Chapter 25
Through the Eyes of Students and Faculty:
A Conceptual Framework for the Development of Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments. It is argued that online learning can help address issues of educational inequity, poverty, and social exclusion. The momentum is moving towards online learning, and universities are pressured to develop more online options for their students in order to stay relevant and provide needed flexibility. On average, courses that are delivered online have higher attrition rates than regular face-to-face courses. There are numerous challenges and difficulties in developing online learning environments without sacrificing the quality of learning. This case study examines the development, delivery, and evaluation of online learning through the eyes of students and faculty of an educational leadership department in a Southeast research university.

INTRODUCTION

Literature suggests that online learning is growing in most sectors all over the world (Gulati, 2008; Moller et al., 2008; University World News, 2014). In higher education, enrollment in online courses has been growing substantially and rapidly, exceeding the growth in enrollment in face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2013). It is argued that online learning can help address issues of educational inequity, poverty, and social exclusion since it is a value neutral means of instruction (Gulati, 2008). Online learning can allow individuals to overcome time, space, and social obstacles and gain access to educational opportunities. Online learning

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can provide opportunities of higher education, especially to marginalized groups, as it offers a cheaper and more flexible educational alternative (Andersson & Gronlund, 2009; Dhanarajan, 2001; Patton, 2000; Potashnik & Capper, 1998).

Online education is here to stay (Okamoto et al., 2000); the momentum is moving towards online learning and universities are pressured to develop more online options for their students in order to stay relevant and provide needed flexibility. That being said, online course delivery may still face some obstacles, one of which is the development and maintenance of long distance partnerships between teachers and students who are typically separated by both distance and time. It is worth mentioning also that, on average, courses that are delivered online have higher attrition rates than regular face-to-face courses (Diaz, 2002; DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006). The challenges and difficulties of developing online courses without sacrificing the quality of learning remain numerous. In this chapter the researchers will provide a review of the relevant literature, and examine the development, delivery techniques, and assessment of online learning and technology. The researchers will present a case study which employed participatory action research in collaboration with students and faculty of an educational leadership department, in a Southeastern research university. Results from this participatory action research case study will be presented as a conceptual framework for the development of effective online courses and recommendations for ensuring positive learning outcomes for students enrolled in online courses.

HISTORY AND DEFINITION OF ONLINE LEARNING

As Marshall McLuhan (1964, p. 7) said so eloquently and succinctly, "The medium is the message." He further described media as "extensions" of ourselves and believed that the message of any medium or technology is "the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (p. 8). As an example, he cites how first the development of the railway and then the invention and widespread use of the airplane accelerated the rate of transportation, creating new cities, new work possibilities, and new forms of leisure. These two inventions changed the very fabric of society around the world. Similarly, in the late 1980s, the Worldwide Web and its system of transport, the Internet, vastly accelerated the transmission of information around the world, making it virtually instantaneous and ubiquitous. There are many terms for online education. Some of them are: virtual education, Internet-based education, web-based education, education via computer-mediated communication, and distance education.

Distance education was defined as "the application of telecommunications and electronic devices which enable students and learners to receive instruction from some distant location" by the U.S Department of Educational Research and Improvement (Bruder, 1989, p. 30). There are two different viewpoints on the main purpose of distance education; the first argues that distance education is an instrument of instruction, whereas the second contends that distance education is a teaching method. There is a definition which combines both viewpoints and is commonly accepted by the distance education community (Casey, 2008). This definition is offered by Keegan (1988) as follows:

1) the quasi-permanent separation between teacher and student throughout the length of the learning process; 2) the influence of an educational organization both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services; and 3) the use of technical media: print, audio, video, or computer to unite teacher and learner to carry out the content of the course. (p. 10)