

14. Symposium: Researching Theory Led Designs for e-Learning Communities and Collaborative Learning

ABSTRACT

This Symposium arises from the work of a Special Interest Group in the EU funded project “EQUEL” – equality in e-learning. The SIG worked together over one year on a variety of research issues concerned with “Theory led Designs for E-Learning Communities and Collaborative Learning”.

The Symposium focuses on research into the design, implementation and sustainability of networked e-learning groups and communities. We draw on our experiences as practitioner researchers – people who are actively involved in the design and practice of networked e-learning and who carry out critical research into that practice – to present four critical case studies illustrating the divergent features of design which we are each implementing and researching, and the learning outcomes that are associated with each design. These designs all focus on networked e-learning communities of one kind or another in continuing education contexts, and include blended courses and fully virtual courses; short courses lasting up to 10 weeks, and longer courses (Masters) lasting up to two years.

In the Symposium, we use the papers as a resource to be drawn-on rather than a set of papers to be formally presented. From a meta-analysis looking across the four case studies we present a series of critical perspectives on the ways in which theory informs the design and implementation of e-learning. This includes:

- Analysis of the underpinning philosophical and theoretical issues and concerns which have guided the design of the four different e-learning courses
- An analysis of the theories which we draw on to develop and sustain the learning communities
- The ways in which learners change identity as a consequence of participation in the learning communities, and the mediating effects of the communities on that process and on the development of professional practice
- An analysis of the development of methodologies for researching our practice across a spectrum of possible methods which might be described as ranging from “holistic” methodologies, to very specific and focused methodologies. We for instance discuss our use of grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenography, critical event recall and content analysis.
- We show how learning communities have to be “designed into” any learning event or course, and not assumed to be in place or to exist without any intention.
- We focus on the ways in which technology (platforms, virtual learning environments and so on) can affect the implementation of any e-learning design, and how the specific features of the technology may be used to foster interaction and participation and generally sustain the community.

We intend to run the Symposium as a highly participative event where we will present short introductions to the various issues outlined above, followed by discussion with the conference participants.

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