Chapter 16
Experiential Learning Model for Online and F2F Programs in University Continuing Education

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ABSTRACT

Online learning continues to grow throughout the world of post-secondary education. However, the actual learning experience is becoming less and less about human interaction and more and more about the development of applications ("apps") that rely more on technology than the interaction of instructor and learner. In an effort to enhance the level of student engagement, McMaster University's Centre for Continuing Education has turned to a model of online learning that leverages the benefits of experiential learning enabling students to work on authentic industry projects. The results of this one-year pilot are presented outlining the strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement and further research. While the experiential learning model received favorable reviews from learners, several areas for improvement were noted including, improving the onboarding process for both learners and instructors, redesigning courses to accommodate experiential learning, and improving the communication between corporate partners and those involved in each course.

INTRODUCTION

The internet continues to govern much of what humanity does. Major events of the day are transmitted throughout the world in the blink of an eye, while finances, entertainment, relationships, and professional communication can be managed exclusively online. As such, is it any surprise that education has followed the same path? Over a six-year period (2011 – 2016), the number of Canadian institutions offering online courses has increased by 11% (from 94 to 105) with a majority of Canada's institutions (85%) offering online education (eCampusOntario, 2017). Clearly the mode of delivery is here to stay. Yet, through it all, one wonders if the human element of the learning experience has been diminished as technology increasingly drives the design of courses offered in much of post-secondary education.

While many institutions and instructional designers employed therein chase after the newest and greatest application, game, or other technological toy, there is a growing move to re-instate the human element into the digital world of online education. Proponents of this view seek to re-centre human engagement in the learning journey, despite the fact that this journey increasingly takes place through the virtual medium. It is based on this view that McMaster University's Centre for Continuing Education in Hamilton, Ontario has set out to enhance the learning experience of its students by improving human interaction in a new wave of innovative courses, both in and out of the digital domain. The following analysis uses evidence gathered from this initiative along with insights from literature on engagement in online learning to trace the process and effects of the Centre for Continuing Education's efforts to leverage an experiential learning strategy employed to enhance human interaction in the online medium.

BACKGROUND

A recent report released by eCampusOntario (2017) entitled *Tracking Online and Distance Education in Canadian Universities and Colleges: 2017*, clearly confirmed the many benefits of online education. Among them were the following:

- Increased access to courses and flexibility
- Increased enrolments for the host institution
- More innovative ways of teaching
- Less demands on physical space within post-secondary education institutions
- Enhancement in specific student skills (reading, writing, etc.)
- More engaging experiences for students
- Cost-effective

Yet, for all the benefits identified in this and other similar studies, the online learning experience continues to struggle with other aspects of the learning journey. Among the most common complaints associated with online courses are the lack of immediate feedback, limited engagement, and an absence of instructor presence (V. Phillips, 2017).

Comments like these, from research conducted by Phillips (2017), indicate a disconnect between instructors and the learning process:

When I graduate this fall, I do so with a 42k student loan debt. This wouldn't bother me so much IF the education I received was taught by the engaging 'industry experts' my school advertised in their promotional materials (p.1).

$2,800 [did not] buy me … an instructor who replies to e-mails (p.1).

I must admit that these are my first online courses, but I expected a lot more interaction with the professors. Essentially this program is nothing more than independent study with a class webpage to submit homework and take quizzes and tests. There are no lectures or interaction with your instructor except by email; not my idea of a college class (p.1).

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