

Adopting E-learning in Higher Education

Firehose presentation on Learning Ecologies

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Many of you may be familiar with the movie “Field of dreams” where a farmer builds a baseball stadium in a corn field in the middle of nowhere – because a voice tells him: “build it, and he will come”. There are certain similarities between this story and our subject today.

In Denmark, at least, university IT-strategies tend to be quite vague about the goals to be reached; and criteria for determining success often are not clearly defined. It is generally recognized that there is a long way to go before the ideals of the national strategy for ICT in education have been implemented. The August 2010 DASTI conference in Copenhagen, where Dan Gilbert and Renate Fruchter present keynotes, is an initiative meant to provide inspiration on why and how to proceed (see also: <http://www.ubst.dk/uddannelse-og-forskning/international-konference-om-it-innovation-og-lering>).

But what are the barriers for adoption, given that “e-learning”, “net based learning” and “ICT and learning” have long been recognized as having a significant technological and pedagogical potential? In this brief presentation, we will touch on a few cultural and organizational issues.

Roughly speaking, university faculty although well-qualified professionally and pedagogically, are digital immigrants when it comes to using new media. Furthermore, all too often, e-learning is ignored by the prevalent “pedagogical tradition”, or it is considered as a specialization. A case in point being that generally exams at Danish universities are still conducted with pen and paper regardless of the fact that the computer is an indispensable tool in most disciplines.

Peer recognition of e-learning initiatives may be scant, and to aggravate matters, leadership may fail to recognize the extra workload involved in developing and delivering e-learning courses. No matter how creative, initiatives may end up as one off projects, and there may be little if any sharing of knowledge.

The students, on the other hand, are digital natives who communicate, search and analyse information, and perhaps even think in ways that are different from those of their professors.

The students expect easy, digital access anytime and anywhere to resources and courses, using the latest technology, and they are prepared to try out new approaches. In relation to LMS-based e-learning, this can be a two-edged sword, because the bright students may find more interesting ways of collaborating, using the LMS only as a mailbox, and leaving the teacher in the dark as to what is going on.

Still, digital literacy does not automatically guarantee proficiency in academic use of IT. Net based collaboration and research are skills that have to be learned, and

academically immature students risk being left behind, if the need for academic IT-training is neglected.

The challenge for university leadership consists in planning, encouraging and facilitating the development of new didactical designs that may scaffold student learning in new and meaningful ways.

It is not just a matter of making technology available, and it is not just a matter of remediating existing practices for the sake of efficiency and a supposedly richer learning environment. Yet, important decisions about strategy tend to be made on the basis of limited empirical evidence and without a clear understanding of the objectives in terms of learning.

Today and tomorrow, we will be talking about active user engagement in learning processes and in design. Of course, faculty everywhere is offered courses and guidance in ICT-supported teaching. But if peer support and departmental recognition are missing, if there is no concrete institutional vision for the use of ICT in education, if technical and pedagogical assistance are not constantly available, and if the academic programs and syllabi are not geared to integrate ICT-supported courses, then it requires an inordinate effort of the individual to take up the challenge of rethinking teaching and learning.

We tend to build grand e-learning solutions, expecting faculty to come and help change the world of learning. But so far, in the field of education, ICT has not proven to be a disruptive technology – although surely there has been an evolution. Motivating faculty, introducing changes to entrenched world views, and making the users take ownership of the technologies are real challenges. Until we master them, “they will not come”.

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- Lack of visions and concrete and operational criteria for success.
- Differences between teachers' and students' approach to ICT/collaborative tools.
- Little recognition by leadership of the extra effort involved in introducing changes.
- Inadequate academic IT-competencies among students.
- Developing a new didactical design – how to define it?
- Inadequate empirical evidence and knowledge about learning and learning processes.
- Concrete barriers in eg. Inadequate support and knowledge sharing.
- Motivating and challenging users to take ownership and introduce changes.

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