Chapter 17
Online Learning:
An Examination of Contexts in Corporate, Higher Education, and K–12 Environments

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ABSTRACT

The internet and telecommunications technologies have redefined distance learning, while at the same time led to increased access to students and an expanded breadth of subject offerings. For these and other reasons, online learning has been embraced by a large number of corporate, higher education, and K-12 institutions across the nation and globally, reaching billions of students. In order to understand the relationship between technologies, course design and course delivery, we conducted a survey of content designers and facilitators in higher education and corporate sectors. Additionally, we interviewed seven learning leaders who represent organizations involved in online learning in these sectors, as well as in K-12 education contexts. Results indicate that increased access is a primary strategic advantage of online learning. Additionally, corporate and educational sectors tend to approach course design and the choice of technologies in different ways.

INTRODUCTION

The internet has revolutionized how we as a society view distance education, its potential uses, and its strategic value. Online learning has infiltrated every learning environment—corporate, technical and vocational training, university degree

programs, lifelong learning, and K-12 education. This is remarkable, if one considers the fact that internet access has only been widespread in society for the past decade; the first web-based course was introduced slightly earlier, in 1995 (Bates, 2001).

Despite the increase in online learning, there is debate regarding the effectiveness of the overall educational experience. It is not simply enough to transfer the face-to-face learning experience to

an online environment and expect similar results. Designers, developers, and facilitators have to consider key areas in development and execution of online learning. Zemsky and Massey (2004) outline four levels of e-learning adoption. The first "inject[s] new materials into teaching and learning processes without changing the basic mode of instruction" (p. 17) and can include the use of PowerPoint and email. The second level of adoption is the integration of learning management systems which allows for alternative interactions between students and professors. This can be facilitated through the use of discussion boards and online testing and grading as well as distribution of course materials. The third level allows for professors to utilize and embed a variety of learning objects such as video and simulations. The last level results in reconfiguration of interactions and course materials and requires both instructors and learners to engage with each other in a variety of ways. It can combine face-to-face, asynchronous and synchronous technologies to shape a vastly different learning environment.

BACKGROUND

A Distance Learning Revolution

The role of technologies in redefining distance learning has been nothing short of revolutionary. Several technological advances have allowed for the development of highly sophisticated learning environments. Clarke and Hermans (2001) note that the revolution in bandwidth enabled a vast expansion in corporate e-learning that has facilitated strategic alliances among top universities, e-learning and technology companies to create and deliver education and training globally to corporate partners. Additionally, major corporations have invested heavily in e-learning to develop their own global learning networks and corporate universities. While Clarke and Hermans (2001) argue that most corporate universities

were simply glorified names for traditional human resource development training programs, some are fully-developed models that include heavy involvement with knowledge management technology, academic partnerships, and research and development. General Motors University was founded in 1999 with 11 functional colleges and a steering committee called a Dean's Council. In 2001, Motorola U had over 300 faculty and staff, 600 external educators, and 330 classes, with 100 of them offered online (Clarke & Hermans, 2001, p. 7).

Developing and Implementing Effective Online Courses

Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, and Ling (2006) completed a review of the research that in part examined the learning environment. They found that the learning environment was influenced by the learner characteristics and was more favorable for those who were comfortable using technology and were highly self-motivated. Although Zemsky and Massey (2004) argue the student population may not be as interested in e-learning experiences as was originally envisioned. Students are more likely to be interested in specific types of computing that include multi-media, self-presentation, and communication. An additional hurdle to overcome is the perception that online learning may not be as effective as face-to-face encounters (Bouhnik, Giat, & Sanderovitch, 2009).

A 2001 ASTD survey showed that nearly all respondents who had taken an e-learning course would take a similar course in the future, although only 38% preferred the format to classroom instruction. Additionally, respondents overwhelmingly preferred to take online courses during work hours and at work, illustrating that employees like e-learning, but do not want to complete work-related coursework at home (ASTD 2001).

The creation and implementation of the online learning experience is influenced by several fac-

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