Chapter I

The Future of Online Learning

Introduction

To write about technology is to write about change. In the first decade of the 21st century the rate of change of technology is greater than ever before. At a recent meeting of human resource developers using online learning, an executive of a local, national broadcaster mentioned that a year ago his organization did not know what podcasting was and that today they have managers of it. Change in technology has been recognized by almost all who live in developed countries, and it is clear to most that the only certainty about technology is that, for the foreseeable future at least, it will continue to change. Yet a conundrum appears to exist as fundamentally, little has changed about online learning or e-learning in higher education and human resource development for the past 10 or so years. Content is still predominantly text-based and the communications tools are generally limited to text. This contrasts markedly with the trend in other online experiences to include audio, video animation as well as text and graphics. This book argues that it is high time for e-learning to change. The book puts forward theoretical models designed to assist trainers, teachers, and

instructional designers to create e-learning where rich media are used for content as well as interactions.

Just as many terms have entered our language with the introduction of computers and the Internet, so too have terms been coined to describe the use of these technologies in learning. Online learning clearly refers to learning that uses the Internet. Today distance learning often also uses the Internet and blended learning is used to refer to learning that blends online and face-to-face. In this book the term *e-learning* is used to describe online learning, whether distance or blended. Throughout the book the terms e-learning and online learning are used interchangeably as both terms are used in the parlance common to teachers, trainers, students, and instructional designers. These terms and others are described in greater detail in the following section.

Definitions

The information society has been defined in many places and most definitions concur that in an information society, information is critical to the success of organizations and individuals (Doku, 2007; Mobileman Glossary, 2007; World Summit on the Information Society, 2003). In an information society, information becomes a commodity or essential to the production, distribution, and use of other products. A central tool in the creation, use, and manipulation of information is information technology and a central tool in the distribution and diffusion is communication technology. In the past 20 years the impact of information and communications technologies has been felt in almost all aspects of life in developed countries as they become information societies. It has had an impact on all sectors of education from kindergarten to further, technical and higher education. Many new words have entered our lexicon to describe the hardware and software that make up the technologies, so too have new words been created to describe the many aspects of the application of technology. Education is no stranger to technology. For many years technologies have been used in the classroom as adjuncts to face-to-face teaching and learning. They have also been used to deliver education to students in distant locations or who were unable to attend classes through limitations of time or mobility. In the field of distance education the technologies used have evolved and the concept of generations of distance education features in the literature (Nipper, 1989; Taylor, 1995, 2001). It is to the most recent generation that this book is addressed.

As mentioned earlier, many terms have been used to describe the current application of information and communications technologies to education. Online learning, flexible learning, open learning, e-learning, and blended learning to name a few and these have been defined in the Glossary in Appendix One. In this book many of these terms are used in a generally interchangeable way to refer to intentional learning that is fully, or has a large component that is accessible via the Internet.

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