Chapter 1

A HISTORY OF E-LEARNING
Echoes of the pioneers

Paul Nicholson
Faculty of Education, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Australia 3125
pauln@deakin.edu.au

Abstract: In many contemporary sectors, E-learning is often regarded as a ‘new’ form of learning that uses the affordances of the Internet to deliver customized, often interactive, learning materials and programs to diverse local and distant communities of practice. This view, however, is historically disconnected from its antecedent instantiations, failing to recognize the extensive links between developing educational theories and practices that had shaped the use of E-learning over the past 40 years. In addition, the historic divide between Education and Training has led to both the concurrent development of different notions, foci, and labels for technology-enhanced learning in different contexts and situations, and different conceptual origins arising in acquisitive and participatory learning metaphors.

Key words: E-learning; history; theory; practice.

1. PARALLEL HISTORIES AND TERMINOLOGY

With the historian it is an article of faith that knowledge of the past is a key to understanding the present (Stampp in Szasz, 2006). In the history of E-learning, it is important to note that there is no single evolutionary tree and no single agreed definition of E-Learning: since the 1960s, E-learning has evolved in different ways in Business, Education, the Training sector, and the Military (for a military perspective see Fletcher & Rockway, 1986), and currently means quite different things in different sectors. In the school sector, ‘E-Learning’ refers to the use of both software-based and online learning, whereas in Business, Higher-Education, the Military and Training sectors, it refers solely to a range of on-line practices. (Campbell, 2004)
The history of E-learning across all sectors is best summed up as: ‘Opportunities multiply as they are seized.’ (Sun Tzu, 410bc) as for the past 40 years, educators and trainers at all levels of Education, Business, Training and the Military made use of computers in different ways to support and enhance teaching and learning. (Charp, 1997; Molnar, 1997) Consequently, the contemporary use of the term ‘E-learning’ has different meanings in different contexts (Campbell, 2004). In the Higher Education, Business, and Training sectors it relates particularly to Internet-based flexible delivery of content and programs that focus on sustaining particular communities of practice. E-learning in business and training can be characterised as being driven by notions of improved productivity and cost reduction, especially in an increasingly globalised business environment, with a focus on content delivery and online course management. These sectors initially employed the limited learning models extant at the time, but have since moved to incorporate a diverse range of learning models and foci. (Nicholson, 2004) Campbell (2004, p1) argues that:

‘Broadly, in industry settings, E-learning reflects an emphasis on informal and non-formal, just-in-time learning where the emphasis is on collaborative productivity. Whilst, in higher education settings, best-practice online learning emphasises the development of metacognitive skills, where the emphasis is on reflective and collaborative learning.’

In the context of the wider education community, the use of the term E-learning has historically had wider connotations that embrace a diverse range of practices, technologies, and theoretical positions. It is not only focused on online contexts, and includes the full range of computer-based learning platforms and delivery methods, genres, formats and media such as multimedia, educational programming, simulations, games and the use of new media on fixed and mobile platforms across all discipline areas. It is often characterised by active learner-centred pedagogies. (e.g., Harel, 1991; McDougall & Betts, 1997)

The growth of E-learning in Business and Higher Education, and its marketing as a ‘killer-app’ (Friedman, 1999), has led to concerns about the influence of quality assurance driven models on the structure and quality of these programs (e.g., King, 2002; McGorry, 2003). Related concerns about its ability to deliver meaningful pedagogically structured learning experiences, or to have a clearly identifiable learning paradigm have also been raised (Gillham, 2002; Stone Wiske, Sick et al., 2001; Suthers, Hundhausen et al., 2003). Recently, driven by such concerns, its focus has expanded to accommodate the incorporation of learner engagement and social-learning models (e.g., Mortera-Gutiérrez, 2006; Schroeder & Spannagel, 2006). Since its inception, technological advances in computers