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## 23. . Higher Education: The Online Teaching and Learning Experience

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### Abstract

*Globally, higher education, utilizes online teaching to ensure that a wide array of learning opportunities is available for students in a highly competitive technological arena. The most significant influence in education in recent years is the increase and recognition of private for-profit adult distance and online education programs as legitimate institutions for quality learning. Online learning focuses on a wide range of technological based learning platforms, delivery methods, and the integration of educational technology components into the learning environment. The emergence of modern technology has allowed students at all levels, young and mature, the opportunity to participate in advancing their education in an environment that is diversified, rich in best practices, yet progressive enough to allow students to proceed in a self-paced manner. This article will address online education, its strengths, limitations, online teaching tools, professional development, best practices, and an evaluation of a personal online experience.*

### Introduction

Today's students are exposed to a technological era in which they are engulfed with an array of mobile technology and learning tools to include, iPad, computers, iPhone, interactive audio or videoconferencing, webcasts, instructional videos via CD-ROMs or DVDs and computer-based systems transmitted through the Internet (The National Centre for Education Statistics, 2011). Mobile devices provide education to students by allowing them to download necessary materials, immediately, to help fulfil requirements for issues they are confronted with daily (Bonk, 2009).

Digital learning tools such as webcams, electronic books, and audio devices for recording lectures, to be used by students at their convenience, are effective tools offered by educational institutions to increase students' success rate with course requirements. Electronic books can reduce the cost of and ensure use of most current reading materials, and a larger variety of sources. The growth of these devices has provided instructors new and innovative tools to promote teaching and learning for students with varied educational needs. Not only are technology devices necessary for success in the online environment, but the design of the online program, including the instructor, the curriculum, and student support services accompanied by a strong sense of community and connectedness within the program, are significant as well.

### The Online Learning Experience

The online learning environment is characterized by several terms. According to Kearsley and Moore (2012), distance learning implies a distant and reciprocal interaction between student and teacher. Online learning and e-learning are other terms used in describing distance education. Both terms represent a two-sided relationship between student and teacher which embraces the deliberate goal of helping students to learn through use of the Internet. The online learning experience, comprised of students, instructors, and the course curriculum, require the use of technological tools for accessing the online environment (Ally, 2008). The online learning environment provides autonomy, yet requires self-directed learning, and self-discipline which may influence the success or failure of online learners.

Learning institutions, offering online programs, are provided the unique opportunity to approach the learning process from an eclectic perspective; one that is diverse in nature, as its population of students is in their experiences. Incorporating the use of a variety of technological modalities, self-paced learning practices, and diversified learners may enrich the learning environment. The quality and design of an online program are crucial. The quality standardsbased curriculum should be designed to include the following components: course procedures and guidelines, measurable learning objectives, assessment and evaluation,

methodologies that address learning outcomes, interactive learning opportunities, resources and materials, learner support services, and accessibility to all students.

Online education may not work for every student. Some students may experience isolation and a sense of disconnectedness during the learning experience. The reduced sense of community may increase dissatisfaction and discontentment and increase the dropout rates. Instructors can help reduce isolation in the online environment by teaching face-to-face in a traditional classroom, record the collaboration among students, and incorporate the audio/video into online courses. Students that have a continual need to communicate with peers and the instructor can schedule chat sessions and online group discussions to participate and respond to questions, assignments, problems, and projects. The four interacting components of a sense of community within the online learning environment are connectedness, interdependency, socialization, and common goals.

### **Strengths of Online Learning**

Online learning offers the convenience of time and space, capability of reaching a greater student population, and draws the attention of a new group of digital learners. Rovai (2002) proposed that instructors, who embrace supportive methodologies, may help students feel connected through a strong sense of community, leading to a productive and successful online experience. Online students view teacher feedback as key dimension of the teacher-student interaction process. Wong (2005) advocated that student view quantity and quality of feedback on assignments as an accurate measurement of the instructor's concern and interest in them. Higher education has begun to follow completion rates, rather than just enrolment of students in online courses; this represents cost effectiveness for colleges and universities in the long run. Communication by way of the discussion tools can also help increase student achievement. In lieu of bricks-and-mortar related expenses, some less-developed countries see the online experience as a cost-effective option.

Research offered by (Allen & Seaman, 2006) clearly demonstrated that online learning continues to become more prevalent in the majority of higher education program offerings, provided instructors are given the necessary tools for implementation of online education programs.

### **Limitations of Online Learning**

As with any learning medium, the use of the Internet in distance and online learning has limitations, as well as strengths. Isolation is a crucial factor to consider when designing an online program, especially considering the social perspective which some academia shows little appreciation. Social interactions within the online environment are influenced by communication approaches designed within an online program. Research suggests that college students in online learning programs spend more time developing cognitive and critical thinking skills (Barr & Tagg, 1995) and less time in the social domain for growth and development creating a sense of isolation, not because of distance, but from the instructor and fellow learners.

Another difficult part in building an online environment is that there is limited opportunity for establishing trust. Developing a deep level of sharing may sometimes be problematic. Ethical practices such as honesty, integrity and reliability may not always be present in student practices. The belief that there are more opportunities for cheating, creating falsehoods, and producing dishonest work perpetuates this view. Institutions have put in place policies and guidelines to help mitigate plagiarism and other dishonest practices. Technical problems and solutions for technical support may also hinder the effectiveness of online learning. Learner support should be in place with policies and services ready to assist students, including those technologies for students who need help with assistive devices including visual and audio elements.

Online education has its critics that perpetuate a bad reputation, for this type of program, as a result of some for-profit organizations' dishonourable approaches to getting federal financial aid. Some organizations received funds for student loans even when they did not qualify. Critics view online programs, offered by

for-profit organizations in higher education negatively, with the belief that the quality of education is less than that of other educational institutions

### **Professional Development**

The readiness of faculty is another factor that must be addressed and resolved. Teachers' attitudes and dispositions must be considered as well as development of technology and online proficiency skills through continuous professional development.

Higher education institutions expanding to include online programs, many instructors are still dubious regarding the effectiveness of the online environment, particularly, the diminished academic support, and the incentives used to encourage participation. The growth of online courses and programs calls for more qualified faculty to teach online (Allen & Seaman, 2009). Some instructors in traditional learning environments experience trepidation of online dynamics such as course methodology and course management germane to the online environment. Others find it challenging to adjust new pedagogical form from a traditional structured educational environment.

Institutions of higher learning, especially within the discipline of education, are constantly concerned with preparing teachers to cultivate best practices for addressing the progressing educational needs of their students. Digital technology allows teachers to connect with one another, learn from each other enabling them to be more effective in the teaching and learning environment.

### **Best practices for Online Teaching**

Effective instruction in any learning environment includes the creation of a positive learning environment by cultivating self-efficacy, providing meaningful and active engagement, and inclusivity. Instructors of online learning programs must:

1. Establish a nurturing and supportive environment that reduces stress associated with academic difficulties and peer conflicts. Brain research has confirmed a link between cognitive and affective learning domains. When students feel threatened, stress hormones are released that interfere with the processing of information. Memory and learning are impaired (Jensen, 1998)
2. Ensure that communication between faculty and student must be constant and effective to include e-mail, web-based conferencing (webinar), course room postings, online discussions and phone contacts. FaceTime and Skype should be included for those students who need the personal approach.
3. Provide cooperative learning opportunities to facilitate critical thinking, brainstorming/problem solving, study groups and the use of dyads and peer assessment activities.
4. Provide experiential and active learning activities, utilizing Bloom's Taxonomy to activate areas of the brain responsible for higher order thinking that address the construction of knowledge through analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These activities require students to make decisions, conduct experiments, and explore ways to solve real-world problems, case studies, role-playing, and scenarios to promote a higher level of achievement.
5. Give punctual feedback regarding students' posts, within course room, through e-mail, course room assignment postings, or whatever is agreed upon by teacher and students. Structure opportunities for practice and establish peer tutoring when necessary.
6. Express high expectations of students by continually motivating, commending successes, and providing stimulating activities to support active learning.
7. Embrace cultural diversity and different learning styles by incorporating Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1983) to address varied learning styles and engaging students' academic strengths.
8. Provide differentiated instruction, by channelling in, personally, to all students' needs, so that all learners can be reached and developed to their fullest potential.
9. Discuss and define course policies, teacher expectations and plagiarism early in course. Differentiate intentional and non-intentional plagiarism. Implement contractual documentations, if necessary.
10. Ensure accommodation of learners needing special assistance and assistive technologies.

### **Strategies for the Online Learner**

Learners in higher education, characteristic of autonomous and self-directed learning, can control the level and pace of their learning. Online learning programs impose deadlines for course room postings,

just as bricks-and-mortar programs engage deadlines for submitting assignments. Both programs are similar in content, except in pace and quantity of content; online programs engage enormous content; and demand rapid progress. For this article, self-paced progression refers to movement “through” courses, rather than, movement “within” courses.

1. Avoid procrastination.
2. Plan & organize weekly coursework
3. Set goals and manage time effectively.
4. Develop and engage good study habits, then practice them.
5. Keep up with assignments and post in a timely manner.
6. Allocate time in work schedule for rest, exercise, proper nutrition, and social interaction.
7. Participate in online discussions and check into course room based on course requirements.
8. Communicate with professors, as often as necessary.
9. Take keyboarding class (before beginning online class) if typing and computer skills are not proficient.
10. Take notes while reading and practice becoming a good note taker and developing outlines.

### **An Evaluation of a Personal Online Experience**

The following is a response to an evaluation of an online program from a learner

1. How does student/teacher relationships online compare to traditional classrooms?  
When learners do not meet with professors face-to-face somewhere at any time during the course experience, especially during the writing of the master’s thesis and dissertation, there can become a distrustful atmosphere for the learner/student. This in turn may lead professors to unnecessarily over-saturate learner production to help ensure the credibility of the learner’s work.
2. Did your online course experience provide an appropriate environment for learning?  
The online environment was fine but did not provide opportunities for appropriate reinforcement of concepts because of its fast-paced nature. The lack of multisensory stimulation and presentation in the course room leaves little for engaging the different learning styles. The environment was appropriate but less effective in meeting the individual needs of each learner/student.
3. How is online teaching incorporated into the curriculum of your organization?  
At my university, several departments have incorporated online courses with their curriculum offerings. These online courses did not replace any existing courses, but expanded offerings through the online medium.
4. What are the advantages/disadvantages of online courses?  
The advantages of online learning are: Learning in safe and familiar environment; moving at personal pace; free of travel time and expense; convenience. The disadvantages of online learning are: Too costly; little opportunity for personal contact; encountering geographical biases (some professors and students from other areas of the country or world cannot accept that learners from a particular location are educated and are capable of performing well and/or excelling academically).
5. How does online coursework help students achieve greater academic success?  
Online learning may help students achieve greater success, but not necessarily academic success. The online experience can cause one to excel technologically, and become better equipped for today’s job market since technology is fundamental to everything. Online learning is not for everyone. Those students who are self-motivated, independent and self-disciplined may benefit from an online program.
6. How does teacher preparation impact online teaching?  
I do not know how teacher preparation can impact online learning. But I think that online learning can impact teacher preparation. Because of online learning, teacher populations can be reached far and near with a computer and just the click of a button, cost effectively for professional development, short term workshops, mini conferences, tutorial learning, online conferences, etc. Sky’s the limit.
7. How cost effective is online coursework?



Online coursework is not cost effective for learners in degree programs who maintain an extended stay. Online learning is convenient, but too expensive.

Evaluation of an online program at degree completion is an effective means of collecting information to enhance student learning and provide improvement in the overall program. The data collected from student evaluations can also provide educational institutions and faculty with valuable information for faculty improvement. Evaluations should focus on improving the quality of teaching and help to ensure that instructors have the necessary resources and learning opportunities they need to be most effective in the online environment.

## Conclusion

Design and delivery of online courses that embrace community, curriculum, and assessment, as well as actively engage students in the learning process are significant for sustaining and building the online program. Effectiveness in the online environment points out the importance of being supportive and contribute to a sense of togetherness for development of relationships and overall success of coursework. Students' interest in a course and relevance of the content influences their work performance for achievement of goals for the course. Professional development can play a crucial role in preparing teachers to integrate technology and learning into an educational environment that encourages interaction, meaningful involvement and a connectedness to other learners, as well as the international community.

An efficient online learning environment demonstrates technology-rich, research-based instructional and learning strategies that facilitate learning, and classroom management within the course room experience. The electronic movement has evolved into a science which engages best practices; some from bricks and mortar institutions, and others which emerged from a highly diversified cultural, academic, and geographical cohort of learners. The online learning environment, once devoid of personal communication, is now inundated with approaches that help students feel a sense of community and partnership while meeting their learning needs. In online programs, learners experience a paradigm shift from literal involvement in academic pursuits, to both virtual and tangible realms of scholastic pursuits within a virtual community of learners with a common goal of meeting their educational needs while networking with others.

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