A gradual paradigm shift from IT use that complements traditional teaching towards embedded IT use in E-learning provides new challenges for educational researchers. An international strategy to meet these challenges is to establish E-learning research observatories which will sustain longitudinal research programmes and inform researchers and other stakeholders to maximize the impact of research on national and international policies.

Introduction

Three principal calls to action identified at Edusummit2011 by the Researching IT in Education technical working group (now TWG7) were to: (i) identify research strategies that would be relevant to the digital age within an emerging global society; (ii) develop mechanisms for sharing and distributing research outcomes to all stakeholders; and (iii) articulate research methods that can be used to inform policy-makers and influence change in education. Having established the need for international research observatories, the main issues to be addressed for TWG7 at Edusummit2013 are: (a) identify the current research priorities amongst working group members and the nations they represent and (b) develop strategies to establish research observatories which would meet the needs of different nations and national policies.

Background

Our review of past research, and the variety of new and evolving methodologies identified therein, has shown that traditional methods will no longer be sufficient to address the complex factors that impinge upon the teacher and the learner, especially with regard to formal and informal educational environments. IT provides new communication and knowledge representation possibilities that are dynamic and unstable as new technologies evolve. This means that research methods are needed which can accommodate these “uncertain” learning experiences and address problems where, for example, learners are restricted from free and personalized use of IT in formal school settings, which stands in direct conflict with their informal IT use outside of schools. This rapidly changing context makes it essential that research teams be sufficiently skilled and literate in the medium that they are researching to avoid misinterpretation of the learning processes under examination.

Opportunities to participate in digital cultures, including access to E-learning in developing and developed countries (or within regions for some countries), can be dramatically different. However, our research agenda for examining what some have called the digital divide needs to move beyond an access focus to address issues of attitude, culture, ability, cognition and literacy. Although there is clearly a divide between haves and the have-nots there are also distinct cultural and individual differences and interpretations between and among groups concerning the value and use of technology, as well as a divide in utilization and productive application of IT for learning, even among
those with high levels of IT access. Therefore, researchers and policymakers need to consider what communities can and are doing to overcome digital divides, and respect differing learning cultures relative to digital resources. During the 2011 working group discussions, it was proposed that terms like digital difference or digital diversity may better capture the more complex research context and be preferable to the term digital divide. As a research community, we need to become more clear and consistent in our use of terminology, which has been a cause of misinterpretation of research findings by policy makers and the media.

A major challenge in forming a clear and coherent strategy for researching IT in education lies in the fact that there are multiple stakeholders with differing aims, goals and objectives. Some of the myriad relationships among stakeholders, which were identified by the working group at Edusummit2011, are represented in Figure 1. The central triangle shows elements that are foundational to supporting relationships among practitioners, researchers and policymakers, with one key to success involving cooperation and collaboration among stakeholders. In many cases, stakeholders have been at odds with each other, with policymakers viewed as imposing mandates and regulations on practitioners, practitioners viewing researchers’ work as too theoretical and removed from the real world of teachers, and researchers questioning the effectiveness of teaching practices and challenging the wisdom of mandated policies.

Therefore the focus of the working group 7 will be to build and elaborate on relationship between the roles identified above, and to establish a framework of communication and collaboration which will feed into and draw from the proposed research observatories.

**Issues/unresolved questions/concerns**

The following issues, which were identified from previous Edusummit working group member’s expertise, research reviews and deliberations (see references below), will be augmented by contributions from the Edusummit2013 group.

There are still many political, cultural and financial barriers which inhibit a shift towards a more cooperative and collaborative environment, which recognizes and honours multiple voices and perspectives.

The paradigm shift required in education to account for the pervasiveness of IT in society, which has resulted in local and global networked societies, shows that for a research agenda to address the
interrelationships among the different stakeholders in formal and informal educational settings, research teams will need to have diverse discipline expertise.

**Key questions will include:**

1. How can research practices be rectified with cultural differences, national priorities and global agendas?
2. How can the international community of researchers bring about a shift towards a more cooperative and collaborative research community?
3. How can the Edusummit2013 working group build on cooperation amongst stakeholders to develop an internationally shared vision?
4. How can members of Edusummit2013 establish the basis for educational research observatories?

**Recommended additional reading**

*Papers and reports that preceded or emerged from EDUsummit 2011:*


**References**