

Chapter 37

Facilitation of Online Teaching and Learning

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ABSTRACT

Twenty First Century Education is undergoing change not only to keep in step with the emerging technological innovations, but also to address the needs and meet the high expectations of a technically sophisticated student body. Physical manifestations of these changes may be seen in new institutional building work. Technologically, the Facebook Generation of students in our universities expect online access across the campus, not only to all manner of information and social networks, but to their course work. A growing body of the student population now remain in full time employment, enrolled via online courses. Their virtual access to teaching and learning requires a different form of tuition to that generally experienced in face to face lectures. Online teaching and learning is a facilitated process, which this chapter seeks to explain. The role of the facilitator is explained, along with the process of online learning, with reference to an established online degree course, Ultraversity.

INTRODUCTION

Technology that enables a wider access to learning is increasingly pervading our daily lives. All day news television channels provide almost instant information from virtually all points of the globe, and within developed countries particularly, our ability to access the Internet continues to improve. Away from our home or workplace computers, we

can link to the World Wide Web via Wifi hotspots, or through our 3G phone's network provider, providing added opportunities to regularly engage in distance online learning.

Knowles predicted that by the beginning of the 21st Century, technology would play a growing role in enhancing the learning experience of students engaged in higher education (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 236). That technology enhanced learning process, particularly in an online environment cannot be fulfilled without the virtual presence

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and contribution of a facilitator. This chapter will attempt to clarify the process of facilitating online teaching and learning. It will also show that the process of interaction between the participants in online learning and their facilitators is not a trouble free process, and that further research is required into the dynamics of this subject, for it to be better understood, both by future learners and teachers, in order to make full use of technology for learning.

Educational institutions are regularly faced with the challenges of ensuring that opportunities for learning are fully optimised for both students and staff, and that every reasonable means of achieving this aim are exploited. Increasingly institutions need to fully incorporate the use of technology to provide learning opportunities that are in step with our constantly evolving digital lifestyles, and seemingly insatiable desire for obtaining online information. This can range from seeking out the latest weather forecast to sourcing a recipe for a curry, checking our friends' latest exploits on Facebook and Twitter, before even embarking upon the task of retrieving the latest research to assist in the completion of that assignment due for submission in a week's time.

Making that technology engaging, serving a primary role in the learning and teaching process, providing a medium for the student to undertake research for learning on the one hand, and on the other the means to engage in a collaborative learning journey with the other students online, is one of the fundamental tenets underpinning the facilitation of online learning and teaching.

The role of the lecturer within a virtual learning environment (VLE) is evolving and developing into one that facilitates that learning process. Traditional methods of teaching that were once familiar to our parents and grandparents are not always appropriate in an age of instant iPhone generated information. Often the student has accessed more recent information on a particular subject than their teacher, therefore changing the learning dynamics in the classroom from a model

of top down, teacher to many students, to a scenario of a student introducing learning to the rest of the class and the teacher, is at the core of online teaching and learning. This requires a facilitated approach. This chapter will make reference to the facilitation role within the Ultraversity programme at Anglia Ruskin University.

BACKGROUND

Defining Online Learning

Before proceeding with this chapter, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by online learning. Online learning occurs formally and informally, both requiring access to the Internet. A formal online learning situation, usually involves a student who has enrolled upon an online course using email to communicate with a facilitator (tutor) or other students, a web browser to access a web search engine, or more often a VLE (virtual learning environment) in order to retrieve course information and to participate in collaborative, asynchronous discussions with other students and facilitators. Such discussions relate to sharing particular knowledge about their coursework and research, and significantly clarifying their understanding of a particular stage of the overall learning journey. The online learning process often involves the sharing of document, image, animation and video files. Based upon the Ultraversity experience (Lang, in press), the online learning process also involves accessing course resources (usually from within the VLE), engaging regularly in collaborative, formative peer assessment, and the online submission of completed assignments for summative assessment, as well as anonymous student course feedback once students have submitted their work for summative assessment and grading.

According to Blackboard (the course management software used by many universities):

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