



REVISITING eLEARNING CHALLENGES IN THE POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD: FROM RHETORIC TO REALITY

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In the beginning...

In 2005, six years after the term 'e-learning' was devised, I authored a paper titled "Staff use of e-learning and graduate competencies for the knowledge economy: A study of the misalignment between rhetoric and practice" (2005). Incidentally, 'e-learning' became 'elearning' without the hyphen in the early 2000s as online learning became widespread. This paper examined the dominant rhetoric of this initial period of elearning adoption by higher education (HE) institutions and the professional development of academics. At the time, the rhetoric was alarmist. For example, the Commission of the European Communities (2000) warned about addressing the skills gap in elearning and information and communication technology (ICT) skills as a pre-condition for participation in the global knowledge economy (KE). It was argued that participation in the KE has numerous advantages, such as increasing individuals' knowledge, boosting economic competitiveness and generating employment opportunities. Likewise, the consultation paper 'Towards a Unified eLearning Strategy' by the Department for Education and Skills (United Kingdom) (2003) explicitly outlined the interrelationships between skills, education, and KE and the British government's commitment to incorporating the e-agenda into HE curricula through a systematic approach and nationally integrated strategies. A report by the Education Network Australia also addressed similar themes (2003).

A closely aligned issue of this initial period of elearning adoption was the identification of academics as a critical group that required training and support to acquire the appropriate knowledge and competencies. A recurring issue still relevant today is the significance of

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appropriate professional development, not merely in using the technologies *per se* but also in using the affordances they offer for teaching and learning to enhance and innovate pedagogically.

Lastly, during the initial period of elearning adoption, there was also the acknowledgement that the range of factors associated with staff development combined macro and micro issues rather than being the responsibility of academics alone. Universities were meant to become 'learning organisations', i.e., they would adjust to technological transformations, gain new knowledge and utilize insights to enhance efficiency, innovate and accomplish strategic goals (Bates, 2000).

The learning organisation perspective in the context of technological transformation suggests that elearning knowledge is not a fixed entity to be dissected, quantified or memorised but a dynamic collection of experiences shaped by various evolving contexts. The organisational objective is to learn continuously and identify emerging trends, influences and environments where online learning technologies can be effective while highlighting innovative and effective instructional implementation examples. The implication is that research in learning technology is a practical and contextual discipline that aims to understand the application of technology in educational settings with the underlying principle that socio-constructivist theories and learning models are appropriate for elearning. Effective professional development and instructional innovation ought to be based on learning design grounded in these micro and macro parameters

Professional development

Before 2000, technology-enhanced learning was known as computer-based learning (CBT). Interactivity is critical for learning design with CBT and technology-enhanced learning in general, as it can foster knowledge acquisition and the development of cognitive skills. From the period before 2000, the paper "Interactivity: A Forgotten Art?" by Sims (1997) was seminal in providing for the first-time classifications of interactivity in terms of user engagement.

These classifications of interactivity are:

- proactive inquiry (simple feedback to user interaction),
 - reactive pacing (user ability to move linearly backwards and forwards through content),
 - reactive navigation (user ability to navigate predefined paths),
 - reactive inquiry (feedback to user performance),
 - updated interactivity (dialogue between the user and the computer-generated content)
- and
- proactive elaboration (the user can manipulate components to achieve a goal).

Likewise influential from this early elearning period is the book by Laurillard, “Rethinking University Teaching: A Conversational Framework for the Effective Use of Learning Technologies” (2002). The author breaks down learning technologies into categories comprising different technologies according to their potential and affordances for instruction and then exhaustively details how each category of technologies can be used for teaching and learning. These categories are:

- Narrative media (lectures, print, video, television),
- Interactive media (hypermedia, web resources, interactive television),
- Adaptive media (simulations, virtual environments, educational games),
- Communicative media (computer-mediated conferences, digital document discussion environments),
- Productive media (microworlds, collaborative microworlds, modelling).

The insights provided by Bates (2000), Sims (1997) and Laurillard (2002) continue to be relevant for learning design and the professional development of academics. Universities that adopt a learning organization approach towards technological change and offer professional development focusing on the distinct interactive affordances of (evolving) instructional technologies are better equipped to address technological challenges.

What the pandemic revealed

In early 2020, the coronavirus outbreak compelled higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide to cancel face-to-face teaching and conduct various lessons remotely to maintain continuity of teaching and learning provision, and this became known as emergency remote education (ERE). Unlike specialist HEIs with a history of online delivery, such as the various open universities, many universities found this transition to distance education troublesome (Souleles et al., 2020). For example, in an extensive worldwide report titled ‘Global Survey of College and University Leadership’ (O’Malley, 2020), only 37% of university leaders considered their institution ready for the COVID-19 pandemic.

It emerged from this report that the challenges HEIs faced due to the pandemic included a lack of faculty training for online, hybrid or remote education and maintaining academic standards. Similarly, in a national investigation undertaken in Norway (Langford & Damsa, 2020), the authors determined that 74% of the HEI participants faced significant challenges, including how instructional technologies could be used for teaching, lecturing and interaction with learners. The same report highlighted the need for appropriate professional development of academics.

Of particular concern during the implementation of ERE were summative assessments and how to eliminate cheating and plagiarism. These concerns were addressed with the provision of randomised quizzes and other forms of electronic assessments that the various online

platforms allow for, as well as the use of different methods of assessment such as open book and take-home assessments, learner presentations or demonstrations, the request for annotated bibliographies and the creation of e-portfolios (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). This switch to alternative assessment methods implemented by some HEIs during the pandemic led one author to claim that “the re-assessment of assessment may be one of the more fruitful outcomes” of ERE (Bates, 2020).

Concluding thoughts

Despite the challenges presented by ERE, it can be argued that HEIs demonstrated, to various extents, remarkable resilience and managed to cope with the demands brought about by the pandemic. It can also be argued that professional development may not be able to anticipate all the dimensions of emerging technological challenges, as often it is reactive rather than anticipatory. It tends to address learning gaps as they arise, such as the shift from CBT to elearning.

Unforeseen circumstances, like those brought about by the pandemic concerning the professional development of academics, are likely to arise again. For example, in recent times, HEIs have been dealing with integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into teaching and learning while maintaining academic integrity. The potential of AI to enhance learning is exciting. AI can be used so that elearning platforms can personalise learning experiences and enable adaptive learning systems that adjust content and assessments based on individual learner performance – the holy grail of interactivity.

Boud and Soler (2016) expounded on the position that sustainable assessment entails strategies that foster, cultivate and promote learners’ ability to develop their approaches for self-assessment after they graduate and in the context of lifelong learning. These authors argued that the ability of learners to undertake self-assessment activities independently will help them meet their future learning needs. The time has come for learning design to borrow from the concept of sustainable assessment. The professional development of academics need not be reactive towards rapid or unforeseen technological changes but proactive. In the post-pandemic period, the trend emphasises flexible, technology-enhanced learning models that adapt to future disruptions and changing learner needs. Instead of identifying skills gaps associated with ongoing technological changes – a futile pursuit, the time has come for professional development focusing on learning design skills that can be transferable across different technological advances and challenges.

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