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Review of IADIS e-learning conference 2009

Gurmit Singh

Introduction

In June 2009, I attended the International Association for Development of the Information Society (IADIS) e-Learning conference, held as a part of the IADIS Multi Conference on Computer Science and Information Systems 2009 in Algarve, Portugal.

The IADIS Multi Conference is an important annual event bringing together researchers and practitioners in computer science and information systems under 15 different conference themes. The IADIS e-learning conference is a platform to address the technical and non-technical aspects of e-learning, and the implications for reconsidering pedagogy and curriculum in the 21st century.

The e-Learning conference programme demonstrated a balanced mix of innovation and theorising, from industry, teaching, academia and the public and not-for-profit sectors. The key topics of interests presented were:

1. Technological Issues and challenges related to e-learning
2. Curriculum & Instruction issues of e-learning
3. Management Issues related to integrated e-learning in various education sectors
4. Delivery Issues related to online tutoring, facilitating, participation and motivation
5. Research Methods and approaches related to the study of e-Learning

This review will highlight particularly important original research detailed at e-learning 2009, and assess their potential impact on e-learning research and practice in the coming years.

Technological Issues

In this focus area, two studies stood out: research on the adoption of Moodle (Cuadrado-García and María-Ruiz-Molina, 2009), and on integrating various Web 2.0 applications (Frydenberg & Andone, 2009). These two studies showed an illuminating contrast on the effectiveness of using a Learning Management System (LMS) with using social networking tools. Both were on collaboration projects among students at two universities in two countries. In both cases, results showed that students enjoyed learning online with peers from another culture, although they initially had to overcome linguistic and time barriers. The key difference between the two studies was the effectiveness of a closed versus an open learning environment – both studies reported student satisfaction and achievement of project goals. However, recent studies of e-learning via social software beyond learning management systems (Dalsgaard, 2006) suggest that the use of Web 2.0 tools better facilitates social constructivist and connectivist (Downes, 2007) pedagogies, to enable self-directed personalised learning and to create social networks, rather than for ‘managing’ students through an administrative system. Therefore, as e-learning evolves, research presented in this focus area revealed that the challenge of integrating technology becomes less one of which is the better platform, but how technology is actually changing how we learn, and what this means for how we teach using technology for the ‘Net Gen’, to which we now turn.

Curriculum & Instruction Issues

As students change, and the role of education in society is reappraised, practitioners continue to explore what to plan and how to guide learning effectively. Two key presentations presented alternative ways of framing design thanks to the affordances of Web 2.0 (Seely Brown and Adler, 2008).

Firstly, in a provocative keynote speech, Jay Cross, CEO of Internet Time Group, argued that in the current networked era, the basic tenets of instructional design – the ADDIE model – no longer apply. Instead of undergoing formal training packages, learners now have to constantly learn to keep up with an unpredictable changing world. Constant learning requires one to get better at tapping into the possibilities of social and informal learning because ‘learning’ knowledge and skills in a short course is not enough when individuals are unable to predict their future employment prospects. New e-learning tools available make this possible. The shift to continuity transforms learning into CATNIP – Cross’ acronym for a continual evolutionary process of creating, accessing, trying, networking, intending, and performing. I found this concept could improve our work as educators by overcoming the constraints of logical-rational design frameworks, and by tapping into the power of Web 2.0 for designing lifelong learning ecologies (Seely Brown, 1999) supported by communities and networks (Siemens, 2003).

To design and implement learning ecologies for impact however, the role of curriculum and instructional designers necessarily changes. Research presented by Biggam, Barlow, et al., and by Weil, et al. showed that one cannot simply expect instructional design frameworks to work when put online, mainly because of reasons to do broadly with teaching methodologies and social contexts. Additionally, as the Web evolves, the reality we must face up to is global ‘on-time, on-demand’ social, connected and collaborative learning. Consequently, the concern for what is an ‘effective’ e-learning model has to transcend a school or university setting.

To address this social and pedagogic challenge, Professor Catherine McLoughlin (Australia Catholic University) proposed “Pedagogy 2.0” (2009). This is predicated on the shift from dialogic learning through participation to trilogic learning, based on creating new knowledge through activities, projects, networking, mentoring and improving performance. Interesting studies showed how this could be realised, for example the work of Le Rossignol (2009) in repositioning universities for the net learner, and that of Brown, Wade and Murphy (2009) in developing a blended learning framework for enabling organizational change.

The presentations by Cross and McLoughlin are relevant because they enable e-learning practitioners to improve how they tie together different pieces of the teaching/learning puzzle in today’s networked, lifelong learning context in the following ways:

- I. To rethink input-output instructional design models
- II. To overcome static repositories and passive dissemination of content online
- III. To get beyond a search for the ‘right’ method to educate
- IV. To encourage cultivating learning ecologies for guiding learners on journeys of curiosity and discovery
- V. To promote creativity, innovation, problem solving and lateral thinking in virtual learning communities (McClintock, 1999), as opposed to delivering standardized content for average students through LMSs.

Management Issues

In this area, research presented showed that as the need for ongoing education at a distance increases, so do the management and strategic complexities. On the one hand, the flexibility required for on-time, on-demand, personalised, pervasive and connected learning brings opportunities. On the other, the need for economic efficiencies, while ensuring the pedagogic affordances of technologies are harnessed for social justice and (e)quality outcomes, pose challenges.

Karapadis, Dworschak and Pappa (2009) presented research showing how a 'learning-competence-performance' framework could be applied in business to develop real time e-learning courses. While this framework may be suited to justify corporate training, the study did not address how to stimulate employees to uptake social software in the workplace. A recent article (Cross & Husband, 2009) suggests that for productivity in a networked era, effective workplace learning creates continuous conversations, stimulates self-monitoring of competencies, and actually reduces redundancies in organizations aiming to become better at learning, by extracting value from informal interactions rather than cumbersome needs assessments.

Research presented from the New Zealand higher education sector by Mansvelt et. al (2009) showed that for e-learning's potential to be realised, there is still a huge need for effective and appropriate faculty professional development. An example provided by Leeder (2009) from England suggested that workshops were still the preferred approach to learn about e-learning. However, the need to address faculty's underlying resistance to changing their practice with the arrival of e-learning was not addressed. From a study of Portuguese lecturers, Martins and Nunes (2009) argued for the importance of shaping user behaviour during e-learning implementation.

Hence, the key issue highlighted is not simply the better management of courses and programmes, but of the overall paradigm shift happening due to the acceptance of e-learning in the education and workplace sectors. Managing this change requires policy and advocacy to go beyond the limitations of objectivist perceptions of knowledge and skills transfer to consider socio-cultural practices and actor-network perspectives. More attention should also be given to how incorporating systems thinking, informal learning and practice theory can resolve complex management issues to bring about systems change.

Delivery Issues

In today's lifelong learning context, research presented from a variety of disciplines exemplified a growing recognition for addressing delivery issues by integrating understandings from technology, pedagogy, and management for the effective uptake of e-learning.

Zhang et. al (2009) highlighted how a mobile toolkit can support the delivery of motivating and relevant work-based learning via iPods. To develop competencies through social learning, Weil et al (2009) presented encouraging results from a case study using online discussion forums that stimulated cooperative and problem-based learning in accountancy students. My paper (Singh, 2009) on online mentoring to improve the quality of scientific writing around International AIDS Conferences offered another example of an effective delivery strategy to expand research capacity building across time and distance. Yet, there was a lack of research on an effective blended delivery model for cost-effective and scalable continuous learning and sharing of actionable knowledge to improve practice and performance. Going beyond both competency discourses and one-off, face-to-face workshops, the work of Anderson (2009) shows how groups, networks and collectives can expand our professional and scholarly activities, even more so with Web 2.0 tools. Clearly, more work needs to be

done in this area, in particular, in precipitating mutual flows between formal and informal, onsite, online and ongoing delivery, participation and engagement, as what it means to practice professional activity expands towards a 'glo-cal', multi-modal, digital ontology.

Research Methods

In research methods, a number of researchers addressed how to measure whether efforts in e-learning are paying off. As more investments in technologies occur to keep up with changing trends and needs, are programme evaluations effective in measuring impact, or do they only provide a glimpse of visible short-term outcomes? Annansingh and Bright (2009) used mixed methods to evaluate the satisfaction of their faculty and students regarding e-learning, while a host of case-studies using surveys and questionnaires by le Rossignol (2009), Jesus and Moreira (2009) and al-Fahad (2009) were presented on evaluating e-learning on criteria such as engagement, collaboration, and so on in different contexts. Two research methods stood out that went against the grain of positivist methods: Martins and Nunes (2009) used grounded theory to suggest a richer, nuanced picture of faculty acceptance of e-learning; Taylor et. al (2009) used biographical data to reveal the role of gender in influencing student uptake of e-learning in South Africa. Research with methodologies such as virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2000) must be encouraged to keep our methodological creativity sharp.

As yet, it is less evident how different kinds of learners engage with e learning. No research was presented on the challenges of promoting e-learning among 'at-risk' or marginalized students, adult learners, or those from non-mainstream backgrounds. It is also not evident what the return on investment is with all the variety of possibilities to design, create and deploy podcasts, blogs, wikis and so on in today's educational terrain. More research is needed on the best learning metrics, in terms of quality of learning, however broadly defined, that we should devise to write the report card on e-Learning. One recent suggestion is Return on Investment in Interaction (ROII) (Cross & Husband 2009). More attention also needs to be given to the issue of optimizing knowledge transfer and skills, and in getting evidence into practice quicker to drive change and improvement from the centre to the margins, and vice-versa. Developments in e-learning research that can capture the nexus of the complex effects of personalised, pervasive, connected learning, while nurturing thriving learning ecologies does not, surely, reduce to an algorithm.

Implications

Clearly, the field of e-learning continues to thrive in its theorising potential. However, some important programme gaps remain. Notable evidence demonstrating how technology, curriculum, management, delivery and research issues can successfully leverage e-learning to deliver meaningful educational outcomes would be welcome in the following areas:

1. E-learning to drive democratic education for social equity
2. E-learning to enable access to those outside traditional formal education systems
3. E-learning that transcends the 'outcomes-oriented, indicator-driven' performativity culture education currently labours under (Ball, 2001).
4. E-learning that works learners' digital identities to solve real-world problems driven by their own learning trajectories in an ongoing global learnscape
5. E-learning on overcoming the digital divide and for solving grand social challenges such as poverty, climate change, and HIV/AIDS

6. Research on online professional development of educators developing open education resources collaboratively, such as WikiEducator

In future, IADIS needs to solicit e-learning research from developing country, interdisciplinary, psychological and behavioural, socio-economic and political sciences, and post-structural perspectives. After all, I am not convinced that using activity theory to address e-learning pedagogic and technical issues (Idrissi, Merouch and Benani, 2009), or 'context-aware annotation based memory' (Ouadah, Azouaou, and Desmoulins, 2009) is adding value to educators' professional development. Instead, to develop theories from good practices, we need more applied and interdisciplinary research as we learn, try out and reflect on our new roles as facilitators of learning ecologies.

From the conference, one critical insight that stood out for me was the discussion I had with Maggie McPherson (the IADIS E-Learning Conference Co-chair) about the unexplored area of how to align teaching and learning to capture more of what is learnt but not taught (Atherton, 2005). This is known as 'perverse learning' in organizational management (Ascher, 2000). While Web 2.0 is beginning to make its mark, I feel it is important to start exploring how social software accommodates perverse learners who have been alienated by conventional (and in all likelihood behaviorist) teaching processes. If Web 2.0 allows learners to take a more personalised approach, can it more effectively allow learners to meet their own learning needs rather than industry and government dictated needs? With the rising rhetoric on how technologies are enabling the freedom to learn for the Net Gen (Tapscott, 1998), there are issues around the political economy of education (Goldstein, Justman and Meier, 2005) that deserve investigation to improve the evidence base on teaching/learning strategies, and to overcome the hype of e-learning (Bullen, et. al, 2009).

Looking across the five focus areas of e-learning 2009 I covered above, and revisiting Cross' CATNIP concept of learning, I feel it's also time to revisit the notion of conference programming by professional societies itself. Using the metaphor of the curriculum, a conference programme of tracks and silos of 'areas of interest' can deliver a product to be captured and stored but cannot harness the intangible assets being created by networking and social and informal interaction processes. In the changing context of lifelong learning and ongoing professional activity across time and distance, the poetics of teaching (Hansen, 2004), or anti-teaching, might be the path we wish to constructively risk treading into now, as compared to inviting, reviewing, and presenting papers of knowledge to be transmitted in what is akin to a school-assessment regime. Taking an aesthetic perspective (Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002) therefore, an e-learning conference programme can begin to be imagined as the practice of cultivating learning gardens where perverse learning – learning that is not planned like a blueprint or a prescribed set of materials and sessions – actually thrives and is valued. In turn, peer-peer and expert-peer teaching is a practice based on make-believe rather than the known, and learners actually reveal to their teachers what they are personally really like in their private lives, through their multiple digital identities. How we conceptualize conferences in our lives and constructions as e-learning professionals is thus a question we need to consider.

Summary

In sum then, my main insights were that in addition to the provocation of rethinking instructional design, researchers' interests are moving away from institutional LMSs. There is more interest in taking advantage of the affordances of social software and the

flexibility they offer, and I think this contrasts with institutional desires to have greater control over the learning process. I also see a lot more interest in 3D learning environments, but think that this has a long way to go before it is proved to most tutors that this is a way forward for them.

My advice for IADIS e-learning participants is to be more perverse, at the edge, learn what you don't plan, and learn how to take your innovations to scale creatively, learn how to rock the academy, so we improve together, using social software, to overcome time and distance barriers that have hindered tapping into the wisdom of crowds in the past to create a sustainable world step by step: As IADIS members, we are what we CATNIP, and we CATNIP who we are in a fertile garden of onsite, online and ongoing life-changing experiences, as we lead and shape educational policy and practice this century.

Read the call for papers and learn how you can participate in IADIS e-learning conference 2010
[LADIS e-learning conference 2010](#)

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