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E-learning policies, practices and challenges in two Norwegian organizations

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Abstract

This article reports a pilot study on the uses of technology to enable learning within a formal educational setting in a higher education institution and within a corporation. These two Norwegian cases were selected due to their commitment to technology-enabled learning, as expressed in policy and strategy documents. The aim was to investigate the commitment and actual use of information and communications technology (ICT) for learning as well as what key actors think are the major challenges for successful large scale implementation of ICT for learning. The findings indicate that there is insufficient follow-up on e-learning policies and that there is a general lack of strategic direction and leadership in this area. The key challenges respondents highlight relate to the need for a systematic and pedagogical approach to e-learning in which three equally important considerations must be balanced: organization, pedagogy and technology. Key perspectives of a coherent pedagogical and organizational framework for planning e-learning are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In schools, universities, and in work life, the question of how to utilize modern information and communication technologies (ICT) for learning purposes is an important question for anyone with a stake in education and training, as new technologies are spreading rapidly. A core issue with regard to these pervasive changes in educational technologies in the context of the global economy is learning. Simply put, a valid slogan for educational institutions and corporations alike might be 'Learn or Burn'.

What is actually going on in the field of learning and ICT? Are we witnessing a revolution of learning? Are new technologies producing better learning than traditional classrooms and traditional teachers? Or, are claims of radical improvements in learning as a result of ICT only empty words aimed at making people believe in the utility of ICT and buy more technology? Evidence for both possibilities can be found. A basic motivation for this study (Welle-Strand & Tjeldvoll, 2002) is to explore e-learning policies and practices in order to get a better understanding of what actually contributes to improved learning and

increased value creation as opposed to what about technology is just fashionable.

This is an exploratory pilot study. The empirical data are intended only to illustrate or exemplify policies and opinions at two organizations. There is no intention to explain what is going on in general in the field of learning and ICT, although what is happening in these organizations may be representative. The overall research questions are: how is e-learning understood, and to what extent is there a relation between e-learning policies and practice?

2. Organizing of learning

During the last twenty years, many countries have increasingly put emphasis on knowledge and on an educated population as strategic competitive measures in the global economy. The general aim is to become knowledge societies and play an active role in the global knowledge economy. The reason for the increasing emphasis on knowledge can be found in the assumption that we are living through a revolution as pervasive in scope and effects as was the industrial revolution (Castells, 1996). For firms in a highly competitive and dynamic market, continuous innovation becomes a goal in which knowledge is seen as

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the core resource and learning is viewed as the most important process (Lundvall, 1992).

In a society where knowledge is the main resource, the development and spread of new knowledge becomes central. Consequently, universities and institutions of higher learning are seen as central agents of innovation and competitiveness. “If knowledge is the electricity of the new informational-international economy, then the institutions of higher education are the power sources on which the new development process must rely” (Castells, 1994, p. 16). Trondsen (2000) argues that new technologies, highly competitive global markets and the new labor force all contribute to the increasing demand for learning. Today’s global context forces all organizations to find ways of adapting to changed surroundings or surrender—that is, learn or burn.

A critical condition for making an institution’s ICT learning (e-learning) effective is assumed to be the institution’s key actors’ level of understanding the rationale for organizing goal-effective learning. As an overall framework for identifying conditions of goal-effective learning, a model of relations between certain factors pertaining to all learning is applied. However, the two organizations chosen for this study represent very different learning environments. One is a private university and the other a telecommunications corporation. As this article aims at describing and comparing understanding of and experience with e-learning in these two organizations, it is necessary to understand how they differ.

Corporations as learning arenas are different from educational institutions because they do not have learning as a primary objective. Corporate learning aims to serve corporate goals and needs, and in a general sense to increase competitiveness, profit, efficiency, and so on. At the same time, learning is a cognitive process in the minds of individuals. As such, learning is related to individual learning experiences, to groups and to the larger organization. The content of learning differs in the two contexts. In educational institutions, particularly universities, learning is based on scientific disciplines or defined knowledge areas. Corporate learning, on the other hand, is interdisciplinary and oriented to practical tasks (Sangster, MacLaran, & Marshall, 2000); learning in corporations is built upon work tasks or work situations, and how to master certain competencies or solve specific tasks. Time is a central variable. Learning strategies in corporations are often geared towards just-in-time learning. Just in case learning, on the other hand, is learning knowledge and competencies in advance of potential use, which is the time perspective of educational institutions where students enroll in a program to learn a range of competencies for potential use in the future. Finally, another important dimension relates to the degree of planning and structuring of learning activities. Educational institutions emphasize formal learning, which is course-based and where emphasis is put on validation of acquired knowledge through testing and evaluation. This is

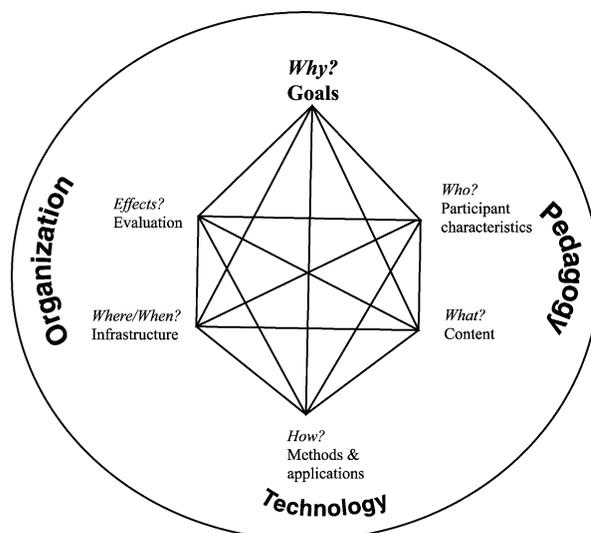


Fig. 1. A general model for organizing goal-effective learning.

not the primary focus of learning in corporations, where learning is a mix of formal courses and much informal learning, with the test of knowledge being improved job performance—the application of learned knowledge and skills to job tasks.

While the learning activities in educational institutions and corporations are markedly different, their efforts to organize learning share important properties with regard to planning and facilitating learning for groups and individuals. It is important to bear in mind that the model for organizing learning that we use (see Fig. 1) only takes into account deliberately planned learning activities—not informal and ad hoc learning, which represent the largest proportion of learning in corporations (Trondsen, 2000). Because e-learning represents pre-designed learning activities and our focus is on e-learning, our goal-directed model can be justified.

At a general and highly abstract level, the process of organizing and planning learning activities needs to take into account the following considerations and interrelationships: why learning activities are being planned; who the learners are; what is to be learnt; how it is being learnt; where and when the learning activities are taking place; and, what the effects are (see Fig. 1). These considerations correspond to didactical categories: goals, content, methods of instruction, and evaluation. In addition, explicit emphasis is put on the participant characteristics in terms of prior knowledge, learning styles and motivation. The model also emphasizes the need for considering the infrastructure for learning, in terms of where and when learning is to be archived with the view that different learning arenas impact planning and outcomes—the physical environment influences how to facilitate learning.

This general rationale of goal effective learning was formulated by Tyler (1950) and further developed in a Norwegian context by Bjørndal and Lieberg (1978), Engelsen (1997) and Thune and Welle-Strand (2000).

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