

Chapter V

Advancing E-Learning Policy and Practice: Influences on Academics' Adoption, Integration and Development of Multimodal E-Learning Courses

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary education is increasingly a contested space where advances in Information Communications Technologies and their application to technology-mediated e-learning environments have forced university administrators and educators to dislocate themselves from traditional correspondence modes of student engagement. Compounding this paradigmatic shift within the traditional sphere of distance education pedagogy are multiple and conflicting pressures on academics to develop flexible, engaging, cost-effective and sustainable interactive learning resources that incorporate both multimedia and hypermedia. This chapter reports on a study that examined factors that influence educators' decision to adopt and integrate educational technology and convert traditional print-based distance education materials into interactive multimodal e-learning formats. Although the broader study was conducted in a single Australian university and investigated pedagogical, institutional and individual factors, this chapter restricts its focus to solely the pedagogical motivations and concerns of educators. It is argued that findings from the study have significance at the institutional level, particularly in terms of developing an underlying pedagogical rationale that can permeate the e-learning culture throughout the university, while at the same time, providing a roadmap for educators who are yet to fully engage with the e-learning format.

INTRODUCTION

Advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and their application within e-learning have forced the university distance education sector to increasingly dislocate itself from traditional correspondence modes of student engagement. This transformation is multifaceted and has occurred not only in reaction to paradigmatic shifts in pedagogical and technical orientation, but has also occurred as a result of broader neoliberal economic adjustments that have seen e-learning increasingly commodified and interpreted within the narrow confines of flexibility and cost-effectiveness. This chapter centres on the experience of a major Australian distance education provider, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), where in 2003, academics commenced the process of converting traditional static print-based distance education materials into multimodal courses that were heavily – though not solely – reliant upon e-learning technologies. This chapter examines this conversion process, and discusses factors that have influenced educators' exploration and integration of new technologies within USQ's distinctive distance education environment.

By analysing what influences academics' adoption, integration and development of multimodal e-learning courses the chapter helps focus discussion on e-learning and its relationship to pedagogy. Explicitly, the chapter taps into individual educators' understandings of pedagogy and tracks how such understandings are linked to the critical decision to integrate and embrace multimodal e-learning. Clearly the focus of the chapter is of benefit to practicing educators, however, the chapter has also been written in the hope it can be of use to policy makers who may be charged with the task of bringing onside resistant educators who remain sceptical about the benefits of e-learning. In line with these goals, the chapter can be used by educators to better contextualise their teaching within e-learning environments

while also providing guidance for e-learning at the institutional policy level.

The chapter is based on an in-depth review of e-learning within the context the USQ, an institution that has historically been heavily reliant upon the provision of distance education. This institution's transition from a predominately print-based distance education provider to its current blended format of virtual, print and face-to-face modes of delivery provides a unique window through which to view policy and pedagogical transformation. The qualitative study on which this chapter is based identified a range of pedagogical stimuli that influence academics' development of multimodal courses including: catering to the learning needs of different students; improving learning outcomes, retention and progression rates; challenging students to become learner-centred, self-directed, resourceful and independent learners; replicating aspects of the on-campus experience; engaging students in the learning experience; revitalising the curriculum; and providing a rich learning environment for e-learning students.

CONTEXT AND BACKDROP TO THE RESEARCH

The research that serves as the focal point of this chapter examined factors influencing academics' development of multimodal e-learning courses at USQ, which is a major Australian provider of distance education courses. Yearly enrolments at the university exceed 26,000 students with students from over 120 nationalities and approximately 20 percent of enrolments being international students (University of Southern Queensland, 2007). In 2007, USQ offered more than 300 accredited programmes (comprising approximately 1000 courses) across five faculties. A typical undergraduate degree programme comprises 24 courses with each course usually involving 15 weeks (165 hours) of study. Students studying with USQ choose to study in one of three modes:

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