

Chapter XX

Investigating and Encouraging Student Nurses' ICT Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions rely increasingly on information and communications technology (ICT) to provide learning opportunities. Written to support this enterprise, the Guidelines for Networked Learning in Higher Education (Goodyear & NLinHE Team, 2001) carefully blend theory and practice to provide a wealth of sound advice for course design teams. The focus is on “promoting connections” that directly relate to learning. However, in nursing, 6 years after the Guidelines were published, levels of students' skills and engagement with ICT remain problematic, which undermines attempts to deploy networked learning. I argue that for such initiatives to succeed, other, more foundational connections need also to be promoted. I focus on some of the factors that contribute to student nurses' ICT non-engagement: gender, caring, professional identity, and knowledge work. Finally, I explain how some of the barriers identified can be overcome through integrating ICT. HE programs can provide students with meaningful encounters with ICT in the different elements of a course: curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment, as well as informal learning through online forums. If successful, this integration can promote the students' development of working knowledge in ICT, and increase the chances of their engagement in networked learning and evidence-based practice.

The JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) funded "Effective networked learning in higher education: notes and guidelines" (hereafter simply the "Guidelines") was written "to support teachers in higher education who are thinking seriously about making use of networked learning" (Guidelines p. 4). Since the Guidelines were published, learning technologies such as virtual learning environments (VLE) have been deployed throughout Further and Higher education in the United Kingdom (Joint Information Systems Committee, 2004). The Guidelines' "language, constructs, models, theoretical insights and evidence" (Guidelines p. 5) are as needful today as ever.

Networked learning is defined in the Guidelines as: "Learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources." (Guidelines p. 9)

The loose coupling of technology to student activity, implied by the central notion of *promoting connections*, is well suited to study at university, with its climate of autonomous learning. However, technological "solutions" bring their own layers of complexity and, in spite of their being extremely well informed, the Guidelines do not sufficiently promote connections of a more foundational nature, that is, access to and engagement with ICT *in the minds and lives of students*. In my experience with student nurses, sociocultural factors are more powerful than the most well-informed learning designs in deciding the fate of networked learning initiatives. With much rhetoric touting the benefits of ICT to learning, it can be difficult for course designers to resist investing technology *per se* with deterministic power (Jones, 2002). E-learning, in particular, is regularly portrayed as having the potential to enhance learning, motivate learners, and cater for widening access and participation, and so forth. (Department for Education and Skills, 2005). As with antecedent

learning technologies, ICT generated excitement and expectations far beyond its capacity to deliver (Cuban, 2001; Ludvigsen, 2006). However, Goodyear (1998) argues that Universities have *not* invested in computers on primarily educational grounds. Rather, the proliferation of computers in the wider world of work makes their absence unthinkable in universities, dominated as they are by knowledge work. Thus the "project world view" that characterized UK government investment in learning technology (e.g., the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme) did not catalyze widespread uptake. Not that a project approach *per se* is to blame, the Guidelines themselves suggest a project lifecycle approach to course development. These "organizational fictions" are necessary to bring a complex goal to fruition. The Guidelines enact Goodyear's (1998) environment-centered approach in the Pedagogical Framework, which chimes in with the underlying innovation process in higher education. Universities have proved to be remarkably adaptable where the purpose of the innovation has been central to their mission (Goodyear, 1998). Without such a central motive force, mere enthusiasm about the advantages of computer use will not be sufficient to promulgate learning technologies, especially when built on the assumption that students will engage with computers in a moderately straightforward way. In my role as ICT lecturer, it used to surprise me that not everyone shared the same blasé attitude to using ICT as I do. Many of the ICT workshops I ran were poorly attended, and a significant proportion of those who did come did not even know their log in details. It would be easy to fall in with uninformed prejudice and write off nurses as technophobic, but the reasons for non-engagement are more complex and, moreover, usually rational. For example, Donald Norman is scathing towards hardware and software designers for accentuating the mismatch between "rampant featurism" and the practical needs of users (Cuban, 2001; Norman, 1999). At the most prosaic and yet telling level, Neil Selwyn *et al.* (Selwyn, Gorard,

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