

Chapter 7

Towards a Political Theory of eLearning

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the political strategies that are utilized in the context of eLearning. The starting point for this paper is the eLearning Political Strategies (ELPoS) model. The model is based on two dimensions: 1) the direction of the political strategy (upward or downward), and 2) the scope of the political strategy (individual or group based). The interaction between the above dimensions defines four types of eLearning political strategies, which result in different political outcomes. The presentation of the model is followed by four mini case studies that demonstrate the political strategies that the model outlines. The discussion and conclusion sections integrate the findings from the case studies and elaborate on the rules that govern the application of political strategies in different eLearning contexts.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of eLearning in the past few decades has resulted in a significant body of research on the attributes of this phenomenon. As the literature review in the following sections demonstrates, while many studies focus on the technical and strategic aspects of eLearning, not enough attention has been paid to the social and political aspects of this phenomenon. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by focusing on the politics of eLearning.

This paper addresses the politics of eLearning in a number of ways. First, it introduces the eLearning Political Strategies (ELPoS) model, placing it in the context of previous literature on politics. Second, the paper demonstrates that eLearning is not the “neutral” phenomenon that most previous research assumed it to be, but rather an arena where political struggles take place at a number of different levels.

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Third, by presenting the findings from a case based investigation, the major components of the model are demonstrated. Finally, by integrating the findings from the case studies in the discussion and conclusion sections, the underlying principles of eLearning are elucidated and directions for future research on the rules that govern the politics of eLearning are proposed.

THE DEFINION OF ELEARNING

An important area of contemplation in the literature on eLearning focuses on the definition of this process. Cross (2004) is considered the person who coined the term eLearning. Since then, a range of definitions have been offered by other researchers. The first type of definitions focuses on the fact that eLearning is based on the Internet. For example, Rossett (2001) defined ELearning as: “Web-based training (WBT)”, Adrich (2004) defined eLearning as: “a broad combination of processes, content, and infrastructure to use computers and networks to scale and/or improve one or more significant parts of a learning value chain, including management and delivery”, and Rosenberg (2001) defined eLearning as: “the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance.

Other, much broader definitions of the term eLearning, expanded it beyond the use of the Internet to include just about any type of interaction or experience that can take place in educational or other types of organizations. For example, Manville (2003) defined eLearning as: “Not only Internet-published courseware, but also the tools for managing, modularizing and handling: different kinds of content and learning objects (including both electronic and non-electronic forms, and even traditional classroom instruction), just-in-time and asynchronous learning, such as virtual labs, virtual classrooms and collaborative work spaces, simulations, document repositories and publishing programs, tools for prescribing learning, managing development pathways and goals and handling e-commerce and financial transactions related to learning, and the utilities and capabilities for supporting informal learning, mentoring, communities of practice and other non-training interventions”. In other words, according to this definition, eLearning can encompass almost everything that happens in the corporate world.

Other definitions of eLearning seem to go even further. For example, Jeurissen (quoted by Moeng, 2004) defined eLearning as: “the use of innovative technologies and learning models to transform the way individuals and organizations acquire new skills and access knowledge”, while Drucker (2000) defined eLearning as: “Just-in-time education that integrates high velocity value chains”.

We in this paper define eLearning as both electronically based and related to teaching and learning. However, this does not mean that we restrict eLearning to activities that occur in a classroom (including an on-line classroom) or that we consider eLearning a process that takes place during the delivery of content. Quite the contrary, our definition encompasses activities that may take place outside a classroom (on-line or otherwise) and that may involve students, instructors, and administrators, within an organization that engages in teaching and learning (such as a university).

MAJOR THEMES IN THE LITERATURE ON ELEARNING

There are a number of central themes in the literature on eLearning that are directly related to our study. First, is the discussion of factors that predict attitudes to eLearning. Previous research indicated that the list of factors affecting attitudes to eLearning includes, age: gender, personality, and computer experi-

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