



Chapter IX

Impact of E-Learning During SARS Outbreak in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The potential benefits of e-commerce have been reported widely in the literature, and e-learning has been gradually accepted as a social tool for e-commerce at tertiary institutions (Parker, 2003). In this chapter the impact of e-commerce on the local community during a Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in Hong Kong will be briefly described, with an emphasis on the use of E-learning technology as a contingency measure in tertiary institutions. At the height of the SARS epidemic in April 2003, Hong Kong had 60 to 80 new cases of the disease each day. Hundreds of thousands of residents wore surgical masks in an attempt to avoid catching the virus. All schools and universities were ordered closed and governments invoked quarantine laws not used for decades to isolate those who might be carriers. Explained Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa in announcing tougher measures to curb the spread of the disease: "Hong Kong is currently facing its most serious contagious disease threat in 50 years." As a contingency measure e-learning technology was employed in the local higher education. This chapter aims to identify some of the practical difficulties involved in an evaluation of the academic performance of two groups of engineering students taking an introductory course - one group studied via e-learning and the other studied through the traditional classroom approach. Preliminary findings showed that with limited time

available for the course design and delivery, the examination result of the e-learning class was slightly better than the traditional class. With positive student feedback on the e-learning approach, this would imply that e-learning shows a potential for substituting some of the traditional course elements, especially for topics relating to higher-order thinking skills. To generalize these findings more studies with properly controlled experimental design would need to be carried out. Directions for future work are also suggested.

SEVERE ACUTE RESPIRATORY SYNDROME

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has killed more than 800 people worldwide - most of them in Asia - since the disease first appeared in southern China last November. In Hong Kong, 296 people died of the disease and 1,755 became ill. SARS is a pneumonia-like illness and the main symptoms are high fever, dry cough, and shortness of breath or breathing difficulties. While some medicines have been tried, no drug can at this time be recommended for prophylaxis or treatment. Based on currently available evidence, close contact with an infected person will cause the infective agent to be spread from one person to another. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), contact with aerosolized (exhaled) droplets and bodily secretions from an infected person appears to be important.

At the height of the SARS epidemic in early April 2003, Hong Kong had 60 to 80 new cases of the disease each day. Hundreds of thousands of residents wore surgical masks, and stayed away from public places in an attempt to avoid catching the virus.

IMPACT OF E-COMMERCE

During this period, with thousands of Hong Kong residents undergoing voluntary isolation, Internet use surged in the territory. Business people prevented from traveling and home-bound youths playing online games contributed to a 30 percent rise in residential broadband Internet traffic at a fixed-line phone company in Hong Kong. According to the second largest long-distance carrier company, international telephone calls had risen by more than twenty percent.

Providers of virtual services such as online games and video conferencing were benefiting as the city's 7 million residents chose to shy away from face-to-face contact for fear of catching SARS. Software companies have rolled out their video conferencing equipments and software since the outbreak of SARS. The stock price of these companies also climbed in May 2003 by this factor.

Since the outbreak of the SARS epidemic, many companies in Hong Kong have cancelled the meeting and traveling events to the Asia Pacific region, especially those to China and Taiwan. The video conferencing system combined with video and audio equipment has been therefore adopted as an alternative of overseas traveling.

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