Chapter 4

Setting the Scene:
E-Learning and the Evolution of Roles and Practices in Post-Compulsory Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores developments in e-learning in colleges and universities, providing a context for the work that follows. Pedagogical developments are reviewed, focusing particularly on the UK. Research is then considered, beginning with an orienting discussion of the curriculum as a focus for study. Research concerning the relationship between technology and the curriculum is then discussed. Implications of this for teachers, students and others are then presented. The chapter concludes by emphasising the need to engage with, rather than ignore, the complexity that a social account of technology in education provides.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an account of the development of e-learning in post-compulsory education, focusing primarily on Higher Education and formal in-service learning, which is historically where the majority of interprofessional education has taken place (Freeth et al., 2002). This is considered in relation to pedagogy, and its relationship to interprofessional education, as introduced in the preceding chapters, is considered. To provide focus, the chapter then concentrates on research into curriculum design and practice, illustrating how these

ideas fit with research into new technologies. This is then discussed in terms of implications for various roles, before conclusions are drawn about the kinds of issues that remain important within this area.

Technology and Post-Compulsory Education

Technology has always been implicated in educational development and change, whether it be the development of writing, the printing press or the Internet. Any review of this relationship, therefore, will necessarily be partial. For the purposes of this book, a review is provided that focuses on developments across the last few decades, concentrating

on pedagogic developments and issues of professional role. This review concentrates on the UK, in order to provide a manageably brief case context.

Technology and Pedagogy

Technology is frequently associated with progressive pedagogies. However, simply adopting technology is no guarantee of pedagogic development, and indeed can be associated with less sophisticated pedagogic approaches (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). Certainly, theories such as constructivism have had a powerful impact on practices such as instructional design (Duffy, Lowyck & Jonassen, 1993). However, almost any theory would have something to offer, since each provides its own distinctive insights into the process of learning (Mayes & de Freitas, 2004).

Rather than seeing technology as a driver for particular pedagogies, it may be fairer to view it as a weathervane, revealing contemporary educational preoccupations and developments. In the form of educational television, it was touted as an answer to the problem of mass training of military personnel during World War II; in the guise of teaching machines, it was advocated by Skinner (e.g. 1958) as a means of making the educational system more efficient; by Piaget (1929) and Papert (1980) as a way of supporting children's creative thinking and self-expression in the face of a heavily structured curriculum; and more recently by a variety of authors as a way of formalising the tacit learning that arises from social interaction, such as learning in the workplace, as a way of making this amenable to formal educational support and recognition (Dyke et al., 2006). Clearly, there have been pedagogic developments – Thorpe (2002), for example, provides a useful overview of the way in which pedagogic thinking has developed from a focus on materials and instruction to one on social competence, collaboration and situated performance. However, as she also points out, this is not a simple progression towards some utopian future: for example, the increasingly prevalent view of the learner as independent and autonomous can also be seen as viewing the learner as isolated, unsupported and responsible for their failings.

Whether or not pedagogic thinking progresses, research into the use of technology has, historically, suffered from a limited perspective. Whilst educational technology as a field of study may date back over 40 years, much research is located within specific 'generations' of technology, drawing only on a few years' worth of work. As far back as 1995, Mayes lamented the ongoing cycles of hype and disappointment – which he illustrated by analogy to the film 'Groundhog Day' – that have come to characterise research in this field:

People who have been involved over any length of time with educational technology will recognise this experience, which seems characterised by a cyclical failure to learn from the past. We are frequently excited by the promise of a revolution in education, through the implementation of technology. We have the technology today, and tomorrow we confidently expect to see the widespread effects of its implementation. Yet, curiously, tomorrow never comes. We can point to several previous cycles of high expectation about an emerging technology, followed by proportionate disappointment, with radio, film, television, teaching machines and artificial intelligence (Mayes, 1995, p. 1).

This continues to have resonance, over ten years later. Clearly, no technology to date has managed to "solve" education, and it seems equally likely that no new technology will manage to, either. Instead, research into each new technology tends to follow a familiar pattern: technical or specialist research specifying the technology; initial 'proof of concept' papers establishing its potential within education; and further case studies elaborating uses and exploring applications within other educational disciplines or contexts. Theorisation – which ought to build from this (Oliver & Conole, 2003) – does not always follow.

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