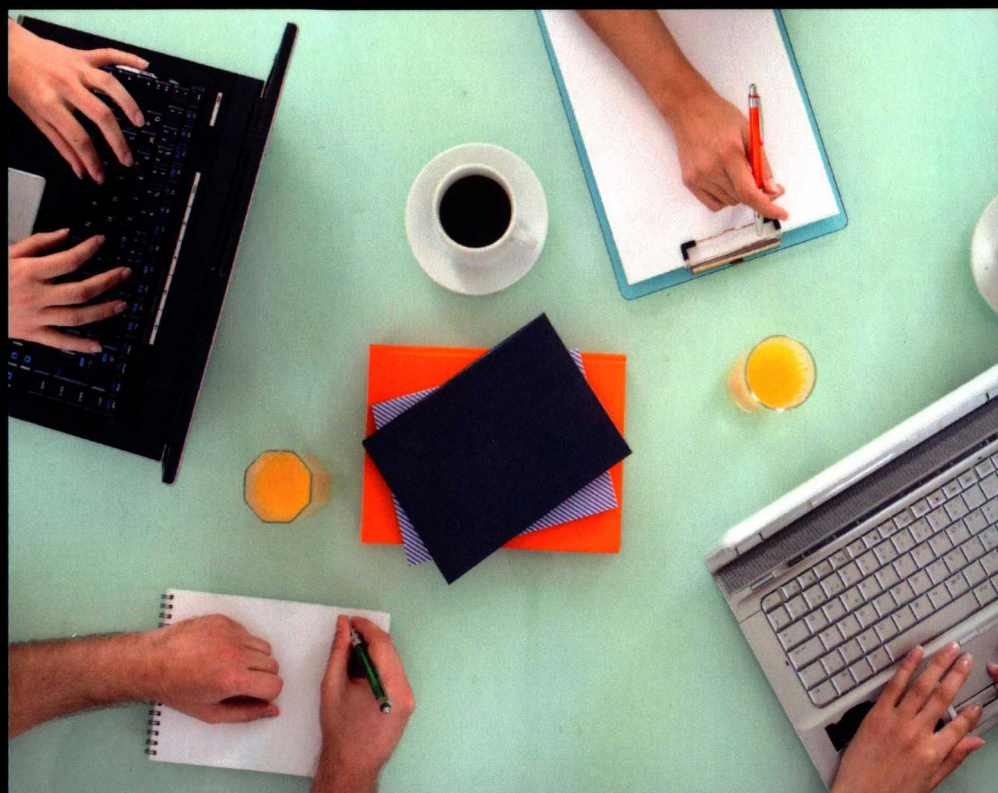


Cases on Formal and Informal E-Learning Environments

Opportunities and Practices



Harrison Hao Yang & Shuyan Wang

Cases on Formal and Informal E-Learning Environments:

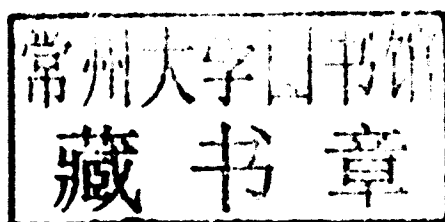
Opportunities and Practices

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Preface

In recent years, we have witnessed that e-learning environments have been supporting both intentional and non-intentional learning in new ways through various forms of participation. On the one hand, emergent technologies have the capacity for educational institutions and corporations to become involved in training that helps extend the possibilities of accommodating different types of learning. With these technologies, instructors and trainers not only empower learners, but also create exciting new learning opportunities. On the other hand, technology-enriched learning environments provide new ways of supporting lifelong learning. Learners can interact with other learners through e-learning; thus, gain information from their interactive and social experiences to construct their own knowledge. Consequently, opportunities and practices of formal and informal learning significantly expand within e-learning environments.

With digital and social technologies experiencing an accelerated process of evolution, we believe it is important to go over both cutting-edge, research-based and first-hand, practice-based cases in order to have a better understanding of different e-learning environments. Accordingly, we edited *Cases on Formal and Informal E-Learning Environments: Opportunities and Practices*. This book disseminates practices and research regarding formal and informal e-learning environments that include case studies, best practices, personal experiences, pedagogical approaches and strategies, related resources and projects, etc.

Cases on Formal and Informal E-Learning Environments: Opportunities and Practices is written for the broader audience. These individuals include educators, trainers, administrators, and researchers working in the areas of e-learning or distance learning in various disciplines, such as education, corporate training, instructional technology, computer science, library information science, information technology, and workforce development. We hope readers will benefit from the work of authors who range from cutting-edge researchers to experienced practitioners regarding the research and practices in formal and informal e-learning environments. Learning environments usually include a variety of, and interrelated, components, such as space, people, technology, culture, etc. With this in mind, the book covers focal

points of e-learning environments: communities, activities, and strategies. Specifically, this book is organized into three sections of formal and informal e-learning environments: (1) Networking and Learning Communities (Chapters 1-7), (2) Professional and Disciplinary Implementations (Chapters 8-12), and (3) Pedagogical Design and Implications (Chapters 13-19).

Cases on Formal and Informal E-Learning Environments: Opportunities and Practices provides not only the advanced and latest developments of formal and informal e-learning environments for experienced professionals, but also provides clear and detailed practices/projects for novice readers. Cases inside this book can easily adapt to suit a variety of information and communications technology related courses/workshops and specific needs of students, instructors, professionals, and administrators. For instructors and trainers to utilize these studies in their courses and workshops, an additional set of support materials for each case is available, which includes: (a) a list of questions and answers for the case, (b) an epilogue and a list of lessons learned, and (c) a list of resources for further study. The book can be used as a research reference, pedagogical and professional guide/textbook, or educational resource in the area of e-learning environments.

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Acknowledgment

We would like to express our appreciation to the authors whose cases appear in this book. We have enjoyed working with them, for they have made our work interesting, enjoyable, and relatively painless. Their excellent contributions make us feel confident that readers will truly benefit from reading this book.

We are very grateful for the support provided by the reviewers. They have done outstanding work providing us with detailed comments and constructive suggestions for each of the cases. Their comments and suggestions were helpful in making editorial decisions and providing important feedback to the authors for improving and revising their cases. Special thanks go to Hengtao Tang for an eye for detail throughout.

Finally, we would like to thank our families for their patience and encouragement. Both of our families have been a constant source of understanding, support, and encouragement.

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In their personal lives, many students are using social media to create, communicate, and connect with others from around the world. Yet, the research suggests that students' use of these tools in an academic setting is often minimal, at best. This chapter examines the use of social media by students to extend the learning beyond the formal boundaries of one fully online course. Using a social media tool, the students were instructed to follow individuals affiliated with the topics covered with this course throughout the semester. The purpose of this activity was to provide students with informal learning opportunities and enable them to make connections with individuals in the field. While a small number of students initially expressed frustration with the tools, as well as the quality and quantity of the content, the majority stated that this activity led to a greater understanding of the course topic.

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A vibrant community of learners benefits from the well-being and health of all. The connectedness of today's students through social media presents a powerful

opportunity for K-State, which built the University Life Café to strengthen the emotional health of K-State’s students and to optimally prevent student suicides. This site provides opportunities for student intercommunications and interactivity; it offers access to counseling professionals. The site also provides relevant and original information on a variety of issues that affect students’ lives: methods for handling stress, dealing with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), maintaining healthy eating, strengthening social bonds and friendships, and problem-solving. The University Life Café team sponsors on-campus talks and events (including an annual art show). This team reaches out to traditional and non-traditional students and strives to create contents that speak to various demographic niches in the student population. The work of the University Life Café supports student retention by supporting learner well-being and self-efficacy through nonformal and informal learning outreaches. This chapter introduces the work of the University Life Café and the efforts made to understand who its users are in the first few years of the site’s launch. This work shows the limits of the inferences that may be made about the site visitors and their possible needs and suggests more formal and informal channels for information may enhance this situation of limited information.

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The changing landscape of technology, information, and communication is challenging higher education to rethink its approach to learning. With current developments in educational technology, formal and informal learning communities have tremendously enhanced peer-to-peer connections, knowledge sharing, social learning, and critical thinking for first year students (Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray, & Krause, 2008). A prominent advantage is that emerging technologies create a new dynamic for learning beyond the traditional classroom experience. Online resources are social and collaborative, which impact the academic realm. Although online learning has been present in higher education, the shifting technological trends have altered how and when this learning occurs, specifically amongst first year students. This case study, an honors first year seminar from the University of Florida, USA, demonstrates the benefits and challenges of these developments in education. The case expands the definition of formal, informal, and online learning communities in the context of a first year seminar.

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Research has shown that students who live off-campus during the academic year experience greater difficulty with social integration, and are at higher risk of dropping out. The aim of the present study was to explore patterns that may give an indication of the extent to which the use of social media websites can help social and academic integration among students who are living off-campus. A survey was distributed among a cohort of 370 first year undergraduate students, measuring their sense of belonging to the institution and their attitudes towards student life. Students who lived on-campus and who used social media websites reported a stronger sense of belonging than students living off-campus. A significant interaction effect indicated that using social media websites reduced the difference in sense of belonging between students living on- and off-campus. Scores on the attitude scale were significantly related to sense of belonging. The results suggest that online networking can aid social integration among students who do not have the advantage of the face-to-face interaction that takes place in residential life on-campus.

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e-Bridge to mobility is a platform designed to encourage a more prospective future for people from Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The objective of this project is to promote mobility to the UK, Germany, and Spain, by offering education, via English, German, and Spanish language courses; practical information about the UK, Germany, and Spain; and membership in an e-community. The project is aimed at people who seek employment in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Spain.

Chapter 6

Informal Online Learning through the Mediterranean Youth Technology Club:
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 Nikleia Eteokleous-Grigoriou, Frederick University, Cyprus

The Mediterranean Youth Technology Club is a bridge building initiative designed to empower and educate youth, providing them with tools that would enable them to become socially and culturally responsible leaders. Within MYTecC youth simultaneously follow three different but complimentary curricula: English, Social-Virtual, and Technology in an informal educational setting, extensively using Web 2.0 tools. Two MYTecC cycles have been finalized, and a new one is in the process of being initiated. The current study evaluates the effectiveness and impact of MYTecC. It aims to capture the overall MYTecC experience from students' and instructors' perspectives. Additionally, it measures the development of youth's social-cultural and leadership skills, skills and knowledge developed, as well as attitude changes. Finally, it evaluates the role of Web 2.0 tools in achieving the above.

Chapter 7

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Different ways of communication are encouraging the development of a different societal texture where social networking sites, blogs, or other Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) tools are employed. The “youngcast” project, an international students’ exchange, has been designed to cope with the demands of this technologically globalized context we are immersed in; in this project, an online platform is used and Oral Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (OSCMC) exchanges are scheduled in order to join English and Spanish Second Language (SL) learners from different parts of the world. A case study, aimed to discover some of the preliminary factors inhibiting participants from taking part in the OSCMC exchanges, resulted in the design of an updated version of the online platform; this new environment is more focused on facilitating online communication between tandem partners and keeping track of some of their learners’ production for ulterior feedback.

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Kenneth H. Anderson, York University, Canada
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Policing is a storytelling profession. Storytelling is a linguistic medium for the sharing of experiences, values, and culture. Organizations have a need to promote the sharing of experiences from senior to junior members. Organizations desire to ensure that proper values and culture are reinforced during this sharing process. Technology affords a tool for the sharing, and for the mediation of what is shared. This study focuses on a case where technology was used for the direct sharing of experiences. This sharing was done through the use of storytelling in the form of video presentations delivered in an e-learning course. Participants viewing these videos reported feeling a sense of engagement and immersion in the experiences of the teller. Participants reported that stories aid their retention and recall of the content of them. Other storytelling professions will benefit from using similar approaches.

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