

Chapter XIX

Technology and Continuing Professional Education: The Reality Beyond the Hype

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ABSTRACT

Social Information Technology (SIT) can allow individuals, dispersed both in time and place, to connect via the Internet. Consequently, the use of online networks is very appealing to Continuing Professional Education (CPE) providers. However, our findings seem to have revealed an underlying reality overshadowed by this hype. Our experience, as both providers and researchers of online CPE to a range of healthcare workers, suggests that the reality of online networks is often far different from the planned learning objectives. In fact, we believe that learning in CPE must be assumed to be much more than the attainment of intangible concepts. Acquisition of static facts are useless if the learners do not have the understanding to apply them in apposite contexts and organisational settings. The use of new Web 2.0 approaches, such as social bookmarking and social networking, may well be an exciting potential development, but if busy professionals are to use SITs as an integral part of their daily personal and professional lives, further research into factors that facilitate and inhibit such usage is required.

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing emphasis on technology to enhanced learning for professional education. The main drivers have come from commercial providers of e-learning products and professional organisations trying to make the most of current trends and fads. Sometimes this drive has resulted in national policies that are supported by Government, such as the recent e-learning strategy that has been proposed for the National Health Service in the United Kingdom (UK).

Continuing Professional Education (CPE) has the aim of developing personal and professional skills so that individuals are able to deal with the wide range of problems that they face in their day-to-day work. This requires a constant renewal of knowledge and skills, especially the tacit dimension that is gained through experience. Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) approaches seem ideal for collaborative and cooperative learning approaches, and allow for tacit knowledge to be shared by professionals who are unable to meet face-to-face. Social information technology can easily allow widely dispersed individuals, both in time and place, to be connected through the Internet, and the vision of online networks has a seductive appeal to providers of CPE.

However, the vast majority of andragogical models for TEL in continuing professional education appear to be largely based on hype and reuse of traditional and very objectivist models. Whilst there has been large capital investment in structured multimedia products that provide sequential instruction and explicit knowledge based skills, however, it is very often the lack of tacit knowledge that hinders the acquisition of these skills.

Having performed several studies and several literature reviews of the use of TEL for healthcare professionals in the UK (Kell, 2006; Sandars & Langlois, 2005; Sandars & Langlois, 2006; Sandars & Walsh, 2004), our findings have highlighted the fact that there is an underlying reality

that appears to have been overshadowed by this hype. In fact, our experience, as both providers and researchers of online CPE to a range of healthcare workers, suggests that the reality of online networks is often far different from the planned learning objectives. Common themes emerging from all of these studies include a lack of confidence, competence, contextualisation, and connectivity that are essential for individual professionals who wish to make effective use of TEL. These professionals, who are working within a wider organisational context, often appear to lack holistic views of the organisational context, inter-professional perspectives and the necessary tacit knowledge provided by years of work in the health system.

In this chapter, we will describe the potential of Social Information Technologies (SITs) for online CPE, and identify the main driving forces. We will highlight the important findings from our experience and research of online CPE, particularly within the health service, but the discussion will also be informed by the authors experience in other areas of CPE, such as the IT and Information sectors. In fact, our motivation in writing this chapter was in part to raise awareness of the importance of the major differences between policy and the reality of the context of professional practice and online CPE, and to propose recommendations that can inform future policy and practice. Thus, although the illustrations will be largely based on our studies of CPE for healthcare professionals in the UK, we believe that our study and findings can be generalised to other professions and to other contexts.

CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Since CPE is a fairly complex concept, before we can discuss the appropriateness of SITs for healthcare professionals, we need to clarify what we mean by this term. Weingand (1999) defined CPE as:

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