

de-learning: an ecological perspective on e-learning research

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Recent studies and events suggest that e-learning has entered a new phase of critical reflection. After the early hype and excitement of the late 90s, and billions of dollars later, major problems are starting to surface. The decommissioning of the £70-million UK e-university, and a recent major study on 'Thwarted Innovation: What happened to e-learning and why?' are just two examples.

In the new phase of e-learning, we have to 'de-learn'. De-learning is a synchronous process of deconstruction and enacting new understandings. It is important to deconstruct the assumptions underlying the failure of e-learning and develop a new set of principles that are appropriate for education in a connected, complex, and rapidly changing world.

There is a long tradition of alternative perspectives on learning and technology that is generally overlooked in e-learning research, ranging from Romantic disenchantment with the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s (William Blake, Samuel Butler), through the 1960s (Leonard 1969; Reich), and more recent studies (Roszak, Bowers, Dreyfus). The session will examine the recent evidence on the failure of e-learning and situate this within the broader genre of critical discourse on the uses of technology in education and society. It proposes a new framework for developing e-learning based on emerging ecological approaches to teaching and learning in higher education.

The key idea is that teaching/learning is an ecosystemic process of transforming information into knowledge, in which teacher-subject-student relationships are embedded or situated in a context where complex interacting influences shape the quality of learning outcomes (Frielick 2004). This perspective ventures into a new ecology of cognition and learning known as enactivism (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991).

It raises the question: As we de-learn about new educational modalities, can e-learning provide an authentic substitute for the embedded contextual relationships that characterise authentic and deep learning environments?

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