

Distance learning across continents: What is a 'Traditional Learner' anyway?

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Let us introduce ourselves! We co-edit the University of Bedfordshire's *Journal of Pedagogic Development (JPD)*, and are delighted to have been asked to write the editorial for this edition of *IJEDICT*. Even if our publications do not share a common readership, we believe that the *JPD* embodies ideas and ideals similar to editors' ambitions for *IJEDICT*: to encourage strong submissions from different parts of the world; to inform our readers of good practice emerging from other continents; and to try to form a picture of what constitutes contemporary pedagogy. Like *IJEDICT*, we are focused on identifying and strengthening the links between research and practice in ICT education and development. Both research and practice are predicated on an epistemological position, in other words, how we think individuals learn.

Technology has an important role to play in epistemology as a mediating resource, linking teacher and teaching with learner and learning. However, we fully support the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee's (JISC) aphorism that '...it is the pedagogy, not the tool, that comes first' (2008:17). Pedagogy is epistemology in action. So the pedagogies we adopt using ICT in practice depend on how we think individuals learn. And that is where research is so valuable. It gives us findings with which we can present evidenced judgements on practice to support the development and adoption of contemporary pedagogies. Although the UK would not be considered a developing economy, universities here are operating in the same technologised world but from a different historical and political socio-economic base. This has its advantages and disadvantages. One of the disadvantages is that academics in the UK tend to construct pedagogies based on the concept of a 'traditional' learner, rooted in nineteenth century conservatism with Oxbridge elitism at its core.

IJEDICT and *JPD* have different emphases – you foreground technology, we focus on pedagogy – but the epistemology on which both publications are predicated is centred on the learner, and not on socio-economic background. Like *IJEDICT*, we are happy to say that the *JPD* has included strong submissions and disseminated good practice from every continent apart from Antarctica (we're still working on Antarctica!), despite being in existence only two years. We are also intent on forming a picture of what constitutes contemporary pedagogy – or even what constitutes a 'traditional' learner.

At UoB we are challenging the concept of 'traditional' learner. We are a 'widening participation university', focused on encouraging students to enter higher education who might not necessarily see themselves as potential graduates. The concept of 'traditional' also embraces the pedagogies used in teaching and learning. The *JPD* is part of this challenge to traditional pedagogies and we admit that we find redefining the concept problematic. Is there any such thing as a 'traditional' learner – or even a 'traditional' distance learner? With distance learning programmes, both technology and pedagogy are vital components but are interdependent on one another, and an academic tutor online might be obliged to assume roles that are often beyond the customary scope of teaching *per se* – the assumption of pastoral care roles, for instance, more ordinarily suited to a counsellor.

Some of our UK distance learners have overcome considerable disadvantages. More explicitly, some would seem to qualify for the status of a paradigm of resilience (Chapman Hout, 2011). A full-time learner from Norway, who was in their armed forces as a submarine commander, had

been given a year off to complete a Masters. However, when a situation arose in Afghanistan, the learner was recalled to train soldiers in Cyprus. This caused a lapse in her studies, which we managed successfully, but just as normality was returning, her husband was sent to Afghanistan for six months (he was a pilot in the American army). Since she knew the situation out there, this became a very stressful time for the learner, and keeping her active with her studies required supporting her personally as well as supporting her studies. To achieve this we set up regular Skype sessions to complement our frequent email exchanges. Some of these sessions turned out to be personal support, so there were highs and lows during this period; but she did keep going with her studies.

A different (mature) learner worked for charities in Belgium that set up and maintained HIV/AIDS projects in Africa. She needed to undertake the course to give her academic credibility among her colleagues who had PhDs. After a period of successful studying, the learner's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and the learner had to fly back and forth to Sweden, where her mother lived. Her mother died very quickly and the reality of being on her own hit her hard. She needed somebody to care for her, and this was not a lecturer's place; but the learner had communicated with a colleague who was equally mature and who found studying much easier. This second learner felt able to Skype the first learner regularly; she explained that she had an excellent supportive family – if things got hard she could talk to them and they would come up with a solution. All went well at first with this arrangement, but then disaster struck. The Belgian learner was taken to Ethiopia on a work project. In the two weeks she spent there, two of her colleagues were murdered and our learner was the person who found them. This began a period of withdrawal for the learner; we all tried to keep in contact with her and although her work came in, she appeared to have lost her way – and understandably so. She was heading for a breakdown.

What prevented this breakdown was that she had to come to the UK for a work meeting, and she arranged to meet us. Another learner decided that she would be her chaperone, and this arrangement worked well. After three months, she felt she could continue, provided that we would continue to support her.

These are examples of how work situations, however unorthodox they might seem to many, can influence and swerve a learner's course. Perhaps another way of looking at our distance learners is by age and by the acknowledgement that the online milieu is suitable for the demands and restrictions of an increasingly more mature student body. However, although few people would oppose the view that lifelong learning is intended to be a positive experience, it should be borne in mind that an ageing student demographic body might require the development of additional tools and skills for the online educator.

A female learner in Africa expressed dissatisfaction when the tutor asked her how the course was progressing. She also said that once she had finished her Masters, she wanted her staff to look up to her. She felt downtrodden by her organisation; she had no confidence in her ability, and felt her team members were laughing at her behind her back. The tutor asked her to lead an online discussion group on a subject area with which she was well acquainted, as a result of which she became friendly with a course colleague in Canada. After graduation she changed her job, and she was happy with her new challenges. Approximately two years later, we received a letter from this learner, saying that the course had been a turning point for her...and that she was moving to Canada and felt ten years younger! Although there was an element of peer assistance to this matter, it seems apparent that online learning was also used in a pastoral context. One learner showed empathy for an older member of the virtual group, empowering her to strive for her goals. A male learner in India, in a similar practice to a British General Practitioner, wanted to study at Masters level but found it hard to be among a younger online group that was academically able. He found using a computer difficult and knew little about academic skills. By chance a very bright

young learner, who came from the same geographical area, was studying the same course. They worked together. Meanwhile it came to light that the learner did not feel comfortable in the initial discussion groups, not only because of the technology, but also because of the mixed-sex groups. The tutor explained the place of women in British society, and the learner was open and honest, saying that in his family women were seen as subordinate to men; their presence on the course, however virtual, was totally unexpected.

We might agree, then, that peer learning online (as a pedagogical tool) is an important factor – and peer learning means more than simply going through some of the course material together. Challenging preconceptions and attitudes is every bit as important. And when it comes to the other tools used, technology is instrumental in helping a learner through a course, and arguably even more important in building an emotional scaffold to support a learner through difficult circumstances.

Is there any such thing as a 'traditional' learner? Probably no more so than when it comes to distance learning, there is no pedagogy without technology, or vice versa. As with most other things, the Internet has made us challenge what we mean by a 'traditional' learner; arguably, he or she does not exist any longer; but the challenges that our learners face, perhaps, remain traditional. Quality learning can improve the quality of life for our learners, prompting them to consider other opinions, other choices – even other countries: sentiments that the readers of both *IJEDICT* and *JPD* can well appreciate and comprehend.

REFERENCES

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