Chapter 8.2
E–Learning in Higher Education:
The Need for a New Pedagogy

Dirk Morrison
University of Saskatchewan, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the imperative prerequisite to the effective adoption of e-learning by institutions of higher education, namely, the adoption of new pedagogical perspectives and methods. It examines the purposes and goals of higher education, some grounded in tradition, others born of contemporary demands. By focusing on thinking skills, deep learning, and mature outcomes, the author underscores the need for such pedagogical foci to be integrated into the very fabric of higher education's adoption of e-learning. The hoped for outcome of such a consideration is a transformed institution, enabled to meet the demands of learners and society in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, valid critiques have pointed to the lack of empirical evidence that technology-enhanced learning initiatives actually improve learning outcomes, enhance the teaching enterprise, and are cost-effective for the institution (Clark, 1994; Twigg, 2001; Zemsky & Massy, 2004). Each of these claims, of course, needs careful analysis. One of the conclusions coming out of such criticisms is that technology, in and of itself, cannot be expected to solve the problems of an inefficient, even archaic, approach to pedagogy employed by the vast majority of our institutions of higher education. What, then, does the successful implementation of e-learning in postsecondary education look like? And, what does any evaluation of the success of e-learning need to include?

A critical measure of success for any institution employing e-learning technologies will be the quality of the outcomes (Weigel, 2002). This chapter aims to expand discussion beyond pragmatic questions regarding how to make the transition from face-to-face teaching to e-learning, to include questions regarding how to

fundamentally shift the core guiding pedagogical principles of our institutions of higher education. The basic premise of this chapter is that current strategies used to address gaps in performance (e.g., technology-focused faculty development) will fail to realize the hoped-for outcome of an institution shifting to e-learning technologies. A focus on methods and techniques designed to improve the effective implementation of technological products will only be partially useful; what is also needed is a deep and critical discussion regarding the fundamental purposes of designing and employing such products, and a focus on the hoped-for outcomes of such efforts. Throughout this chapter, e-learning is defined as electronically mediated learning, using any variety of media and hardware/software combinations, and usually including the use of facilitated transactions software (e.g., Blackboard, WebCT) (Zemsky & Massy, 2004, p. 5).

To take full advantage of the potential of e-learning, institutions of higher education not only have to radically change how they are organized to support technology-enhanced learning (infrastructures and organizational models), but also face the challenge of creating a more appropriate pedagogical foundation upon which to build revitalized educational systems necessary to meet the demands of current and future knowledge users and creators. Put another way, I argue that the entire system of tertiary education needs revamping from the bottom-up. Current approaches to teaching and learning are an awkward fit with the new information and communications technology (ICT) tools currently used for teaching and learning (May & Short, 2003). In many ways, these new technologies have forced this pedagogical issue and are inherently changing the system from within. Dziuban, Hartman, and Moskal (2004) pointed to a report by the National Research Council Panel on the Impact of Information Technology on the Future of the Research University, which speculated that "information technology will alter the university's usual constraints of space and time, transforming how institutions of higher education are organized and financed, as well as altering their intellectual activities" (p. 8). While it is important to consider the range and variety of factors necessary to ready institutions of higher education for the adoption of e-learning technologies, it is also critical to examine and critique current pedagogical approaches. In addition, not only will instructors and learners be challenged to learn new skills and new ways of working as a result of the adoption of ICT, but they will also be required to change their ways of thinking about the purposes of higher education, the learning process, what it means to be literate, and how knowledge is created. In other words, both faculty and learners will need to re-examine their beliefs, values, perspectives, and resultant approaches to teaching and learning when adopting e-learning technologies.

HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Eisner (1997) claimed that knowing how to pursue and capture broad meanings shaped the minds of learners. These minds, in turn, collectively shaped the culture, effected change in democratic societies, and ultimately transformed the global community—no small matter. Bamburg (2002) claimed that the very definition of what it means to be educated has changed. In the past, the educational system concentrated on providing students with the basic skills for working in an industrial economy. Now the system must focus on higher order thinking skills that are needed in our knowledge-based economy.

The implication here is that institutions of higher education have critical responsibilities to provide learning environments conducive to the development of capable and creative minds—minds readied for the challenges of a complex world. They must empower learners to know how to pursue and capture broad and deep meanings

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