

E-Learning and M-Learning Problems

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INTRODUCTION

The use of online teaching in education is expanding at a rapid rate. Some may be tempted to view technology as an educational panacea (Herrington & Herrington, 1998). However, the existence of any technology does not guarantee that good educational material will be provided or that effective learning will happen (Boddy, 1997). Online teaching has the “potential to be just as inflexible and inappropriate as any other form of poor instruction” (Bennett, Priest & Macpherson, 1999, p. 208). Problems associated with online learning are often overlooked or not fully investigated (Hara & Kling, 1999). It is important not to be blinded by technology. We need to recognize and study these problems to obtain a broader picture of the impact of technology in teaching. This author is an early and enthusiastic adopter of technology in teaching. However, he has learned through experience and research that it is important to identify problems, both real and perceived, in order to develop strategies to overcome them. For example, innovators are prepared to be relatively understanding of technical problems, but the bulk of users are not likely to be as forgiving (Freeman, 1997).

BACKGROUND

As the field of online teaching is relatively new, it is recognized that best practice will only develop over time (Morris, Mitchell & Bell, 1999). Even with such a short history, there is already considerable experience to draw upon. There have been many successful, and not so successful, applications of online teaching in widely disparate contexts. Unsuccessful strategies or problems encountered should not be ignored. When teachers come to tailor these skills for their own situation, they need to be able to anticipate possible problems and devise strategies to deal with them (Marx, Blumenfield, Krajcik & Soloway, 1998). For

all of the problems identified in this chapter, there are means to minimize or eliminate them. However, the focus in this case is to identify some of the common problems associated with e-learning and m-learning.

General problems with online learning may include:

- Technology may not provide any educational benefit and, in some cases, may actually interfere with learning.
- Opens up institutions to global competition.
- Students with limited or no Internet access are disadvantaged.
- Increased costs to students (Internet access, printing, etc.).
- Slow Internet access times and technical unreliability.
- Lack of quality control on most WWW resources.
- Poor pedagogical practice (e.g., simply putting lecture notes on the Web).
- Information overload.
- Communication anxiety.
- Increased workload.
- Less personal interaction and loss of visual cues.
- Increased isolation and health problems linked with long hours spent at a computer screen.

Different forms of online teaching generate or emphasize particular problems, and it is useful to examine these in greater detail.

ASYNCRHONOUS COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Asynchronous computer-mediated communication techniques allow participants to contribute from different locations and, more importantly, at different times. The tools available include e-mail, list-servers and discussion groups.

Limited Communication

Communicating using only the written word can be stressful for some—"one Asian student, who fell behind in his work, noted the difficulty of communicating in a completely text-based medium" (Chester & Gwynne, 1998). Many social context cues, such as body language, aspects of the physical environment and paralinguistic characteristics, are filtered out (Chester & Gwynne, 1998). "Emoticons" such as the smiley face :) are only a poor substitute, and it can be difficult to determine whether someone is joking or angry. The ease of responding immediately also makes it easy to "write in haste, repent at leisure" (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1998, p.212). Rather than build a cohesive community, a discussion can degenerate into name-calling, flaming and other anti-social behaviour. This is made even more difficult given the fine line between what one person finds acceptable and another offensive (Harasim et al., 1998).

Information overload is another common problem with text-based discussions, as they can be voluminous and overwhelming even to the enthusiastic reader (Harasim et al., 1998). Smaller conferences can give the impression of information overload if students have trouble navigating and become lost in hyperspace. "A sense of place has not yet been established, and the conference may feel like a maze" (Harasim et al., 1998, p.223).

Students may feel compelled to respond even if they would not have voluntarily initiated the interaction. When the teacher chooses e-mail or discussion groups as the pedagogic tool, the feeling of obligation can be even greater and the "distinction between voluntary and required use is even more critical" (Mitra, Hazen, LaFrance & Rogan, 1999). It needs to be remembered that students can feel apprehensive using the technology, and some may view the computer as a very cold environment for human communication (Harasim et al., 1998).

Without careful moderation, including reactions to and weaving of student responses, all students may see is each other's raw, and possibly incorrect, responses (Harasim et al., 1998).

"It is very necessary that the information base that students bring to such discussions is adequate

for the purpose, otherwise it is only ignorance that is shared." (Pettit, 1998, p.24)

On the other hand, posting corrections or answers immediately may stifle valuable student interaction (Morris et al., 1999).

Lack of Participation

What if you hold a conference and nobody comes? A common fear, which is often realized, is a lack of participation by the students.

For most students, this will be a new medium for communication. This can be uncomfortable, and given the self-activating nature of the medium, some delay or totally put off joining (Harasim et al., 1998). Many become lurkers. This is a problem in that students are not actively engaged (Klemm, 1998). However, many academics are lurkers themselves and recognize the benefit that can be gained from carefully considering other people's responses (Freeman, 1997; Naidu, 1997). Students with limited access to the Internet and students who are less motivated or less prepared are inclined towards procrastination and "tend to do less work and learn less than they would have in the traditional classroom" (Harasim et al., 1998). Teachers new to the medium may use it to deliver large amounts of lecture-type material and find very few responses (Harasim et al., 1998).

Communication Anxiety

Given the permanent nature of the discourse, a common fear by students is criticism, or even ridicule, by fellow students of what they have written (Pearson, 1999). It is quite different to expose cognitive shortcomings to peers rather than just the teacher (Harasim et al., 1998).

"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." (A student comment in Pearson, 1999, p.233)

This can be particularly daunting for students who are used to being relatively passive in face-to-face classes. Newcomers may spend 10 to 20 hours simply reading before they will risk adding their own com-

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