Chapter 7
Building Learning Spaces:
Creating Online Learning Environments

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The learning space that online distance learners enter is critically important. The space provides access to learning activities, but it also establishes an environment in which knowledge can be effectively co-created and shared. Designing the learning space involves making decisions about intent, pedagogical priorities, and technological affordances. Online learning spaces communicate educational and social intent and must be designed around the interests, concerns, and cultures of their users. However, the learning space must also embody the values and perspectives of the instructor/facilitator and the institution that offers the educational experience. This case study presents two situations in which learning spaces were created for specific online courses offered for distinctive learner populations: international students in a Cross-Cultural Management course and U.S. military members enrolled in a Management and Organizational Design course. To explain how these learning spaces were constructed, the case study presents a brief evolutionary history of distance learning and virtual learning spaces. It analyzes two design contexts using an organizational-educational-pedagogical approach. The analysis incorporates differing learner anticipations, concerns, and cultural perspectives and invites the reader to consider appropriate learning space design. This case study also encourages readers to consider their own solutions to these specific learning space challenges. Recommendations and suggestions are made about the ways in which these specific cases might be generalized to different contexts.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

Virtual learning spaces provide supportive and effective environments within which distance learning can take place. Virtual learning spaces parallel the physical architectural spaces of traditional brick-and-mortar colleges and universities (Lee & Tan, 2011; Oblinger, 2006). This case study looks at the opportunities and challenges presented in creating virtual learning spaces. Specifically, it examines the objectives and strategies that become salient when learning environments are populated by learners who are culturally different from the instructor/designer. Two short cases are presented to illustrate the impact of different learner cultures on the structure and dynamics of the learning environment. The first considers the creation of an online distance learning Cross-cultural Management course in a transnational program of an American university. Targeted learners had no prior online distance education experience and were exclusively non-American, originating from Central and Eastern Europe and beyond. The second case details design considerations for an online distance learning Management and Organizational Design course, offered by a different American university. Here, targeted learners were all Americans with considerable online distance learning experience. They were also active service members of the U.S. military.

The first section provides a broad context for creating learning spaces. It considers the evolutionary history of online distance learning, because this history reveals technological possibilities and pedagogic approaches that have influenced learning space design. The next section sets the stage for the study by examining the nature and function of learning spaces. This is followed by a presentation of the specific contexts in which the two cases were embedded, together with suggestions about design concerns and strategies. Those sections invite the reader to consider how appropriate learning spaces might be constructed in different presented scenarios. The sections that follow review implementing design strategy, monitoring outcomes, and generalizing the specific contexts reviewed to accommodate new learning space creation.

In considering these case-studies two points should be kept in mind. First, college administrators inevitably stipulate the computer platform that will be used in their online distance learning programs. Instructional designers may then be asked to create "ready-to-go" courses that reflect sound disciplinary content and learning principles. In a "ready-to-go" situation, instructor/facilitators and learners have little input into design matters. This is problematic, because instructor/facilitators can neither personalize the environment nor include their preferred learning strategies. Although the advice of instructional designers can be useful, instructor/facilitators have two professional responsibilities: they must possess subject matter proficiency

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