Chapter 20
The Future of Online Learning in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the future of online learning and online learning technologies in higher education. Our understanding of the use of future technologies can be aided by a better understanding of how we have addressed the use of technologies in our past and in our present. A brief history of the use of technology in teaching and learning serves as a catalyst for a discussion of the near term, mid-range and far term technologies and possible issues associated with them. The authors propose that keeping the focus on human learning instead of specific tools will help higher education take full advantage of online learning in the near and far term future.

INTRODUCTION

When we first started talking about the future of online learning for this chapter, we did a number of things. First, we looked at where technology may be headed. We regularly follow online and print-based sources to see what technologies are on the horizon and how we might use them in teaching and learning. We consulted sites such as http://slashdot.com, http://technorati.com/

technology/, and the ubiquitous Google Lab (http://www.googlelabs.com/). We looked at the Horizon Reports for 2009 (http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/CSD5612.pdf) to see what they were tracking. We looked at what futurists were writing about technology and society in general (e.g. Kurzweil, 2005). Additionally, we considered the history of the field of Educational Technology (Ely & Plomp, 1996; Saettler, 1990). We have met much change in technology and its impact on education over time and we feel it is important to look at our history so that we are

not doomed to repeat it, if you will. To distill much of the reading and discussions we have had both in preparation to write this chapter, and in our ten plus years of research and writing about online learning (Harmon & Jones, 1999, Jones & Harmon, 2002; Jones & Harmon, 2006; Jones & Harmon, 2009), we can say conclusively and without reservation, that as to the future of online learning: it depends.

But make no mistake. The future of higher education will be inextricably intertwined with the Internet, or whatever the Internet becomes. Whether or not you support online learning, it will become a part of our future in higher education. As society embraces these technologies, we in higher education will find it impossible to ignore them. We see these changes already in everything from how students turn in assignments (in digital drop boxes) to how they obtain their course readings (as digital downloads to eBooks). And as a generation of web savvy-FaceBook-tweeting-texting students prepare to enter higher education in the immediate future, we will either embrace these technologies also, or be steamrolled by them. In this chapter we plan to speak briefly about our past experiences dealing with the future, the near term future, the far term future and how we should be preparing for them.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FUTURE

Suffice it to say that we in education have a rocky relationship with technology. Saettler (1990) who wrote the book, both figuratively and literally, on the history of American Educational Technology, details how various technologies have, over the years, been presented to educators as revolutionary and bound to change education as we know it. Moving from Edison's introduction of film, to radio, television, computer-based education, to online learning and everything in between, technology has been heralded as both a savior to education and, in many cases, as a replacement for teachers. After a few decades of this, teachers at all levels became, rightfully in our opinion, somewhat nervous about technology. While it seems unlikely that technology will replace teachers (at least anytime soon), at present we agree with the widely attributed saying "any teacher who can be replaced by technology should be." And even if technology is not going to replace teachers, but "merely" revolutionize education, professional educators have a vested interest in what happens with technology.

As a society, we have watched our schools spend millions of dollars on technology to improve teaching and learning. From film strips to broadband to interactive whiteboards, we have put a considerable amount of technology into classrooms, and some would argue, to little or no positive effect (e.g. Postman, 1993; Oppenheimer, 2003; Cuban, 2001). Of course those of us who work in the learning technologies world know that technology isn't the answer in and of itself. No single technology will solve our problems. What will solve our problems is first defining them and then applying research-based strategies to them. The question then becomes, which problems will a technology solve, and how will it solve them? Norman (1988) popularized the work of Gibson (1977) on the concept of affordances. The basic idea being that different technologies have different strengths and weaknesses. The trick is to leverage the strengths and avoid the weaknesses. Historically, we have not been particularly good at this. PowerPoint is a good example. Yes, PowerPoint.

Back in the day, we used overhead transparencies to provide visual information to learners during instruction. And in the days before computers enabled us to make compelling transparencies easily and affordably, creating overhead transparencies was quite resource intensive. For example, to letter a bulleted list in a professional font (e.g. not hand written) you needed quite a bit of time and patience. This might have meant rub-off letters, or tracing stencils to create a professionally

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