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Title: A new challenge in ODL: The arrival of the play generation

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Many experts on Open and Distance Learning have argued about the expected changes facing education. The challenges ahead are usually identified with changes in how the learning experience is delivered, changes in who is delivering the learning experience, and changes in the role of the learner as part of a target population. Radical changes have already taken place in the latter and it seems reasonable to acknowledge that a new pedagogical approach is needed to cope with the arrival of a new generation of potential students. We can describe this change as a shift from a “drill generation” to a “play generation”. Somebody already called this new target group the “playstation” generation.

Mainstream research on educational technology has focused on the discovery of more effective ways for conveying “relevant” information to students. A problem that we identified is that students often do not engage with the subject matter, especially when dealing with complex domain representations, even when hypermedia resources are available. Of course, with the emergence of massive information resources there is a need for powerful and effective learning tools that can handle all kinds of media configurations.

The loose integration of media in Open and Distance Learning and the lack of effective interactivity with many available educational products restrict the use of multimedia in the wider learning context. To face this problem, taking into account pedagogical and technological dimensions, a virtual environment is needed to facilitate the learning process that integrates audio-visual media technologies. In this regard, the reuse of existing materials and the production of reusable materials is a strategic option that makes economic sense and can be an effective solution, if adequately structured to support the learner in an autonomous knowledge construction process.

We believe that more attention has to be paid to the relationship between motivational and cognitive issues. We propose a new model for online interaction that deals with the fractal structuring of knowledge in online learning environments. We argue that cognitive mapping can provide the right support for visualization and construction of hypermedia structures in a learning process that we can define as *constructivist* (Papert).

Findings from our research suggest that this is may be the answer to an emergent learning style based on a more active and more playful interaction.

We are not implying that the processes of traditional university education are wrong. What we are advocating is that interactive multimedia and the Internet hold the potential to be an exceptionally fine tool for creating, densely woven, extremely engaging, and highly challenging new course materials. Such materials may be rooted in traditional forms of pedagogy, respond to the demands of a specific domain, yet are enhanced by the new technologies.