

Chapter I

E-Learning as Nation Building

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Abstract

This chapter is concerned with how individuals may examine the potential for social change arising from interactions in an e-learning environment. We explore continuing education as the site for e-learning in the context of developing a civil society. Referring to Anderson's (1991) work on nationalism, and Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder's (2002) discussion of communities of practice, we argue that the transition from face-to-face teaching to e-learning has the potential to appeal to those learners, and their instructors, who are interested in the capacity of a community to contribute to social change. We are particularly interested in the potential of e-learning to be socially transformative in its power to be inclusive, that is, to support diverse cultures, languages, work contexts, learning needs and styles, prior experiences, generations, economic circumstances, social contexts, and geographic location. We have suggested that the metaphor of an e-learning nation supports the reflective and progressive development of learning communities in which identity is consciously and critically examined.

E-Learning in a Social World of Communities

From a sociocultural point of view, we are intrigued by conceptualizing e-learning communities using the metaphor of “the nation.” E-learning, defined here as electronically mediated learning (Zemsky & Massy, 2004), offers the higher education community an opportunity to rethink the role of education at many levels and to leverage this opportunity in positive social ways.

We may use e-learning to envision new possibilities for social life and to consider the implications of these possibilities for concrete practice in our teaching. We argue that the transition from face-to-face teaching to e-learning has the potential to appeal to those learners, and their instructors, who are interested in the capacity of a community to contribute to social change. We are particularly interested in the potential of e-learning to be socially transformative in its power to be inclusive, that is, to support diverse cultures, languages, work contexts, learning needs and styles, prior experiences, generations, economic circumstances, social contexts, and geographic location. This chapter is concerned with how individuals may examine the potential for social change arising from interactions in an e-learning environment. We explore continuing education as the site for e-learning in the context of developing a civil society. For purposes of this discussion, we reference Martha Cook Piper’s (2002) definition of the civil society:

A vigorous citizenry engaged in the culture and politics of a free society... [in which] the key agent of influence and change is neither the government nor the corporation, but rather the individual, acting alone or with others to strengthen civic life. In turn, how individuals think about themselves and others, the values they espouse and enact, become the essential features of a civil society. (p. 4)

Those of us who teach in and design e-learning courses and environments are challenged to use the advantages and benefits of e-learning technologies while minimizing the disadvantages or risks. By demonstrating to learners, administrators, designers, and prospective instructors that there are many benefits to e-learning, and that disadvantages are recognized and can be addressed, it is more likely that the transition from face-to-face to e-learning can be accomplished.

E-learning can be accomplished in a way that recognizes an important part of learners’ day-to-day world, which is the national community in which they live. E-learning itself constitutes another community—a community of learners—which may be regarded as an “emergent nation.” Learners may be invited to join

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