

Chapter 10

Students' Views of E-Learning: The Impact of Technologies on Learning in Higher Education in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Students are the end users of the Information Systems that educators use to enhance students' learning experiences. The use of technologies in education has altered the ways in which lecturers and students can interact and has expanded the volume of information that students can access. This study was undertaken to obtain students' perspectives on the uses of technologies in higher education to assist educators in improving the pedagogical design of e-learning platforms, known as learning management systems. This chapter provides students' perspectives on the academic use of technologies in two higher education institutions in Ireland. Analysis of the responses received from three hundred and twenty students indicates that students are of the opinion that the use of technologies in higher education can beneficially transform learning; however, technologies will never replace lecturers.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2009 a survey was conducted in the Faculty of Business, Dublin Institute of Technology and the findings were presented in a chapter of a book. "Critical Design and Effective Tools for

E-Learning in Higher Education: Theory into Practice" was the title of the book, edited by Donnelly, Harvey, & O'Rourke (2010). The title of the chapter was "The Student Perspective: Can the use of technologies transform learning?" This book was published in June 2010 by IGI Global (IGI, 1988). In March 2010 the same survey was conducted in the School of Computer Science &

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Statistics, Trinity College Dublin. The findings of both studies are discussed in this chapter.

Networked technologies have been called transformational due to their wide ranging impact (Salmon, 2000; 2003, p. vii). As part of this wide-ranging impact, technologies are increasingly pervading all areas of education. This study particularly concentrated on the higher educational sector of education in Ireland. Nonetheless, a number of the findings and comments are relevant to the use of technologies with respect to learning in general.

The use of technologies has modified the ways lecturers distribute course materials to students; rarely do university students transcribe notes from blackboards/whiteboards. Course materials are disseminated online through files of course notes, PowerPoint (Microsoft, 2009) presentations, podcasts, video casts and web links, with e-dissemination enabling access to electronic learning resources (Littlejohn, 2009). The use of technologies has also brought alterations to students' ability to communicate with lecturers and fellow students, through the use of e-mail, discussion boards, wikis, online chat rooms and video conferencing. In addition, technologies have changed the ease with which students can access further information to read outside of the course material and conduct research through the use of online journals and databases.

In general, academics are very often encouraged to create an online presence without ever having studied online themselves or even considered the pedagogical impact that technology can have on the students' learning experience (Ambrose, 2001). Salmon (2000) stated that the use of the world wide web for learning and teaching was set to dramatically increase, and the onus was on all academics using technology to ensure that they familiarised themselves with the pedagogical skills necessary to ensure that the technologies used effectively enhanced the learning experience of students.

Broad, Matthews, and Mc Donald (2004) proposed that despite students prolific use of new technology, there is no need for academics to presume that students are disposed towards academic use of the Internet in the higher education sector. Furthermore, they question whether the use of technology in education is supported by sound educational rationales and that the benefits to be achieved from using the Internet in higher education have not yet been pedagogically proven (Broad, et al., 2004). All the time and effort that lecturers put into creating suitable teaching resources for use with technology is wasted, unless students actively engage with and gain some benefits from using the material provided.

As a result of a study conducted by Lofstrom and Nevgi (2007) at the University of Helsinki, Finland, the authors suggest that the relevance and meaningfulness of learning activities are crucial to the transferability of knowledge. Educators should keep this in mind when designing material for use with technological devices.

McLoughlin's (2000) experiences from working in the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of New England in Australia, lead her to suggest that despite the prolific availability of online teaching tools there is no established approach on how to develop quality learning programs that make the best use of these tools, which can only be achieved by educators forming a deeper understanding of how technologies can affirm and extend the principles of good teaching. Slevin (2008) from Roskilde University in Denmark, states that concentration upon practical problems associated with the opportunities afforded by modern technologies draw attention away from the theoretical concerns posed by e-learning. Apart from reading books and articles on the use of technologies in higher education, educators who attend e-learning and teaching Summer schools, conferences and seminars, afford themselves the opportunity to form a deeper understanding of how technology can affirm and

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