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Best Practices in Online Learning in Higher Education

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Abstract: *This article Studies the issues related to online learning. The researcher provides a summary of the historical perspective of online education and describes the innovative aspects of online teaching and learning. The barrier in online education is the new faculty roles in online learning environments and its implications for online learners and teaching faculties are also provided. The intention of this article is to stimulate reflections on effective strategies to enhance educator's success in their transition from traditional teaching platforms to online learning and teaching platforms.*

Keywords: Online Learning; Online Education; Technology Learning Environments

I. INTRODUCTION

Many colleges and universities across the nation are transforming from traditional face-to-face classes into fully online, blended, or online courses. This is partially due to the need to maintain a competitive edge and make classes more accessible to a growing and diverse student group across the country. Moreover, online teaching offers new and exciting opportunities to expand the learning environment for various student populations. In a research of undergraduate students at an reputed university enrolled in both traditional and online courses, students voted for online courses to the traditional classroom methods saying that they grasped more in online classes, spent more time on these classes and found these classes to be bit difficult yet of higher quality than traditional ways (Hannay & Newvine, 2006). Over the last decade, the number of online courses and programs have also grown significantly (Allen& Seaman, 2008; Sugar, Martindale, & Crawley, 2007; Wait & Lewis, 2003). Many students are getting enrolled in online courses as it is easy to access as per our need. As the student enrollment and the number of online courses continue to rise, educational institutions will need faculty who are willing to face the existing challenges and engage in developing and teaching online courses.With the rise in demand for online learning as well as more institutions of higher education are striving to provide various educational opportunities, online learning continues to grow rapidly as a viable means andproviding increased access to a huge number of students (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Saba, 2005). As aresult, at a certain point in their teaching career, university educators may be asked to consider teaching their classes either partly or completely online (Clark-Ibanez & Scott, 2008).

II. ONLINE LEARNING

Online learning is also known as web-based training, e-learning, distributed learning, Internet-based learning, web-based learning, cyber learning, virtual learning, or net-based learning (Urdan & Weggen,2000). It is a subset of distance learning and embraces the huge set of technology-based applications and learning processes including computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, digital collaborations, and web-based learnings (Urdan & Weggen, 2000). Additionally, it takes the shape of complete courses with the flexibility to content for "just-in-time" learning, access (Hall, 2000). This definition comprehends delivery of course content through all electronic media and platforms, including the Internet, extranets, satellite broadcasts, intranets audio and video tapes, smart TVs, pen drives, etc. Online learning is based not only on the online contents, but also includes a wide range of computer-based learning platforms and delivery methods, formats, genres and media such as social media, educational programs, simulations, games and the use of multimedia on fixed and mobile platforms through interdisciplinary areas. Campbell (2004) argues that the focus of online learning in higher educationis on the development of metacognitive as well as reflective and collaborative learning. Additionally, online learning goes beyond planned subject learning to recognize the importance of the unplanned and

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the self-directedness of the student to maximize incidental learning and improve performance. In a comparative study performed by Dabbagh and Nanna Ritland (2005) evaluated the differences between traditional and online learning environments and stated that traditional learning environments are

(a) bound by location and presence of educator and student, (b) It is in real time, (c) controlled by an expert and (d) It is linear in teaching methods.

Using advanced information and communication channels, Serial communication, real-time information, online learning environments are unbound and dynamic. Online learning environments have diverse range of student friendly practices and are mostly characterized by active learning, student-centered techniques (Baker, 2003;Browne, 2005).Since the pandemic, online learning has greatly changed affecting small, corporate business, the training sector, private and public education, and the military in various ways. Below Table provides a brief historical content of online development along with the changing focus of educational technology over the past few years (Herrington, Reeves et al., 2005; Mortera-Gutiérrez, 2006; Nicholson & McDougall, 2005;Pilla, Nakayama, Nicholson, 2006).

Table 1: Chronology of Online Distance Education Development.

Era	Focus	Educational Characteristics
1970 - 1980	Drill practices; Computer-based learning: Programming;	Behaviorist approaches to learning and instruction; programming to build tools and solve problems; Local user-computer interaction.
1980 - 1990	Computer-assisted Training, Multimedia	Use of older CAL models with interactive multimedia courseware; Passive learner models dominant; Constructivist influences begin to appear in educational software design and use.
1991-1996	Web Based Education & Training, Internet models	Internet-based content delivery; Active learner models developed; Constructivist perspectives common; Limited end-user interactions.
1996 - 2005	E-Learning	Internet-based flexible courseware deliver; increased interactivity; online multimedia courseware; Distributed constructivist and cognitivist models common; Remote user-user interactions
2006 - Present	Mobile learning and social – media networking	Interactive distance courseware distributed online through learning management systems with social networking components; learning that is facilitated via a wireless device such as a PDA, a smart phone or a laptop; learning with portable technologies where the focus is on the mobility of the learner.

2.1 The Barriers to Online Learning

Even though the instruction provided via the Internet offers a flexible alternative to the need for infrastructure and space, the need for teacher's involvement in online learning remains an important issue for the institutions that plan to continue offer education at a distance (Matsom, 2006; Nelson & Thompson, 2005;Schifter, 2004). In a large number of institutions, faculty members are anticipated to participate in online distance education as a part of their regular duties as faculty (Kim & Bonk, 2006). However, various faculty members are uncertain to change their traditional courses to an online format. This unwillingness to accept the change is attributed to a lackof support, assistance, along with training provided by institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2008;Keengwe, Kidd, & Kyei-Blankson, 2009). Nelson and Thompson (2005) cited faculty time cost, course quality, student contact, rewards, workload, lack of administrative support and equipment concerns as hurdles to online teaching methods. The researchers suggested that program educators keep abreast of the technological problems; courses that integrate more collaboration between educators and learners; training should be provided to faculty to control the negative aspects; faculty attempt to incorporate the need for distance education and learning courses in institutions' missions, and that a reconsideration of fixed term and promotion decisions should be evaluated to support faculty workloads. Similarly, insufficient hardware and software, learners' procrastination, slow internet connections, lack of technical expertise among the educators, inadequate orientation for learners, and a lack of disciplined time for teachers to develop and create their online courses have been quoted as barriers to faculty participation in creating and teaching online courses (Nkonge & Gueldenzoph, 2006). The researchers emphasized training and development for instructors. Supporting faculty members becomes

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important because of the number of faculty who begin the online teaching environment with less knowledge of the process and methods of designing, creating, and instructing an online course(Cuellar, 2002).Both new faculty, who might have been resistant to participate, and expert faculty plays an important role in guiding the new members for support, assistance, and training provided by higher educational institutes. Rockwell et al., (1999) examined the types of education, guidance, and support that faculty felt were expected to be successful in online teaching and learning. Faculty responded with the statement that guidance and support for developing educational materials, developing interaction sessions, and applying certain technologies were important to their success in online learning sessions. Faculty members stated that teaching online is more difficult as compared to teaching traditional courses (Gerlich, 2005) as wellas complain that online delivery was required more hard work because of the amount of time required tocheck papers and respond to questions (Lao, & Gonzales, 2005; Wegmann, & McCauley, 2008; Sellani & Harrington, 2002). In other research, faculty felt that more educational and technical support were needed because faculty were genuinely concerned about the quality of their online courses and the amount of technical support and training provided to them at their institutions were insufficient. (Allen& Seaman, 2008;Keengwe, Kidd, &Kyei-Blankson, 2009).Many Surveys conducted by various researchers suggest that the time and effort needed to create online courses and to learn new technologies are also one of the reasons for faculty member's frustrations and stress. Moreover, some educators may be reluctant towards online teaching because they are more worried that those courses may demand more time for advanced planning and teaching (Matsom, 2006).Further, faculty members may be hesitant about this change because they may not be able to maintaine and control the curriculum, lack of technical training, guidance and support, and lack of release time for planning. Knowing the differences between traditional face-to-face learning system and online learning platforms, and the process of being able to change from one modal to the other, will give faculties the ability to design better online courses and focus more on course delivery for student community (Conrad,2004; Harlow, 2007; Marfoglio, 2006, Sugar, Martindale, & Crawley, 2007). Faculty members should put a light on following points (a) the nature and scope of the content to be taught (b) their role as educators and (c) the needs and demands of the students (Ben-Jacob, Levin & Ben-Jacob, 2000; Lee & Busch, 2005;Jones, Kollof, &Kolloff, 2008).

2.2 Implications for Online Learning

Faculty members have significantly great responsibility for developing specific methods and processes within an online environment as compared to a traditional learning modal (Grosse, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2004;Sugar, Martindale, & Crawley, 2007). Educators new to online learning environments will have to take time to understand their different roles and responsibilities in the new modes of learning and teaching (Colaric & Taymans, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2004). In addition to this, teachers who develop and create online courses Should keep in mind that it is pedagogy not technology that is critical for the success of online courses(Appana, 2008; Lewis & Abdul-Humid, 2006; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008).To successfully transition from traditional eduction to active online learning platforms and instructions, faculty members might need to change their teaching methods used within their regular classroom and embrace new skills to significantly reach the distant learners (Colaric, & Taymans, 2004; Grosse, 2004; Johnson,2008; Kurzweli & Marcellas, 2008; Maguire, 2005; Nelson & Thompson, 2005; Panda & Mishra, 2007). Additionally, a serious component of an online learning environment is for faculty to provide continuous and meaningful communication. It is the responsibility of the Educators to develop a strong learning community among students and institutional members (Jones, Kolloff, & Kolloff, 2008; Wegmann& McCauley, 2008).Although the use of traditional ways may seem to be a quick and easy solution for the need of the faculty involvement in online learning, it is important for teachers and educators to understand the pros and cons of online teaching (Hurt, 2008). Faculty involvement and its success in online learning and teaching requires an understanding of the different aspects of design and delivery of an online course, as well as challenges and opportunities they encounter (Ginzburg, Chepya, & Demers, 2007; Pankowski,2008). To help faculty develop and teach online courses requires that instructional guides, professional improvement opportunities, and educational materials are carefully designed to attend all components of the learning and teaching procedure including education, course management, innovation technology and social dynamics (Caplow, 2006; Grant & Thornton, 2007; Keeler & Horney, 2007; McQuiggan, 2007).In creating a successful online education and learning experience, faculty must understand the content involved in both setting the stage and managing the change process (Maguire, 2005; Park, &Bonk, 2007). Most Importantly, a series of activities, needful resources, and timing should be carefully decided and

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planned (Grosse, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2004). Once the major components like, course description, evaluation criteria, specific course objectives, teaching strategies and course competencies (Maguire, 2005; Park & Bonk, 2007) are paid attention, faculty shall now review the barriers and opportunities that they might face both during the process of developing and educating online courses as well as changing the shift from the traditional teaching methods to an online teaching and learning environment (Grosse, 2004; Lorenzetti, 2004; Sugar, Martindale, & Crawley, 2007).Developments and innovation in information and communication technologies have created enormous opportunities for faculty members to expand the educational modals and ways beyond the Regular classroom to include geographically diverse audiences through online platforms. However, in the shift from the standard learning and teaching modals to online teaching and learning platforms, it is important for teachers not only take efforts to learn the technologies associated with online learning and education, but also understand the demand to fundamentally change and transform their educational approaches to the learning and teaching process to fulfil the educational needs of online student members(Colaric, & Taymans, 2004; Grosse, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Kurzweli & Marcellas, 2008; Maguire, 2005; Nelson & Thompson, 2005; Panda & Mishra, 2007). Technology itself does nothing to promote online education. According to Jacobsen, et al.(2002), the actual challenge is to create fluency with teaching and learning along with technology and innovation, not just with technology itself.

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