Web-based Adults' Courses: Searching for the Right Pedagogy

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Abstracts

Português:

Este artigo objetiva discutir a recente tendência em se definir o sócio-construtivismo como a melhor abordagem para o ensino de adultos baseado na web e questiona como esta abordagem vem sendo erroneamente utilizada em muitos cursos, apenas "mascarando" pedagogias tradicionais. O texto trata das definições de Pedagogia e Andragogia e procura posicionar o construtivismo e a instrução auto-direcionada nesta última categoria. Ao mesmo tempo em que discute a necessidade de uma pedagogia diferenciada para o ensino de adultos, realça como a generalização e o consenso quanto a utilização de um único método para o ensino de adultos pode negligenciar necessidades específicas.

English:

This paper aims at discussing the recent tendency of defining social constructivism as the best approach for web-based teaching of adults. It also questions how this approach has been mistakenly used, by simply "masking" traditional pedagogies. The text defines Pedagogy and Andragogy and seeks to place constructivism and self-directed instruction in the latter category. As well as discussing the necessity for a distinctive pedagogy for the teaching of adults, it highlights how generalization and consensus about the use of a unique method for the teaching of adults might neglect specific needs.

Espanhol:

Este trabajo intenta discutir la tendencia reciente de definir el constructivismo social como el mejor enfoque para la enseñanza para adultos basada en la WEB. También cuestiona como este enfoque ha sido erróneamente usado, simplemente "enmascarando" pedagogías tradicionales. El trabajo define pedagogía y andragogía y busca colocar constructivismo y auto-instrucción en la última categoría. También discute la necesidad de una pedagogía distintiva para la enseñanza de adultos, y realza como la generalización y consenso sobre el uso de un método único para la enseñanza de adultos podría poner de lado necesidades específicas.

Introduction

What should be the pedagogy for online learning? There are innumerable claims being made about effective ways of using the web for learning purposes. However, there seems to be an increasing consensus in the way this issue has been addressed - the theoretical assumptions of social constructivism. In this perspective, learning is a social and collaborative activity, that cannot be "taught" to anyone. It is up to the student to construct his or her own understanding of the learning issues, through practical

activities. One aim of the constructivist approach is to design learning tasks that are authentic to the work and social contexts in which the skills or knowledge are normally embedded. The aim of this paper is discuss why social constructivism has been considered the most appropriate approach to adults' online learning, how this approach has been misunderstood and misused and, more important, to set a challenge for the need of reflecting upon what "shared assumptions" might neglect.

From Pedagogy to Andragogy

The turning point of this constructivist perspective is that it is no longer ideal to perform what was described by Freire (1970/1993) as the 'Banking Model of Education', in which the "educator's role is to regulate the way the world enters into the students" (p. 57). The roots of this teacher-centred pedagogical model of instruction can be found in the monastic schools of Europe in the Middle Ages. The students, young boys, were received into the monasteries and taught by monks according to a system of instruction that required these children to be obedient, faithful, and efficient servants of the church (Knowles, 1984, apud Hiemstra et al, 1990).

From this practice it was developed what we know today by "Pedagogy", which has been defined as the art and science of teaching children (Hiemstra et al, 1990). In this model, the teacher is fully responsible for conducting the learning process, by deciding what should be learned, when it will be learned and how it will be learned.

In despite of the countless contributions brought by Freire related to constructivism in adult education, it seems that this constructive principle has been mainly applied in Brazil for fundamental education, that is, for the teaching of children. Most of face-to face adult educational in the country, excepting masters or doctoral post-graduate courses, relies on the traditional teacher-centred pedagogical mode. However, web-based courses start to bring about a real concern about adult learning pedagogical practices. The tendency of online courses now is to pursue a syllabus in which practical tasks are emphasized and, to a further extent, a syllabus that enable students to be responsible for their own learning process, by negotiating content, tasks, deadlines and evaluation processes. This is the so called "self-directed learning", a view of adult education that shifts from pedagogy to andragogy.

Whereas pedagogy was originally designed for the teaching of children and is teacher-centred, andragogy can be defined as the art and science of helping adults learn. According to Hiemstra and Sisco (1990), the first use of the term "andragogy" was in 1968, by Knowles, a professor of adult education at Boston University. This andragogical model is predicated according to the notions about a learner's ability, need and desire to take responsibility for learning. For Knowles (1975, apud Hiemstra et al, 1990), self-directed learning evolved mainly for the emerging evidence that when learners take initiative for their own learning process they seem to learn more and better than when they assume a passive position. He also suggested a more long-term reason, somehow predicting what would indeed happen in a near future:

(…) it is tragic that we have not learned how to learn without being taught, and it is probably more important than all of the immediate reasons put together. Alvin Toffler calls this reason 'future shock'. The simple truth is that we are entering into a strange new world in which rapid change will be the only stable characteristic.

According to this view, 'empowering' the learners for being responsible for their learning processes is a main issue, moving from a teacher-centred pedagogy to a learner-centred andragogy.

Web-Based Courses' Main Barriers to Constructivism

In web-based courses for adults all around the world, either post-graduate degrees or lifelong learning ones, it is possible to find attempts to put into practice both this andragogical view of education as well as the constructivist approach to learning. However, there are frequently some barriers that have to be overcome. The first one is related to curriculum design and content organisation of the courses. For many academics, or SMEs (subject-matter experts), individuals who are experts in the content areas (Morrison et al, 2001), it is still a very difficult task to be able to set free the steps they used to take for teaching in face-to-face courses on behalf of the new perspective of an online environment. There is still an attempt to "adapt" the content of a traditional face-to-face lesson into the "modules" or "units of learning" in a web-based course. This is because the necessity of providing students with as much information as possible still remains (the Freire's Banking model of Education), taking for granted both the improvements that technology brought into education these days as well as the principle of making the adult leaner feel responsible for his or her own learning process.

Hase et al (2001) claimed that a key issue that affect the development of online learning is the same problem that confronts any traditional educational institution, the dominance of teacher-centred approaches. For most academics the web seem to be a huge maze, in which students will easily get lost while looking for information. Therefore, it is usually believed that any attempt to show order, clarity and organisation is worth taking, even if it means assuming the same traditional pedagogical mode of 'providers of information'.

The point to be made here is that there is nothing wrong about trying to make sure that the students will have access to the minimum content they need to master a subject. However, rethinking how it can be done in a way that prioritises critical thinking and the ability to search for valuable and reliable information on the web is crucial. Technology capabilities hold considerable promise for teaching and learning, but current practices may prove insufficient in optimising available resources and preparing the individual to learn in resource-rich environments (Hill et al, 2001). Although tools and search engines that are provided in the internet typically help to locate potential resources, they do not help individuals to determine their relevance. This should then be considered one of the main abilities to be emphasised in online courses, how to actually "take advantage of the benefits of technology".

There is already some guidance on how to evaluate web pages. They consist on some basic criteria. *Accuracy*, by checking if the page lists the author and institution that published it and provides a way of contacting them; *Authority*, if the page lists the author credentials and its domain (.edu, .gov, .org or .net, etc); *Objectivity* (if the page provides accurate information with limited advertising and its objective is presenting the information; *Currency*, if the page is current and updated regularly and *Coverage*, if the information can be viewed properly, without limiting fees, browser technology or software requirements. These are some aspects that could easily be addressed in online courses, small principles on how to take responsibility for the learning process in this new environment. It would certainly reduce the anxiety of academics to be inclusive, what may lead back to an extremely teacher-centred approach masked with a new technology of learning.

The second barrier that needs to be overcome if an andragogical and constructivist approach of learning is to be envisaged is the misunderstanding of what should be the actual purpose of a web-based course. For many, the purpose of an online course is

the "delivery of instruction through a non-traditional way". However, there is an emerging necessity for a wider understanding of it. Course designers need to realise that if they claim to use a constructivist approach for the course they design, it is incompatible, then, to make use of certain terms such as *instructional delivery* and *education delivery*. The word *delivery* itself implies a provider and a receiver, a passive process that also refers back for the Banking Model of Education, so criticised by Freire (1970/1993). These standardized ways of describing web-based courses just show the lack of understanding of what a constructivist environment for learning should be like and that once more traditional pedagogies are masked with the new technologies.

The third and final barrier we present is the lack of emphasis on the importance of student-student and student-facilitator interaction in some web-based courses. It is really very useful for online education to engage learners in the various ways of exchanging information and interacting with other learners. Nowadays, by using appropriate platforms it is possible to make use of synchronous and asynchronous ways of communication. However, even having access to all those tools such as emails, chat rooms and discussion forums, it seems that online education still remains a solitary action for many learners. Perhaps it is a question of getting used to the idea that although physically distant, the level of accuracy reached by communicating by alternative methods is really amazing. It is just a new form of learning, that demands some practice and trust.

Under this perspective, it is interesting to dedicate some attention to what is called "static" and "dynamic" resources. According to Hill et al (2001), resources include the core information represented in RBLEs (resource-based learning environments) that range in format from electronic to print, and nonprint to human. The static resources include print-based textbooks, as well as encyclopedias, magazines and newspaper articles. The information in these resources is caught at a particular moment in time and this is the reason why they are called "static" resources. Dynamic resources, however, undergo frequent, sometimes continual, change. For example, web-based resources sometimes are updated continuously or on a cyclical or event-based change. Humans are also considered dynamic resources, since there is a continual growth of understanding a particular subject area and a constant cognitive activity. Therefore, every time the facilitator and the learners themselves exchange information in a subject, it can be considered a dynamic resource of learning.

So, if the purpose of an online course is not merely "delivery of instruction" , but rather, it is to make possible for learners to construct their own learning, then it is really important to emphasise the necessity of constant contact to both static and dynamic resources of learning.

Is There a Best Approach for Online Teaching and Learning?

What "can be done" and what "is to be done" in terms of course design for adult-oriented online learning are questions that must be constantly asked. Generalising that there is a "best approach" for online learning can be dangerous if issues such as *audience, needs* and *purposes* are not addressed.

Dealing with adult learners can be very tricky if their actual needs, expectations and learning styles are not investigated prior to course design. Shared assumptions on what should be the "best approach" for adults' online learning might neglect other possibilities perhaps more appropriate to specific cases. Undoubtedly, however, social constructivism and self-direct learning are short listed, but deserve to be very well understood in order to be applied correctly and to achieve the expected outcomes.

It is true that the emergence of new technologies for teaching brought the necessity for reconsidering practises, but not necessarily demanded an "only and unique acceptable practice". According to Kress (2001), "all technologies serve to reconfigure existing practices and bring forth new practices". The only *highly recommended practice* is to be aware of the purpose of the course that is to be designed, the main needs of its potential audience and to understand the essence of the chosen approach. By doing so, the chances of not having satisfactory results are considerably reduced.

Conclusion

It has been pointed out that social constructivism has been considered by many the appropriate approach to online adult learners. However, course designers have been facing barriers such as: a) curriculum design and content organisation problems; b) misunderstanding of what a web-based constructivist course should be like and c), the lack of emphasis on interaction in online courses. These barriers are real and appear in many web-based courses in Brazil and all around the world. This highlights that there is a growing need for reflecting upon chosen practices, so that the expected outcomes can actually be achieved.

Fortunately, course designers, academics and facilitators increasingly start to question the actual aim of adult's online education, its implications and, as a consequence, what should an appropriate pedagogy for it be like. The shift from Pedagogy to Andragogy, brings a lot of light to adults' online teaching and learning, because it reconsiders the traditional teacher-centred approach. It just means that individual differences and meaningful learning have started to be valued in adult education and that it is probably what the pedagogical practices for online teaching and learning will be focusing on. However, claiming that there is already the "best approach" for online adults' courses sounds a bit pretentious and premature, because the use of an accepted *unique* practice for any given adult-oriented online course would unquestionably be neglecting specific needs.

References

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