Chapter 28
The Psychological Domain: Enhancing Traditional Practice in K–12 Education

Adrian O'Connor
University of Limerick, Ireland

Niall Seery
University of Limerick, Ireland

Donal Canty
University of Limerick, Ireland

ABSTRACT

This chapter will attempt to frame the potential of a flexible approach to teaching and learning that provides diagnostic and formative evidence to enhance traditional practice in K-12 education. Commencing with a brief account of the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) as a potential framework for online and blended learning, this chapter investigates what is it about traditional classroom practice that researchers wish to enhance, the challenges facing contemporary systems of online and blended learning, and how new ubiquitous configurations for teaching and learning have become possible. With an emphasis on supporting discourse through the development of social and cognitive behavior, this chapter will endeavor to qualify the processes that evidence psychological development in a ubiquitous learning environment and provide data to inform the relative efficacy of utilizing such processes in the design of a new pedagogical approach.

INTRODUCTION

Eisner (2004) insists that educational advancement requires a shift in perspective regarding our pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, a change in the kind of tasks we invite pupils to undertake, the kind of thinking we ask them to do, and the kind of criteria we apply to appraise both their work and ours. Changes or proposed changes affecting educational advancement are, however, contingent on the availability of adequate resources to manage and implement effective and "real" change. Although

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-5472-1.ch028

before making any changes regarding our pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, it is helpful to first examine the underlying epistemological, philosophical, and, theoretical assumptions that such changes reflect. This process is useful because it helps us to understand the likely outcome of educational practices in new environments and allows us to communicate these expectations before the practices are inflicted upon teachers and pupils. This applies equally to traditional classroom settings and in new online and blended settings in which there remains a sense of uncertainty about "what works" and why. For example, (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011) argue that our lack of understanding about effective pedagogical approaches in online and blended learning stems from deficient research investigating the processes and conditions under which teaching and learning is best supported. In recent years, there has been a growing interest (Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1999; Swan & Shea, 2005) in the development of learning communities for the purpose of investigating the processes and conditions under which teaching and learning is best supported in online and blended settings. Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) describe these kinds of communities as groups of people, connected via computer-mediated communication, who actively engage one another in collaborative learner-centred activities to intentionally foster the creation of knowledge, while sharing a number of values and practices, and supporting progressive discourse.

To understand learning communities as a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning in traditional classroom settings and in online and blended settings, one must begin with an examination of the foundations and assumptions upon which learning communities rest. These include three related changes - an epistemological shift from objectivism towards constructivism; a philosophical shift from behaviourism towards social-cognitive views of education; and a theoretical shift from direct instruction to the facilitation of collaborative learning. The epistemological shift referred to here is a change in perspective of knowledge as existing "out there" separate from the mind of the individual learner and towards a conception of knowledge as constructed by the learner through interaction with the world and others in it. Accordingly, if individuals do in fact construct knowledge through interaction with the world and others, then it makes sense to design learning environments where that construction is more easily accomplished (Shea, 2006). The philosophical shift reflected here is this; individual learners construct their own version of knowledge that is situated in a context of socially-mediated activity, through interaction in specific kinds of settings and institutions. Learning environments, it is assumed, can be designed to represent effective and supportive examples of these settings, and such community-centred approaches represent a vast, and philosophically corresponding, improvement to traditional teacher-centred models of educational pedagogy. This philosophical change is one of emphasis, now commonly placed on understanding the mind and its underlying psychological processes rather than on observable changes in behaviour without regard for the "black box" of the mind. The recognition that we, as a species, live in communities and understand our world through mental states developed in joint activity with others is a critical facet of the shift. The theoretical shift assumed, in which is the change in prominence from direct instruction to facilitated learning. This transition in pedagogical approach, which has been on-going in traditional classroom settings for decades (Barr & Tagg, 1995), is itself an outcome of the epistemological and philosophical changes previously noted. The transition from teaching to learning as a primary goal of education assumes that learners construct and hold greater responsibility for their own learning and that the "traditional, teacher-centred model based on a discredited behavioural paradigm, fails to effectively consider and support the pedagogical processes involved in knowledge building" (Shea, 2006, p. 36).

Thousands of educational institutions and K-12 schools deliver online and blended education. However, the distinction between models of online and blended education that establish successful learning