Viewing E-Learning Productivity from the Perspective of Habermas’ Cognitive Interests Theory

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the throes of an educational transformation from a print culture to a digitized culture, educators face an important challenge of how to define e-learning productivity. This article reviews the meanings of learning productivity from the selective literature and points out the need to conceptualize learning productivity in an e-learning environment. It draws on Habermas’ Cognitive Interests Theory as the conceptual foundation. The proposed framework for e-learning productivity describes three distinct orientations: instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory. The common notion of e-learning productivity often focuses mainly on instrumental objectives that are measured in terms of higher achievement, better test scores, more satisfaction, less cost, and so forth. Yet, this article argues that the notion of e-learning productivity should also encompass the aspects of reaching common understanding, building team consensus, and achieving critical reflection, self-actualization, and emancipation from constraints, because all of these are relevant aspects in today’s technologically rich learning environment.

Keywords: assessment; e-learning; emancipatory learning; Habermas’s Cognitive Interests Theory; learning productivity

INTRODUCTION

Cisco Systems Inc.’s John Chambers once dubbed education “the next big killer application on the Internet” (Grimes, 2000). As one of the first and most promising industries to capitalize on Web technology, e-learning is expected to play a key role in transforming geographically dispersed communication, delivery of information, and efficiency of business practices. The application of information and communication technology (ICT) in knowledge-based industries is a key driver for the rapid rise of e-learning initiatives. Although there are diverse definitions of e-learning, this article characterizes e-learning in the context of Dr. Tom Cary (Bourret, 2000) as “connecting people and learning resources with enabling technologies.” Indeed, with today’s technologies, e-learning provides an alternative and productive way for students to
learn in virtual space rather than in a face-to-face situation. As distance is shrinking and working time expanding, learning can occur virtually at any place at any time without the need for a physical presence at a specific location. In such a backdrop, it is difficult to ignore the visible impact of new technologies that have accelerated the pace of learning and created unlimited opportunities for collaboration, insight, and knowledge production (Zuboff, 1996, p. IX).

Today’s educational enterprises continuously need to cope with an increasing knowledge demand in diverse social, economical, cultural, and technological environments. These enterprises cannot afford to blindly follow the lead of technology without considering the human factors involved. Yet, the rapid growth of e-learning has led many educators and administrators to look upon state-of-the-art technology as a presumable solution for the enhancement of learning and teaching processes. “Faster” is uncritically equated with “better.” Likewise, doing more with less is commensurate with productivity. Consequently, learning productivity is concerned more with what technology can do rather than what purpose it serves. In the throes of an educational transformation from face-to-face interaction to virtual collaboration, and from brick-and-mortar institutionalization to cyber universities, educators and administrators face an important challenge of how to define and assess e-learning productivity. “Faster” is uncritically equated with “better.” Likewise, doing more with less is commensurate with productivity. Consequently, learning productivity is concerned more with what technology can do rather than what purpose it serves. In the throes of an educational transformation from face-to-face interaction to virtual collaboration, and from brick-and-mortar institutionalization to cyber universities, educators and administrators face an important challenge of how to define and assess e-learning productivity. Beyond the hype and the irrational enthusiasm, there exists a major gap in the understanding of the role and impact of the technology used in today’s classrooms. Salomon and Perkins (1996) echo this concern as they write “...the real issue here is to determine whether applications of technology will yield the promised improvement of learning or not” (p. 111).

E-learning is an emerging industry (for more discussion of e-learning, c.f., Huynh, Umesh, & Valacich, 2003). Reviewing the state of e-learning is an ambitious task and also beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, this article attempts to address one small aspect of the very fundamental issue in today’s e-learning: How is productivity defined and understood in an e-learning environment? What are the implications of the commonly assumed notion of productivity in e-learning? This issue is no doubt controversial, but it is an issue that has important implications in the implementation of e-learning. To define and understand productivity in an e-learning environment requires a critical reexamination of the notion of learning productivity.

This article intends to broaden its concepts to depict not only the traditional classroom context, but also the technologically rich environment of e-learning. By doing so, it aims at reconciling the controversial notion of “learning productivity” because achieving a meaningful and well-established definition of “learning productivity” is significant in a number of ways. First, the result may offer a conceptual foundation for assessing and measuring the impact of ICT. Secondly, a well-defined notion of “learning productivity” may provide a clear focus for the objective and evaluation of the technological investment. And finally, a good understanding of “e-learning productivity” is essential for educators to justify the return on investment in the acquisition and implementation of instructional technology.

The article is organized as follows. The next section is a review of the commonly held meanings for learning productivity. This section also addresses the need for the re-conceptualization of learning pro-
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