

Chapter 7.11

Teaching Social Skills: Integrating an Online Learning System into Traditional Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The ubiquity of instructional technology necessitates a more critical look at the theories that drive adoption and the practical implications of its usage. Blended learning has been offered as one compromise to fully online learning or strict adherence to traditional lecture-based instruction that seems outdated. A particular approach to blended learning is examined in the present chapter through the use of an online learning system. Concept Keys was developed to assist instructors of social skills in breaking down these abstract concepts into manageable units of information appropriate for daily delivery via e-mail. This program is shown to be easily integrated into existing curriculum through two studies. A

concluding section attempts to tie these studies together and suggests potential limitations and avenues for future research.

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

The reader will be able to:

- Understand the pedagogical goals driving the development of Concept Keys (CK)
- Understand the key elements of the CK system
- Identify two specific ways in which CK can aid in the teaching of specific social skills
- Determine the usefulness of the CK approach to his or her pedagogical needs

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INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education continue to face challenges posed by online education and the ubiquitous nature of technology in the classroom. The concept of blended learning—the use of two or more complementary approaches when teaching the same material—has seen heightened attention in literature in the past decade and offers a unique approach to merging the availability of technology with traditional and tested pedagogical approaches. Examples of blended learning include using textbook supplements, peer-to-peer learning, and/or online modules while maintaining aspects of a more traditional, lecture-style format. The purpose of the present chapter is to outline the development, implementation, and effectiveness of one online learning system, Concept Keys (CK), that takes a blended learning approach to teaching social skills (see also Bodie, Powers, & Fitch-Hauser, 2006; Powers, Bodie, & Fitch-Hauser, 2005). In service of these aims, a brief background is offered that situates CK into the larger category of e-learning and examines its core components. Then, two studies are used to illustrate how the system is easily integrated into an existing curriculum and can be custom fit to address specific pedagogical goals. Finally, a concluding section ties these two studies together and offers insights for future research and exploration using the CK system.

BACKGROUND: E-LEARNING, SOCIAL SKILLS, AND CONCEPT KEYS

E-learning can refer to a wide range of online learning protocol. Systems can be created that allow individuals to self-manage their learning or that blend online and face-to-face instruction to greater or lesser degrees. Datamonitor (2004, July 14) predicts the global e-learning market for higher education to grow at a rate of

12% between 2004 and 2008. This growth has necessitated a more critical look at the theories that drive technology adoption and the practical implications of instructional technology usage. Intuitively, technology should not be utilized for its own sake; instead usage should be grounded in specific goals and objectives (see Moore, 2005). This translates to practical considerations of which types, how, and how often specific technologies will be used and in what combinations. Backing such claims, research suggests that, when grounded in pedagogical goals and objectives, technology has the potential to enhance learning outcomes (e.g., Dean, Stahl, Sylwester, & Pear, 2001; DeLacey & Leonard, 2002; Rainbow & Sadler-Smith, 2003). Conversely, using technology can impede the learning process if used poorly (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005; Sellnow, Child, & Ahlfeldt, 2005). Still other studies have found that students have certain expectations of instructor use of technology prior to the first day of class; violating these expectations can have deleterious effects on student learning (e.g., Witt & Schrod, 2006).

Thus, it follows that instructors who teach social skills—communication-related skills such as listening and critical thinking (Leigh, Lee, & Lindquist, 1999)—are likely to benefit from the use of online learning systems; however, the adoption of a given system should be guided by specific curricular goals. Concept Keys (CK) is an online, empty engine approach that allows instructors who teach what are generally categorized as social skills the opportunity to offer students a blended learning approach to obtaining these skills. In other words, CK enables the educator an opportunity to define social skills as broadly or narrowly as needed for a particular application (e.g., how to communicate effectively or how to give meaningful presentations). The system can accommodate educators interested in, for instance, enhancing sales-related communication skills as well as educators interested in teaching engineers how to present complex material or medical

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