

Chapter 5.8

Benchmarking Online Learning Practices in Higher Education: Software Selection, Teacher Preparation, and Course Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Colleges and Universities across the United States have experienced an unprecedented growth in the availability of and demand for online courses and degree programs in the recent years. However, this medium for instructing is still relatively new compared to other traditional forms of instruction. Therefore, an overall lack of research on the online medium exists. This study benchmarks the practices of colleges and universities in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia on factors that contribute to the selection of Course Management Systems (CMS), the availability and/or requirements for instructor training, and the evaluation or lack thereof of online courses. A total of thirty institutions participated in this mixed methods study.

INTRODUCTION

The student dynamic in higher education today in the United States of America (USA) is changing. In fact, those originally deemed “traditional students” no longer represent the most prevalent group enrolled in higher education. Of the

nearly 17 million students registered for at least one college class, only 16% of them meet this conventional norm (Stokes, 2006). Along with the rise of non-traditional students, evidence of considerable growth exists in the number of students selecting the online learning format in the USA. For example, between 2005 and 2006, the number of students participating in online courses increased by 10%, resulting in approximately

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20% of students claiming enrollment in at least one course delivered totally online in the fall of 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In accordance with the popularity of online courses, when looking at the future of higher education in America, a large percentage of institutions classify online learning as a portion of their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2005).

With the increased number of students participating in classes in the online format, a number of concerns and questions arise as to the effectiveness of this type of instruction. Many studies attempt to compare the effectiveness of online versus traditional teaching methods (Shelley, Swartz, & Cole, 2007; Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palma-Rivas, 2000; Fallah & Ubell, 2000; Rivera & Rice, 2002; Hauck, 2006; Russell, 2007). However, a number of other ubiquitous concerns exist within the realm of online learning, including: CMS selection (Halloran, 2002; Jafari, 2000), faculty preparation (Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003), and instructor appraisal (Chapman, 2006).

Although research shows that the majority of institutions in the USA utilize some type of CMS software to support their online learning environment (Maushak, Ou, & Wang, 2004; Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003), little research exists on the criteria or the decision-making processes involved in selecting the CMS. Documenting the reasons that contribute to institutional selection of CMS allows institutions an opportunity to benchmark the decision-making process among other institutions.

Another critical research topic is the capacity of faculty to successfully instruct a course in the online format without adequate training. Clearly, the majority of research available on preparing instructors to teach online has documented the need to train faculty on the different methods of instruction required to successfully instruct in the online classroom (Diaz & Bontenbal, 2000; Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003; Okojie, Olinzock, & Okojie-Boulder, 2006). However, research also indicates that some instructors hold the perception

that online instruction is similar in design and pedagogy, if not the same as traditional teaching (Diaz & Cartnell, 1999; Alexander & Boud, 2001; Arabasz, Pirani, & Fawcett, 2003). This represents a major hurdle in the successful preparation of instructors to teach virtual classes; Instructors believe they are prepared from a pedagogical perspective to instruct online, while the research suggests that instructors require additional preparation to create and deliver effective online courses.

Finally, beyond the successful delivery of course content, the issue of quality plays a major role in online learning. Chapman (2006) found an inadequate amount of research on the evaluation of online programs. This is troubling as Schank (2001), a learning theory specialist, describes the criticality of developing effective, standardized course evaluations for online learning. Essentially, effectively assessing any type of program represents a vital aspect of improving processes and identifying strengths and weaknesses within current practices.

This study emerged because of the aforementioned concerns about online learning. By answering the research questions below, the researcher attempts to document the current practices in web-based instruction of colleges and universities in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia as relates to the selection of course management systems (CMS), the availability of and the requirements for faculty training in online instruction best practices, and the evaluation of online courses.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1:** What factors affect the selection of CMS packages utilized by institutions of higher learning?
- RQ2:** What is the availability of and the requirement for faculty training prior to teaching online?

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