

Using Discussion Forums to Mediate Learning in Higher Education: A Literature Review through an Activity Theory Lens

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Abstract

The diffusion of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in education has brought along impediments in the education system where higher institutions of learning are not exempted. The adoption of ICT tools to mediate learning that is not informed by pedagogical and learning theory might not produce the desired results in any given context. Mediating learning with discussion forums is perceived to be one of the simplest ways to use ICTs in education, but the outcomes are not always rewarding. Indisputably, a discussion forum has a potential to transform learning, but contextual factors might influence the effectiveness of a tool, especially when the selection of the tool is not informed by underlying theoretical principles of learning.

This paper demonstrates how Activity Theory is applied as a lens to describe, substantiate and understand how discussion forums have been used in other Higher Education contexts, with the intent to evaluate and understand how mediating learning with an ICT tool - discussion forums in this case - should be based on underlying theoretical principles of learning, taking into account contextual factors that might influence the use of a tool. It transpires from the three case studies analysed in this paper that instructors need guidance to effectively use and monitor discussion forums, or ICT tools in general, hence implying how underlying theoretical principles of learning could be a determining factor to the success of a tool.

Key words: discussion forum, mediation, learning, Activity Theory

1. Introduction

Ineffective use of ICT tools in mediating learning remains a challenge in Higher Education. As instructors in Higher Education are impressed by the use of technology in education, they have developed a culture of adopting any ICT tool at hand and striving to implement it to facilitate learning without consideration of theoretical principles underlying the use of such a tool to effectively mediate learning. However, it remains questionable whether effective learning really takes place when instructors use any available ICT tool, by any means possible, to mediate learning, without a theoretical base. Sharing the same sentiment is Ravenscroft who states that one of the key challenges in e-learning is "how to design or develop the social conditions and communities - in online or blended situations - that give rise to, or accommodate, the dialogue models and discourse practices that are desired in e-learning contexts" (2003, p. 13). A rationale for the ICT tool should arise from underlying assumptions about learning.

Related to the challenge highlighted above is the tendency to adopt any ICT tool in any given context, especially in developing contexts, where many African institutions of higher learning belong. Nevertheless, an ICT tool that has done wonders in Sweden, as an example, might not produce the same results when implemented in an African context. The selection and design of ICT tools to mediate learning should be informed by pedagogical and learning theory so that instructors select and design ICT tools relevant for the context in which they are to be used. Understanding the complexity of how people learn and the conditions under which they learn would guide instructors to make informed decisions when selecting or designing ICT tools. This view is based on Ravenscroft (2003) as well as Mayes and De Freitas's (2004) common notion that implementation or innovation of e-learning tools should be based on underlying principles of learning theory.

Using discussion forums is perceived as one of the simplest ways to mediate learning with ICT tools, which results in instructors adopting discussion forums in their own contexts without considering many other factors involved for the tool to work effectively, or to meet the desired goals (Gunawardena, Plass and Salisbury 2001; Guzdial and Turns 2000). An online discussion forum can be explained in simple

