

Conclusion and proposals for future research on online (web-based) learning

In summary, a virtual classroom is mediated through computer technology and use of the Internet and it differs from the conventional face-to-face classroom in 'space' and time. What the latter means is that learning is more flexible in an online environment where students need not follow a rigid schedule of physical attendance as at a lecture hall or classroom situation. Learning takes place in the location of choice and convenience of individual learners and participation is necessary in order to keep the 'virtual classroom' thus created stimulated through regular online postings and discussions. Like a regular classroom, students are still required to do much research and reading in order to make a valuable contribution to the subject matter or online discussions. In fact, the virtual classroom experience may be thought to boost the participation of individual learners more than a regular classroom because individual participants have to make contributory discussions as part of their assessment criteria.

The significance and the relevance of the experience highlighted and discussed above is firstly, the use of a mediatory instrument and medium of instruction – electronic media as opposed to the face-to-face interaction in a 'real time' and real life classroom. Secondly, the facilitation and construction of a collective and interconnectivity of peoples of different geo-political backgrounds and experiences across 'time and space' in 'virtual reality' (Giddens, 2003; Hiltz, 1994), and thirdly, the achievement of a level of participation, skill and competency rendering the use and integration of new media technologies in education (in this case) a relative success. It would be interesting to compare structured learning, which takes place online with learning that takes place in a real life classroom. Even more interesting would be to compare the interactions in a virtual 'chat-room' with the interactions in a virtual classroom: How are the two types of interaction and communication different and similar, for instance? Hiltz (1994: xv) warns, "[m]any of the problems of contemporary society may be traced to technological innovations. The greenhouse effect, acid rain, polluted oceans, and 'nuclear winter' (...)". She further questions whether the computer's role in the emergence of the post-industrial society will depend on the social context or on the social choices that we make for its use in our daily lives (Hiltz, 1994: xvixvi). Hiltz (1994) remains hopeful that the use of computer networks to advance communicative and interactive learning (educational) opportunities will extend to people of all ages across dispersed communities.

In Africa, with the support of technology such as computers and software packages, that 'link up' people from villages to schools and from homes to university campuses, the possibility for improved learning and social interactions may be realised. Yet, much planning and policy-initiatives need to be in place not so much to regulate the process but to have a clear vision and purpose in mind concerning the well-being and improvement of life for a wide variety of peoples. Inclusion should be one of the main driving forces of computer-mediated learning experiences. Content and course structure and design should be another consideration; will the purpose be to create jobs and employment opportunities or expand creative knowledge for the social improvement and uplifting of life in general, or both.