

## Chapter I

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### Introduction

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Information and communication technologies have socially and economically reshaped society. These same innovations, however, have not had a commensurate influence in the educational domain. Notwithstanding the many inroads that information and communication technologies have made in education, passive information transfer still dominates the educational enterprise. Moreover, there is a growing recognition that we are not taking full advantage of connectivity opportunities for the development of critical thinking and inquiry that has become the foundation of a knowledge-based society. Rethinking conventional education in light of technological developments and the need for higher-order educational outcomes is shaking the foundation of the educational enterprise. E-learning is the nexus of technological and pedagogical developments which has led to insights into deep and meaningful learning.

The emergence of e-learning with its sustained connectivity has demonstrated that deep and meaningful learning is not limited to the face-to-face classroom experience. E-learning is transformational in how we think about educational experiences in terms of sustained communication and collaboration. Ubiquitous communication technologies that can sustain the connection of learners and instantly access information have significantly shifted our conception and acceptance of e-learning. At the educational core is an awareness that students need to be engaged in sustainable learning communities that support reflective discourse and deep approaches to learning. The affordances of ubiquitous and powerful communications technologies with their ability to create and sustain communities of learners have brought e-learning into the mainstream of educational thought and practice.

Education is being transformed as a result of pedagogical advances made possible by e-learning. Educational approaches in the form of sustained e-learning communities are having us reflect on what are worthwhile and relevant educational experiences.

E-learning is pushing teaching and learning design to evolve and reflect a more authentic and accurate representation of how we as humans,

actually learn. What appears to be a "new" era of knowledge delivery, actually reflects how humans have traded in knowledge for millions of years. Our individualistic educational culture is beginning to recognize the wisdom of collective principles in learning and knowledge.

(Wright, 2015, p. 26)

While it may seem surprising to mainstream education, e-learning is not a radical new innovation but a return to traditional values associated with discourse and collaborative inquiry that distinguishes human development. Innovative e-learning practices represent authentic approaches to teaching and learning based on collaboratively constructing meaning through critical reflection and discourse.

It is this convergence of technological developments and a rethinking of effective educational experiences that has driven e-learning innovation to the point we are today. This book provides a coherent understanding of e-learning and how this innovation is transforming how educators are approaching teaching and learning. E-learning as described here focuses on its potential to create and sustain communities of inquiry. In the context of a rapidly changing knowledge society, the need is to evolve the learning experience in a way that models and prepares students for an increasingly connected knowledge society. However, e-learning will fail if we merely add on to or simply repackage passive educational designs. This challenge requires a roadmap in the form of a coherent framework to guide our understanding and development of e-learning experiences. We begin with understanding what we mean by e-learning.

### **E-Learning Described**

In its essence, e-learning is the utilization of electronically mediated asynchronous and synchronous communication for the purpose of thinking and learning collaboratively. This definition is an explicit recognition of the technological foundation of e-learning in the form of the Internet and associated communication technologies whose distinguishing characteristic is to not only connect individuals at a distance but to create virtual communities. The term e-learning came into use in the mid-1990s along with developments in the World Wide Web and interest in asynchronous discussion groups. The goal of e-learning was to explore the creation of communities of learners who could remain connected independent of time and location through the use of information and communication technologies. These groups of learners quickly evolved into educational communities of inquiry whose goal was to collaboratively engage in discourse and reflection with the intent to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding. This perspective reflects an educational approach that is being increasingly adopted with the emerging possibilities of

communication technologies that can cost-effectively build and sustain learning communities over time.

Beyond the definition and origins of e-learning, the two primary applications that constitute e-learning are online and blended learning. Fully online learning is a form of distance education that had its genesis in the field of computer conferencing with its focus on thinking and learning collaboratively (Garrison, 2016). Because of its collaborative nature, online learning is very different from traditional distance education that had its focus on content delivery and autonomous approaches to learning. Moreover, blended learning has become the most prevalent application of e-learning in traditional educational institutions. Paradoxically, the reality is that much of "e-learning innovation has taken place on-campus" (Richard, 2005, p. 69). E-learning in the context of blended learning has shifted the thinking of educators in terms of transformative course and program redesign.

E-learning diverges fundamentally from the autonomous industrialized form of traditional distance education where the educational approach was shaped by the available technology of the times. E-learning is first and foremost directed to providing an accessible and collaborative educational experience. While e-learning can make education accessible at a distance, it represents very different educational characteristics and possibilities. Today, distance has become but a relatively minor structural constraint in providing a quality collaborative thinking and learning experience. E-learning represents a true paradigm shift from a traditional distance education perspective. It represents a shift from the industrial production of prepackaged study materials to educationally shaping the learning experience through the thoughtful application for thinking and learning collaboratively.

E-learning is a distinct educational branch that has its roots in computer conferencing. The distinguishing feature of e-learning is its unique capability to support discourse over time and distance. To focus only on access to information would simply ignore the distinguishing characteristic and innovative possibilities of e-learning to engage participants in open communication. As such, e-learning is not a commodity that is pre-produced and downloaded electronically to be assimilated in whole by an autonomous learner. For these reasons we address independent study only to provide historical context and conceptual understanding of what distinguishes e-learning. The holistic view of the educational transaction emphasizes that we cannot separate the personal and the social. In reality personal reflection and shared discourse are only separated in the abstract. In this way, the potential of e-learning reflects our educational ideals by using advances in information and communication technologies to support the collaborative advantages of human cognition. It is these collaborative characteristics and possibilities that are the central themes of this book.

The theory and practice of e-learning, with its focus on traditional collaborative assumptions and approaches, reflect the digital era of thinking and

learning. The digital era of education associated with e-learning approaches is marked by a return to a craft model of designing collaborative educational experiences (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010). The digital era reflects a connected society whose success is dependent upon collaborative approaches to thinking and learning. At the same time, for learning to be fully integrated in the mainstream of higher education, we must not undermine or discount the value of face-to-face educational experiences. In this regard, an important corollary and caveat is that e-learning must not be viewed as replacing the enormous advantages of face-to-face discourse. E-learning must be seen as a means to integrate the strengths of face-to-face and online learning experiences. The potential of e-learning to merge verbal and written discourse, unconstrained by time, has caused educators to rethink the possibilities for engaging campus-based students.

For these reasons, e-learning is described here in terms of both online and blended learning. It has also been noted that e-learning is not a synonym for distance education. With the proliferation of information and communication technologies, distance has become a minor constraint. In an e-learning scenario, communities of learners are able to sustain themselves productively across time and space and be enriched immeasurably through the content of the Internet. The Internet can be a useful source of ideas to complement the direct injection of ideas associated with the defined content of the course. But this does not just happen by mindlessly adopting information and communication technologies. Our educational ideals must drive the vision. These ideals are captured in the Community of Inquiry (Col) framework that provides the principles and guidelines that make e-learning a viable reality in mainstream education.

## **A New Reality**

It has become apparent that e-learning is not simply another technological innovation that ultimately has little impact on the educational experience. The reason is that e-learning has the potential to offer an open system that blends access to information and purposeful communication into a dynamic and intellectually challenging learning community. E-learning transforms education in ways that extend beyond the delivery of content. Surfing the Internet is not much better than wandering through a library; neither provide opportunities for discourse and purposeful educational experiences. Thinking and learning collaboratively, however, provide opportunities for deep and meaningful learning experiences.

Not long ago, the provision of increased learner independence meant a corresponding loss of collaboration and increased isolation. Before e-learning, independence and interaction were contradictory in an educational context—more of one inherently meant less of the other. From an educational perspective, the "e" in e-learning stands for more than electronic; it can also

stand for extending and enhancing the learning experience. It is how we take advantage of e-learning's possibilities that is of educational importance. To realize the potential of e-learning is to see the educational experience as an open but purposely cohesive communication system.

Education is about ideas not isolated bits of information. E-learning's transformative power and capacity to add value is based upon the means to cope with and make sense of the proliferation of information. While e-learning can support passive information acquisition approaches to learning, the real impact is to precipitate new approaches that recognize and seize e-learning's collaborative possibilities. In reality, this may well be a back-to-the-future scenario as we return to historical collaborative educational ideals and practices associated with communities of learners engaged in critical discourse. These communities are where individual experiences and ideas are recognized and discussed in light of societal knowledge, norms and values. These are communities of inquiry where independence and collaboration are not contradictory ideas but the essential elements of a unified process and qualitative shift in how we approach a deep and meaningful educational experience.

E-learning in the form of online and blended approaches to learning has attracted much attention. However, its value is not faster access to information, or even connecting people in continuous ways. The value of e-learning is as a catalyst to rethink its capacity to stimulate and guide the quest to personally construct meaning and collaboratively confirm knowledge. Upon reflection, it should be no surprise that most research into using technology for educational purposes has shown no significant differences in learning outcomes between traditional and technically advanced media. The explanation of this well-known "no significant difference" (NSD) phenomenon is that we should not expect to find significant differences if we only measure simple recall of information. This can be accomplished regardless of how that information is transmitted. Changing the medium of transmission without changing the expectations and learning experience does not address the quality of learning outcomes. It is the recognition of the potential of e-learning to create and sustain purposeful learning communities engaged in critical discourse that is transforming higher education.

In the mid-1980s, the personal computer became accessible to a large and growing number of people. Today, it is personal computing that is the interface of the Internet and the means to connect entire societies setting the stage for the emergence of e-learning. With the help of community of inquiry research and practice we are beginning to understand the extent to which e-learning can be made to meet the needs of learners in the digital era. With the ubiquity of information and communication technologies that offer multiple forms of communication, we are currently rethinking the educational experience in terms of communities of inquiry unrestricted by time and distance.

## Conclusion

Information and communication technologies, with their multiple media (text, visual, voice) and their capacity to sustain interaction, have made possible e-learning developments. However, this is not happening based exclusively on the technology. While adoption of e-learning approaches has been accompanied by an understanding of communication technologies, the acceptance in mainstream education is based on the educational deliverables. That is, a collaborative thinking and learning approach sustainable over time and space. At the same time, the complexities of collaboration, context and technology characteristics do not lend themselves to easy or simplistic best practices. There are no simple rules or recipes for designing and delivering an effective e-learning experience grounded in collaborative constructivist ideals. A collaborative educational experience demands the experience and insight of reflective, flexible and knowledgeable educators to translate principles and guidelines to the ever-changing contingencies and exigencies of their particular environments.

In realistically addressing the complexities of e-learning, the goal is to provide conceptual order along with corresponding principles and guidelines that will have value for educators. Therefore, the challenge for the reader is to make sense of the ideas presented here by translating the concepts and ideas and applying them pragmatically to their unique educational environment. To do this, we need to ask what e-learning will allow us to do to create a worthwhile educational experience that meets the demands of a knowledge society. It is not about entrenching anachronistic and deficient approaches such as lecturing by using technologies to access more disjoint and incomprehensible information. Nor is it about simply having students experience the same passive learning experience through a different medium.

Increasingly, higher education is returning to its roots by focusing on the values and practices associated with collaborative approaches to learning. This is a reaction to the dominant individual and isolating approaches to learning that have evolved over the decades largely due to expanded access to education and the need for efficiency. This has meant the model of small seminars and opportunities for discussion and debate become increasingly limited. However, it is now time to recast the educational dinosaur and utilize the technologies of learning to move away from the large lecture hall and transmission model. Education is but an illusion if it simply disseminates information without actively supporting critical thinking and discourse with the goal to construct meaningful knowledge. Our purpose is not simply to advocate or promote the use of e-learning. The intent and benefit are to understand the need and nature of learning in a connected world and to explore the implications of a collaborative and constructive educational experience for a knowledge society.