learning (JISC, 2003), VLE developers and e-Learning course designer have a vital role to play in ensuring the finest design quality possible, which will encourage academic staff and students to make best use of these new opportunities. Thus, the challenge is to design VLEs with all the necessary resources built in for active learning, and still ensure that these are really accessible, usable and adaptable for tutors and learners that need them.

If these challenges can be met then the possibilities new professional development offerings abound for IS/IT professionals.

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

Contact:

Maggie McPherson

Dept. Information Studies, University of Sheffield, UK.

Email: m.a.mcpherson@sheffield.ac.uk

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Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

Professor Simon Rogerson

Director

Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility

Faculty of Computing Sciences and Engineering

De Montfort University

The Gateway

Leicester

LE1 9BH

Tel:(+44) 116 257 7475

Fax:(+44) 116 207 8159

Email:<srog@dmu.ac.uk>

Home Page: (<http://www.ccsr.cse.dmu.ac.uk>)

