

THEME - ONLINE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

As we approach a new era of technology, the internet is revolutionizing the society, our economy and our technological system. No one knows for certain how far or in what direction, the internet will evolve. But, we must not underestimate its importance. In the new age of information, we are learning to magnify brainpower by putting the power of computation wherever we resources are infinitely flexible tools; networked together, they allow us to generate, exchange, share and manipulate information in an many number of ways. he internet, as an integrating force, has moulded the technology of communications and computing to provide instant connectivity and global information services to all its users at very low cost (Swan 2010). Age , gender, race has no place in online education. The main advantage of online learning is that it allows students to participate in high quality learning situations when distance and schedule make on regular learning difficult for them (www.ion.uillinois.edu). But total dependency on online Education cannot be motivate as there are various drawbacks of online education. We cannot always ensure quality Education. Proper infrastructure must be developed to provide online education at cheapest rates and quality of teaching must be ensured.

INTRODUCTION

Internet is the collection of computer networks, which form and act as a single huge networks for transport of data from one place to another and messages across distances which can be anywhere from the same office or to any part of the world. The main function performed by the internet is quite simple it transports digital information for one computer to another. In other words we can say that, at the functional level the internet just a communications technology. The meaning of the information communication through the internet is completely irrelevant to its transport, that meaning is determined by the software which receives the information. Any type of information can be translated to digital form. Computer can transport the most common types of information such as text, numerical information, images, sounds and video. Any additional functions which are affected via the internet itself. They are services which are provided by one or more of the players involved. All these services are performed by the exchange of digital information (Reed 2010).

REVIEW OF STUDIES

Dobrin (1999), found that 85% of the faculty teaching online courses felt that student learning outcomes were comparable to or better than those found in face-to-face

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classrooms. Hoffman (1999) reports similar findings, as does Hiltz (1997). In this vein, other researchers have surveyed students and used their perceptions of their own learning as an effectiveness measure. Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz and Swan (2001), for example, found that 41% of 1,400 students enrolled in SUNY Learning Network's online classes believed that they learned as much as they learned in traditional classes. Forty-seven percent thought they learned more. Many researchers (Fulford, Zhang, Picciano, 1993) have reported similar findings.

MODEL OF ONLINE LEARNING

A useful way of thinking about the three forms of interaction is provided by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer's (2001) "community of inquiry" model of online learning. If one equates cognitive presence in this model with interaction with content, teaching presence with interaction with instructors, and social presence with interaction among students, it gives a good representation of how all three work together to support learning online (Figure 1). At the same time it should be remembered that both teachers and students have social presence, that in many online courses, both teachers and students teach, and that learning is always learning of content.

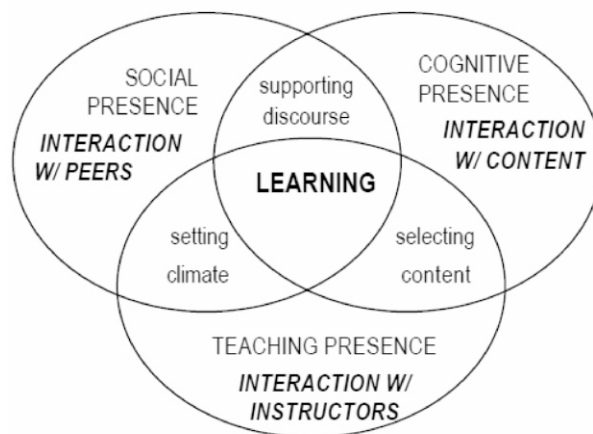


Figure 1: Interactivity and Learning Online
adapted from Rourke, et. al's (2001) community of inquiry model

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION

The online education provides opportunities for people who would otherwise have limited access to education, as well as a new environment for educators in which dynamic courses of the highest quality can be developed (www.ion.uillinois.edu):

The advantages of online education are given below (www.ion.uillinois.edu):

1. It can be taken anywhere :

The main advantage of online learning is that it allows students to participate in high quality learning situations when distance and schedule make on regular learning difficult for them. Students having computers can participate in this programme of learning. The online format allows physically challenged students (and teachers) freedom to participate in class.

2. It can be taken Anytime and at Any Pace :

The Virtual Classroom is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Time efficiency is also another strength brought by the online learning format. Students have continuous access to lectures, course materials, and class discussions. This is particularly useful for those who may need to read again a lecture or take more time to reflect on some material before moving on.

3. Synergy

The online format allows a interaction between the educator and students and also among the students themselves. Resources and ideas are shared to a large extent and continuous synergy will be generated in the learning process. Each individual can give his contributions to the course discussions and comments on the work of others.

4. High Quality Dialogue

Through an online asynchronous discussion format, the learner may reflect on comments from others before moving on to the next item. This format allows students time to articulate responses with much more depth .

5. Student Centered

In an online discussion, the student responds to the course material (lectures and course books, for example) and to comments from other students. Students respond to those topics within the broader conversation that most clearly reflect to their individual levels. These situations result in smaller conversations taking place simultaneously within the group. While students should read all of their classmates' contributions, they actively participate in only those parts of the dialog most needed to their needs. In this way, students control their own learning experience.

6. Level Playing Field

In the online environment, students have a some measure of anonymity. Discriminating factors such as age, place, dress, physical appearance, disabilities, race and gender are mostly absent. Instead, the focus of attention is directly on the content of the discussion and the individual's ability to respond and contribute thoughtfully to the study material.

7. Access to Resources

It is easy to include other guest experts or students from institutions in an online class. Therefore, today's students have access to resources and materials that may be physically located anywhere in the world. A teacher can collect a resource section online with links to scholarly articles, institutions and other materials relevant to his course topic for students to access for research, extension or depth analysis of course teaching material.

8. Creative Teaching

Creative learning and teaching can be emphasized through online education. Teacher can convey his message effectively through online education

Drawbacks of online Education :

While online programs have significant strengths and offer good accessibility to quality education, there are many weaknesses inherent in the use of this medium that can pose potential threats to the success of any online program. These problems fall into six main categories (www.ion.uillinois.edu):

- 1. Equity and Accessibility to Technology** Before any online program can hope to start, it must have students who are able to access the online programmes. Lack of access whether it be for economical or some other reasons will exclude eligible students from the course. This is a significant issue of concern in rural and lower socioeconomic areas. Moreover, from an administrative point of view, if students cannot afford the technology the institution employs, they are of no use. Internet accessibility is not universal
- 2. Computer Literacy** Both students and teachers must possess a minimum level of computer knowledge in order to participate successfully in an online environment. For example, they must have efficiency to use a variety of search engines and be comfortable on the World Wide Web, as well as be familiar with Newsgroups, FTP procedures and email. If they do not possess these technology tools, they will not succeed in an online program.
- 3. Limitations of Technology** User friendly technology is critical to a successful online program. However, even the most advanced technology is not 100% reliable. However, breakdowns can occur at any point along the system, for example, the server which hosts the program could crash and cut all participants off from the class; a participant may access the class through a networked computer which could go down; individual PCs can have numerous problems which could limit students' access; finally, the Internet connection could fail, or the institution hosting the connection could become bogged down with users and either slow down, or fail all together. In situations like these, the technology is neither seamless nor reliable and it can detract from the learning experience.
- 4. The Students** While an online method of education can be a highly effective alternative medium of education for the mature, self-disciplined student, it is an inappropriate learning environment for more dependent learners. Online asynchronous education gives students control over their learning experience, and allows for flexibility of study schedules for non traditional students; however, this places a greater responsibility on the student. In order to successfully participate in an online program, student must be well organized, self-motivated, and possess a high degree of time management skills in order to keep up with the pace of the course.
- 5. Lack of Essential Online Qualities** Successful on-ground instruction does not always translate to successful online instruction. If facilitators are not properly trained in online delivery and methodologies, the success of the online program will be compromised. An instructor must be able to communicate well in writing and in the language in which the course is offered. An online program will be weakened if its facilitators are not adequately prepared to function in the Virtual Classroom.

An online instructor must be able to compensate for lack of physical presence by creating a supportive environment in the Virtual Classroom where all students feel comfortable participating and especially where students know that their instructor is accessible. Failure to do this can alienate the class both from each other and from the instructor. However, even if a virtual professor is competent enough to create a comfortable virtual environment in which the class can operate, still the lack of physical presence at an institution can be a limitation for an online program. For the faculty as well as the participants, such things as being left out of meetings and other events that require on-site interaction could present a limiting factor in an online program.

6. The Administration and Faculty

Some environments are disruptive to the successful implementation of an online program. Administrators and/or faculty members who are uncomfortable with change and working with technology or feel that online programs cannot offer quality education often inhibit the process of implementation. These people represent a considerable weakness in an online program because they can inhibit its success.

Sometimes administration cannot see beyond the bottom line and look at online programs only as ways to increase revenues and are thus not committed to seeing online programs as a means of providing quality education to people who would otherwise not be able to access it. In such a case, an institution that is not aware of the importance of proper facilitator training, essential facilitator characteristics, and limitations of class size would not understand the impact that these elements can have on the success of an online program.

LEVELS OF SYNERGY

Online learning has its most promising potential in the high synergy represented by active dialogue among the participants, one of the most important sources of learning in a Virtual Classroom. However, in larger classes (20 or more students), the synergy level starts to shift on the learning continuum until it eventually becomes independent study to accommodate the large class. At this point, dialog is limited as well as interaction among participants and the facilitator. The medium is not being used to its greatest potential.

WHAT SHOULD NOT BE TAUGHT ONLINE

In the excitement and enthusiasm for online programs that has been generated recently, it is important to recognize that some subjects should not be taught online because the electronic medium in its current state of development does not permit the best method on instruction. Examples are hands-on subjects such as public speaking, surgery, dental hygiene, and sports where physical movement and practice contribute to the achievement of the learning objectives. These subjects are probably best taught in a face-to-face traditional learning environment. Hybrid courses may represent a temporary solution to this problem thus making that portion of the course more accessible to a greater number of people who would otherwise have difficulty getting to campus. However, solutions of that sort still underline the fact that online teaching cannot satisfy all educational needs and goals. Just because it may be technologically possible to simulate a physical learning experience, this does not necessarily mean that it is the best way to teach it.

The **curriculum** of any online program must be carefully considered and developed in order to be successful. Many times, in an institution's haste to develop distance education programs, the importance of the curriculum and the need for qualified professionals to develop it is overlooked. Curriculum and teaching methodology that are successful in on-ground instruction will not always translate to a successful online program where learning and instructional paradigms are quite different. Online curriculum must reflect the use of dialog among students (in the form of written communication), and group interaction and participation. Traditional classroom lectures have no place in a successful online program. Education of the highest quality can and will occur in an online program provided that the curriculum has been developed or converted to meet the needs of the online medium (www.ion.uillinois.edu).

CONCLUSION

Today is a very revolutionary time for technology and education. Online programs offer technology-based instructional environments that expand learning opportunities and can provide top quality education through a variety of formats and modalities. With the special needs of adult learners who need or want to continue their education, online programs offer a convenient solution to conflicts with work, family and study schedules. Institutions of higher education have found that online programs are essential in providing access to education for the populations they wish to serve. In order for an online program to be successful, the curriculum, the facilitator, the technology and the students must be carefully considered and balanced in order to take full advantage of the strengths of this format and at the same time, avoid pitfalls that could result from its weaknesses (www.ion.uillinois.edu).

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