

Classroom Without Borders

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INTRODUCTION

Today the global education community has become the buzz term in the realm of education and training. Learners in every location around the globe must acquire new skills, be literate, and understand constantly changing dynamics in globalization (Schrum, 2000, p. 91). College courses taught in the United States of America can be taken by students in Asia. Likewise, courses taught in Europe can be taken by learners in North America. Although younger learners like to travel to a different university in a different country in order to obtain a much-desired degree and to get cultural immersion in order to learn a different language, nontraditional learners prefer taking courses offered by foreign universities or corporations in foreign countries via distance education technologies in their home countries. This is not to say that nontraditional learners do not like to travel to foreign countries. Rather, they have multiple work and family responsibilities (Wang, 2006) that prevent them from being away from home for a long time. Obtaining a college degree is a several years long endeavor to anyone.

Today, people live in what could be termed a knowledge society (Jarvis, 2001). In a knowledge society, lifelong learning is a must. People learn at every waking minute (Gagne, Wager, Golas & Keller, 2005). Distance education has been viewed as a way in which to offer lifelong learning to those who are geographically separated from traditional institutions, have obligations that limit their ability to attend regular courses, or have other exceptional challenges (Schrum, 2000). Distance education has evolved from passive media (paper, audio, and video broadcast) to Internet network and communication technologies. And it has the capability to deliver courses to large numbers of learners anywhere anytime (King, 2006). Regarding the omnipotent nature of distance education, King (2006, p. 16) has this to say:

- The working mother in rural Nebraska completing her bachelor's degree online through her local state

university while her children sleep at night.

- The single young man in New York City studying for the GED exam via public television and telephone tutoring.
- The mid-career business woman executive pursuing her doctorate in education via hybrid online and residency program in order to change careers.
- The retired bus driver engaged in a collaborative Webinar for his class through a University of Beijing class on the Eastern perspective of global issues.

Indeed, King's description indicates that today's classroom is without borders. Distance education technologies have broken down the four walls of a traditional classroom. Not only is distance education asynchronous, but also it is synchronous. Courses are delivered via chat rooms and videoconferencing and these are considered synchronous formats of distance education. Distance education technologies, especially the Internet communication technologies, have created a shift in focus from our traditional four-walled classroom to a classroom without borders. Distance education is seen as a viable alternative for a myriad of "just in time" professional development and lifelong learning opportunities for learners in just about any location around the globe.

BACKGROUND

Traditional course offerings using a variety of distance education technologies are normally electronic mail, computer conferencing, two-way audio/video, and satellite delivery (Harasim, 1993; Hiltz, 1990; Rice-Lively, 1994; Schrum, 1992; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Numerous studies have concluded that this form of education is not only expensive, but also effective for well-motivated learners. The growth in the practice of lifelong learning has attracted a large number of nontraditional learners to turn to online learning. These learners frequently must overcome concerns about

time, distance, and money that traditional students do not have (Shrum, 2000). As the demand to take more online courses on the part of nontraditional learners grows, many educational institutions have expanded their programs to include traditional and nontraditional courses, partially or entirely online. And other entities such as military, business, and nontraditional educational providers have begun to consider doing the same thing for their employees.

The demand comes not only from domestic learners; the demand also comes from overseas. Most people in developing countries yearn for a middle-class living in developed countries such as the United States and Western Europe. Since these learners are from low-income societies, there is no way that they can afford to travel to developed countries to take college courses. Most leading universities have seen this potential education market overseas and have begun to develop and offer online courses to these learners. To date, giant online universities have delivered courses for learners around the globe. Mention Phoenix University and most people in other countries know that it is an online university located in the United States. Yet, learners from around the world can take its courses anywhere anytime. The university has created classrooms without borders. As Bash (2003) noted, “in 2002, the University of Phoenix, part of the Apollo Group, saw its enrollment surpass 100,000 students—making it the largest institution of higher learning in the United States.” No need to say that this enrollment figure must include students from overseas. Other universities do not want to lag behind in this regard. As Wang (2006, p. 47) noted, “California State University, Long Beach, University of California, Irvine and Online University of America demonstrated Western instructional methods to deliver their graduate programs to leading universities in China, the Middle East and West Europe via Internet technologies in 2004.” Increased communication, interactivity among participants, and incorporation of collaborative pedagogical models are made possible by recent developments in technology. A classroom without borders indeed has many advantages over the traditional four walled-classrooms:

- Instantaneous (synchronous) and delayed (asynchronous) communication modes.
- Access to and from geographically isolated communities around the globe.

- Multiple and collaborative among widely dispersed individuals.
- Ultimate convenience, when and where you choose.
- Interaction with and among individuals from diverse cultures, and
- Ability to focus on participants’ ideas, without knowledge of age, race, gender, or background. (Shrum, 2000)

The classroom without borders has come a long way and taken many steps from traditional classrooms. The classroom without borders would not be possible without distance learning technologies. It was the distance-learning technologies that brought revolution to the traditional classroom. To convert a traditional classroom to a classroom without borders, there are important issues for educators and practitioners to consider. The next section delves into these prominent issues associated with the classroom without borders.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER IN CLASSROOM WITHOUT BORDERS

Although distance learning technologies have the capability to reach beyond the traditional classroom learners, this is not to say that instructors can just go ahead and dump their course onto the computer screens. To implement successful teaching and learning in a classroom without borders, instructors need to take into consideration first of all pedagogical and cultural issues. Shrum (2000) reminds instructors to ask these questions, “What are the instructional and personal goals of this course for all students?” “What is the purpose of this course?” To add to Shrum’s questions, questions that should be asked can be “Where do my students come from?” “Do they prefer Western instructional methods or Eastern instructional methods?” “What kind of prior experience do they bring to this classroom without borders?” “What are my instructional strategies to accommodate their learning needs?” “If my instructional methods do not work with this group of learners from a particular region in the world, do I have alternative instructional methods that I can fall back on?” “What are the political issues that I should always avoid when teaching a particular group of learners?”

Writing in 1996-1997, Duchastel suggests that an instructor rethink the traditional classroom model to

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