

Chapter 34

Investigation Into the Selection of Online Learning Platforms and Tools in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Selecting and implementing the platforms and tools to support online learning effectively in higher education is currently a challenge for which there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Finding the right balance between supporting strong pedagogy, offering training and support, providing data security and privacy, ensuring ease of use, among other factors, shape the decisions that leaders in higher education make as they develop and implement online learning environments. This chapter explores the results of a study conducted during the Fall of 2016 to better understand the efforts higher education experts undergo to develop online learning environments. The study considers the sometimes-competing pedagogical and pragmatic needs such efforts entail and seeks to identify trends and best practices.

INTRODUCTION

The process of selecting and implementing the platforms and tools that support online learning in higher education offers no clear and well-defined approach. Faced with an expansive selection of tools, competing interests, limited time and budget, stakeholders involved with the creation of an online environment make many important decisions with uncertain outcomes. In an effort to better understand the opportunities and challenges that decision makers face in their efforts to develop their institution's online learning environments, a study was conducted during the 2015/16 academic year probing the influence of the myriad technical, pedagogical, and experiential factors on the choices that decision makers face when evaluating and purchasing learning platforms and tools.

Thirty people in decision-making roles at higher education institutions were surveyed about their experiences in teaching and/or managing online learning programs, exploring their backgrounds, teaching and learning preferences, and satisfaction with their current online environments. Then, going beyond the

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survey results, one-on-one interviews with five of the subjects were conducted to provide additional insight and explanations. While their stories are but a small sample of the many unique and diverse experiences occurring every day, they provide some awareness of both the challenges and success that institutions have had in their approach to addressing the needs of online learners. The findings ultimately point to the pivotal role that institutional governance plays in shaping the decision making and implementation process suggesting nascent best practices that can guide others in their work.

BACKGROUND

According to a study by Picciano & Seamen (2009) it was estimated that over a million K-12 students took an online course during the 2007 -2008 academic year. In higher education, it is estimated that in the United States, that at the same time over 3.9 million higher education students were taking a course online (Allen & Seamen, 2008). By 2012, according to federal data, the percentage of American higher education institutions offering some level of online offerings had reached 86.5% (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Considering the growth of online education, it is important think of the impact that online learning will have on the structure of higher education in the 21st century. A report by the Chronicle Research Service (2009) made the case that the traditional four year college experience is no longer the norm, “as demonstrated by the proliferation of colleges (particularly for-profit institutions), hybrid class schedules with night and weekend meetings, and, most significantly, online learning” (p.1) This change in higher education norms is outlined by Ortagus’ (2017) examination of the characteristics of students enrolling in online courses and found that “postsecondary online learners are not necessarily confined by niche characteristics that require the convenient and flexible benefits of online instruction to gain access to higher education, particularly for students who supplement their residential education with some online courses.” (p. 52).

Businesses and governments have also experienced the transformative changes made possible by online collaborative tools (O’Reilly, 2005; Tredinnick, 2006). Grant (2006) in an article about using the knowledge building Wiki noted that “changes in the developed world are leading to a move away from economies based solely on ‘traditional’ industries toward a new ‘knowledge economy’” (p.1). It stands to reason that if one of the goals of higher education is to help students become competent, collaborative, problem solving employees of tomorrow (Scardamalia, 2002), a logical extension that higher education should be preparing students to be critical producers and consumers of information (Buckingham, 2003; Buraphadeja & Dawson, 2008; Marks, 2009). To this end, the development of critical thinking and communication skills is an important component of higher education (Burbach & Matkin, 2004), and collaboration with others is a key element to truly support thinking critically (Choy & Cheah, 2009).

Studies have shown pedagogy that builds upon social learning theories help learners in retaining and applying learned information in other situations. However, researchers and practitioners have called attention to a gap between the learning approaches considered most effective for learners and the actual instruction found in the online classroom (Meier, 2016) and it is noted that both the pedagogy used and the tools available for educators tend to favor more traditional methods (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007).

Before delving into the role of the online tools in closing this gap, it is helpful first to recognize that different philosophies toward learning will suggest different tools, and different tools can be used to reach students in different ways (Kanuka, 2008). While the unique learning styles of students should be taken into consideration (Ally, 2008), one constant is that college students today are not expecting

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