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How eLearning Theory Has Informed Recent Distance Education Practice

Introduction

eLearning theory, like the technology that drives it, is constantly evolving. New software, systems, and ideas push the envelope of previously established educational theories like behaviorism, constructivism, and cognitivism. As theories have adapted to help explain and provide a rationale for how learning occurs best from a distance, instructors have begun to use those theories to inform their work. One modern eLearning theory that is already contributing to changes and new ideas in recent distance education practice is connectivism. Connectivism, by positing an educational theory that lends itself to eLearning, has informed recent distance education practice by helping instructors to provide more diverse information sources, develop learning activities that require 21st century skills, and assess learners in ways that were never possible in face-to-face learning environments.

Connectivism

Siemens' (2004) theory of connectivism is an appropriate theoretical construct for eLearning because it describes how students learn in a networked environment. Since learners are gaining knowledge by interacting with the different "nodes" in a network, this implies certain assumptions and best practices that need to be followed in distance education. Specifically, Anderson (2008) says that learners need to be autonomous and independent, be able to "unlearn" old information, and determine irrelevant information. In addition, instructors are tasked with teaching learners how to make use of networks to seek out resources to keep themselves abreast of new information in their respective fields.

Diverse Information Sources

One way instructors can teach learners how use networks to seek out new information is by providing students with access to diverse information sources. Armatas, Spratt, and Vincent (2014) did a case study of an online tertiary course to analyze how connectivist principles were put into practice. In the course, learners were required to use "Web 2.0 applications such as social bookmarks, news feeds, podcasts,

blogs, wikis, and discussion forums as well as social and professional networking applications such as LinkedIn...as part of their personal learning network” (as cited in Tracey, 2009, p. 8). By using these applications and systems, instructors are implementing connectivist principles by having learners access a variety of information via different networks.

Learning Activities Requiring 21st Century Skills

Another way that Armatas et al. (2014) observed connectivism informing recent distance education practices was through the development of learning activities that require 21st century skills. These skills include information, media, and technology literacies. In order to be considered “literate” in these areas, students must know how to independently take advantage of certain networks in order to access new and relevant resources. In their case study, Armatas et al. (2014) noted that one of the learning activities required students to perform a desktop search using recommended keywords for different journal articles, books, and websites in order to obtain information related to the assigned topic.

Armatas et al. (2014) also observed connectivist principles being used in the guidelines that instructors provided when assigning learning activities requiring collaboration amongst students. Online meeting tools like Skype, email, or phone conferencing were suggested as ways for students to coordinate their efforts. Instructors also encouraged students to take advantage of different online applications like Dropbox or Google Docs in order to share and manage their work products with one another. By designing distance education learning activities that require these 21st century skills like those described above, instructors are using connectivism to inform their practice.

Assessments Designed for Distance Education

With the dawn of online learning came new possibilities for learner assessments that either were not possible or did not lend themselves to face-to-face learning environments. During their case study of an online tertiary course, Armatas, Spratt, and Vincent (2014) said that one of the main summative assessments for the course was the development of a professional toolkit: “The purpose of this toolkit [was] to assist students to develop an understanding of the range of tools available, how they can be used, and when they are most effective” (p. 86). By the end of the degree, students would be assessed by their

ability and experience using online publishing tools, file-sharing applications, synchronous communication platforms, and online presentation software (p. 85). While creating an assessment around such a “toolkit” would be possible in a face-to-face classroom, a degree earned via distance education requires such a practice.

Conclusion

eLearning theories like connectivism are clearly helping to inform distance education practices in the way that instructors provide information, develop learning activities, and assess their learners. By describing how students gain knowledge through networks and engage in an ongoing social discourse, connectivism is a learning theory that is suitable for characterizing distance education. But just as cognitivism was born out of and built upon theories like behaviorism and constructivism, connectivism will likely become a theory that goes out of vogue. It will be interesting to see the new eLearning theories will be developed in order account for advancements in educational technology and practices.

References

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