

Chapter 5.3

The Student Perspective: Can the use of Technologies Transform Learning?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores students' perspectives on the transformations that the use of technology has brought to higher education. The use of technologies in higher education facilitates flexible learning environments but the benefits to students who engage with these technologies will only be realised if the design is pedagogically sound. The pedagogic approach employed by lecturers when designing their e-learning platforms or learning management systems has the capability to transform learning. The author's discipline is Information Technology and Business Information Systems; from experience and case studies there is ample evidence to suggest that the use of technology does not always necessarily meet user requirements. Students are the end users of the technologies that educators use to enhance students' learning experiences. This chapter was undertaken to obtain students' perspectives (as the end users) on the uses of technologies in higher education to assist educators in improving the pedagogical design of their e-learning platforms. The responses received from students clearly indicate they are of the opinion that the use of technologies in higher education beneficially transforms learning but will never replace lecturers. In essence, the benefits that can be achieved through the use of technologies are totally dependent on the ways they are employed pedagogically by lecturers.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly technology is pervading all areas of education. As part of the Dublin Institute of Technology's Strategic Plan, a Learning Tech-

nology Team was established in 2003 to roll out the institutional virtual learning environment. Students are the end users of the information systems that educators use to enhance students' learning experiences. This chapter was undertaken to obtain students' perspectives (as the end users) on the uses of technologies in higher education

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to assist educators in improving the pedagogical design of e-learning platforms alternatively known as learning management systems.

The use of technology has modified the ways that some lecturers distribute course materials to students, i.e., no longer do all students transcribe notes from blackboards/whiteboards. Course materials are disseminated online through files of course notes, PowerPoint presentations, podcasts, video casts and web links. The use of technology has also brought alterations to students' ability to communicate with lecturers and fellow students, through the use of e-mail, discussion boards, online chat rooms and wikis. In addition, technology has changed the ease with which students can access further information to read outside of the course material and conduct research through the use of online journals and databases.

Academics are very often encouraged to create an online presence without ever having studied online themselves or even considered the pedagogical impact that technology can have on the students' learning experience. Salmon (2000) stated that the use of the World Wide Web for learning and teaching was set to dramatically increase, and the onus was on all lecturers using technology to ensure that they familiarised themselves with the pedagogical skills necessary to ensure that the technologies used effectively enhanced the learning experience of students.

An important point to note is that technologies are simply tools at the disposal of educators. The beneficial transformations in learning that can be achieved through the use of technologies depend on the skill levels and commitment of the educators, similar to all professionals' effective use of tools. When employing the use of technologies to transform learning a number of issues need to be considered, amongst them student perspectives, the learning experience, teacher–student and student–student relationships, learning outcomes, and so on, to ensure that the lecturers' pedagogical skills are utilised to best effect. Should any educators believe that their pedagogical approach

does not require enhancement from the use of technologies that is their prerogative.

Broad, Matthews, and McDonald (2004) proposed that despite students' prolific use of new technology, there is no need for academics to presume that students are disposed towards academic use of the Internet in the higher education sector, and they question whether the use of technology in education is supported by sound educational rationales and that 'this strategy has not yet been pedagogically proven' (p. 135). All the effort that lecturers, who employ the use of technologies with their students, put into creating suitable content is wasted unless students actively engage with and gain some benefits from using the material provided. As a result of a study conducted by Löfström and Nevgi (2007) at the University of Helsinki, Finland, the authors suggest that 'Experiences of relevance and meaningfulness are central facilitators of learning. In this context, meaningful learning entails learner activity and intentionality, application of constructivist principles, collaboration, dialogue, reflection, connection to context and transferability of knowledge' (p. 315). Educators should keep this in mind when designing material for use with technological devices.

McLoughlin's (2000) experiences from working in the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of New England in Australia, lead her to suggest that despite the prolific availability of online teaching tools there is no established approach on how to develop quality learning programmes that make the best use of these tools, which can only be achieved by educators forming a deeper understanding of how technology can affirm and extend the principles of good teaching. Slevin (2008) from Roskilde University in Denmark, states that concentration upon practical problems associated with the opportunities afforded by modern technology draws attention away from the theoretical concerns posed by e-learning. Apart from reading books and articles on the use of technologies in higher education, educators who attend e-learning and teaching

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