
Chapter III

Can a Viable DE Program Stay Behind the Technology “Wave”?

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Abstract

Starting with a quote from Herbert Simon to that effect, this chapter questions whether distance education programs should strive to be on the cutting edge of information technology. The general perspective taken is that of the Value Net. A provider of distance education can be seen as a Firm linking Suppliers and Customers while interacting with Competitors and Complementors. The Supplier-Firm-Customer chain can be seen as education production, and the chapter briefly discusses the debate over whether quantitative production models can explain the education process. Theoretical generality is sacrificed in favor of a discussion of the actual mechanics of an online course taught to MBA students by the author. Mean numerical grades in face-to-face and online sections of the course

are compared to show that educational outcomes face-to-face and online are not significantly different. Enrollments in the course are stable. Hence, the course is thought to be viable, as a program of such courses might be. The results of a survey of MBA students reveal that most students consider the professor more important than the technology in their learning and satisfaction. Taken together, the two results provide the beginnings of a case for Distance Education programs staying behind the technology wave.

In the coming years, many new technologies will be proposed to you for use in your university, and you will have the task of raising difficult questions in order to decide when and how these technologies can contribute to the mission of the university. ... we must resist the temptation to use technology just because it is available.

(Herbert Simon, Late Nobel Prize Winner in Economics, 2001, pp. 62-63)

Introduction

Few reasonable people would disagree with the observation that the economies of the world are being influenced more and more by Information Technology (IT). Very few aspects of human life, at least in developed countries, are not affected by computer hardware, software, and appendages. The rapid pace of change in IT gives one the impression of riding on a technology wave, and staying on the crest of that wave is often perceived as integral to one's survival. Moore's Law for Intel CPUs informed us that processing power doubled every year and a half. Although the pace of growth in processing power may be decelerating (Markoff, 1999; Watson, 2000), "bang-for-the-buck" in processing is still increasing. Increasing bandwidth is allowing the expanded movement of data/information among expanding networks. Internet2 has 200 universities worldwide collaborating with industry and government on the Next Level. The consortium is working on developing and deploying advanced networking technologies, including high-quality collaborative and interactive technologies across the myriad of user platforms.

The education sector has not been exempt from IT influence. As education is the process of expanding knowledge and skill, what better milieu can it inhabit

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