Online Academic Programmes:

Gearing Up for Success

The growth in online education offers institutions and organisations new opportunities to bring learning to a whole new level. However, this presents new challenges to the uninitiated who may be lacking in institutional knowledge and experience. This paper suggests that successful online education requires the smooth functioning of three inter-connected "gears", namely the learning platform, learning content and learning design. All three gears have to work together seamlessly to deliver successful online education outcomes. Deans, senior academic leaders and chief learning officers involved in the strategic planning, design and delivery of online academic programmes may find the information presented here of interest.

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Textbook meets Facebook

Millennials, those in the 13 to 24 age group, spend more time online than watching TV (Elkin 2003). That was the result of a survey conducted in 2003, not 2011, but makes the point even more acutely that the students of today are more wired than ever.

Fast forward to April 2010, Apple sold over 3 million iPads within 80 days of its US launch (Apple 2010) and in December, Amazon announced that Kindle 3, the latest version of its e-book reader had, within the space of 5 months, outsold the millions of products in its catalogue to become its best-selling product of all time (Amazon 2010). In normal conversations, it is hard to avoid words like Skype, YouTube and Google, and if you are not on Facebook, students may even accuse you of being out of touch and stuck in the ivory tower for too long.

We do not need fancy research reports to tell us that technology is radically changing how people interact – we can simply walk around and see how phones have morphed into smart phones that will soon become even smarter phones. And because interaction is central to higher learning, it is inevitable that technology will shape how education evolves now and even more rapidly in the future. Indeed, the polemic debate one often encounters in academia between face-to-face and online protagonists seems grossly outdated (and rather academic!) when, in the era of the iPhone, the traditional divide between face-to-face and online education is not only becoming blurred, but increasingly blended and fused.

Image Source:
Salvatore Vuono / FreeDigitalPhotos.net

But Isn't Face-to-Face Education Superior to Online Education?

It is unfortunate that dubious operators, posing as legitimate institutions, granting online degrees for little more than a quick buck have, in the past, given online education a bad reputation. However, such stories highlight a selection issue to do with the quality and sincerity of a chosen institution rather than a serious critique of online education per se. Just as there are institutions offering face-to-face programmes of dubious quality, a quality spectrum also exists in the online setting.

Concerns about the lack of learning effectiveness in online education also seem misplaced. One may argue, with some validity, that a student SMS-ing during lecture or snoozing at the back of the lecture hall adds little weight to the argument that face-to-face delivery is necessarily more effective than online delivery.

The scientific evidence is no more compelling. Two decades of research comparing the effectiveness of online education with face-to-face education has produced no conclusive answer (readers can see the wide variance in research findings at the following website http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/).

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Perhaps, however, this should not be surprising given how flawed an experiment it seems to be to reduce such a complex and personalised process as education down to a small handful of variables.

Online Education on the Rise

Increasingly, institutions are moving past the face-to-face versus online debate and embracing the new opportunities that are opening up through online education. In the US, almost 30% of higher education students take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). And this isn't a statistic generated purely from a dearth of low-quality institutions. Business schools, often the most innovative within a university, are good proxies of things to come. The Financial Times (2010) ranking of online MBA programmes over the last few years includes established and reputed business schools such as IE University, Imperial College London, Babson College, University of Texas and Indiana University. These schools have online MBA programmes that complement and, in some cases, intertwine with their more traditional MBA programmes in an innovative blended model.

"In the US, almost 30% of higher education students take at least one course online."

– I.E. Allen and J. Seaman in Class Differences, 2010

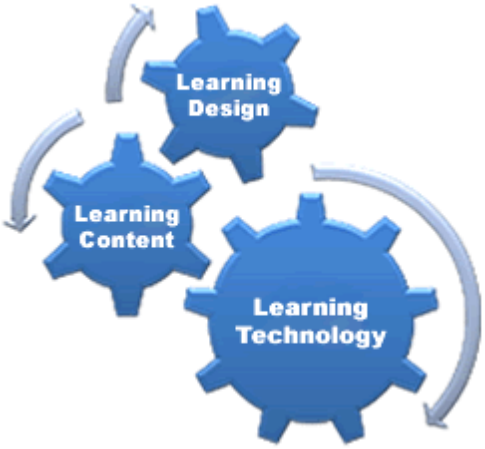
Distance education it is, but in the digital age, distance is no longer a barrier to accessing quality education. Whereas 10 years ago, online programmes might have been considered a poorer substitute for a face-to-face programme, universities without online and blended programmes are increasingly being seen as laggards. Part-time students in particular are choosing when they want to learn, at a time and place that suits them and not when the school timetable tells them to. The shift

towards greater online education offerings seems only a matter of time.

Gearing Up for Successful Online Programmes

For an institution with limited institutional experience in online education, the idea of online education represents a significant departure from traditional face-to-face teaching that most faculty is used to. Bridging this knowledge gap in online education "know-how" is central to how quickly an institution is able to achieve its online education objectives.

Programmatically, online education initiatives are a type of project where success can be framed in terms of achieving realistic project outcomes, typically of an educational nature, to a quality standard acceptable to the institution, within resource, time and financial constraints. The basic components, what we refer to as the "gears" of online education success, are shown below.



There are three essential gears, namely learning technology, learning content and learning design, which will be explained in more detail later on. Importantly, all three gears are inter-connected – a slow-down or problem in one gear will adversely affect the overall outcome. The size of the gear is also important; as we will explain later, massive investment in learning technology does not generate commensurate gains in online educational outcomes unless attention is also paid to learning content and learning design issues.

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Learning Technology - Important But Not Sufficient

Major universities in the US and Europe spend significant sums on learning platforms or learning management systems (LMS). After its acquisition of WebCT in 2006, Blackboard is a popular choice for institutions opting for a commercial learning platform. Other institutions have turned to open systems such as Moodle and Sakai that, although do not come with a licensing fee, require significant in-house IT expertise and resources to install, cutomize, support and maintain on a ongoing basis.

However, dig deeper into the actual pedagogical usage and one quickly realises that many LMS's simply serve as glorified file repositories. Yes, faculty can now make lecture notes downloadable online but that may be the primary use of a LMS, far from what one could reasonably justify as a real, significant educational return on investment. Having a LMS does not mean there is effective online education just as owning a

well-kitted toolbox does not mean one is a skilled craftsman.

In short, learning technology is the smallest gear because adding more technology does not directly translate into better online education outcomes.

Learning Content - Technology as a Content-Enabler

Learning content are the materials a faculty member may use during teaching such as course notes, presentations slides, readings and assignments. Without quality learning content, it is hard to run a course that will achieve any meaningful learning outcomes. Online education does not change the basic substance of these materials, but provides new opportunities for faculty to deliver the content in a more engaging, refreshing, effective or convenient way.

For example, instead of a face-to-face lecture, a faculty member can conduct a live lecture to students outside the classroom through a webinar tool, answer questions in real-time, and record the whole session so that it can be replayed by a student at any point during the course. The basic mechanics of lecturing have not changed, but the technology opens up new delivery possibilities.

Using a more transformational approach, tedious course notes and slides can be digitised through an instructional design process into graphical and animated courseware that provides for a more lively learning experience - ideally suited for the iPad and tablet computers that will no doubt become a ubiquitous part of student paraphernalia.

With Web 2.0, students also have tools to create and contribute dynamic content to the learning environment. For example, students can use blogs to document reflections that attract further comment from classmates. Wikis can be used by teams to support collaborative projects. Indeed, technology provides a window to access and reuse the wealth of content that already exists on the Web, providing opportunities to enrich courses beyond just faculty-generated content.

Learning Design: The Know-How that Kicks it all Into High Gear

As we have made a point of earlier, masses of technology and, it must be said, masses of content alone do not automatically result in a recipe for successful online education. Something is required to integrate and tie it all together, namely knowledge and know-how I refer collectively to as learning design.

Faculty resistance to online education is often rooted in ignorance and a lack of learning design knowledge. However, learning design is not a black art, but rather a collection of practices that, over time, any faculty member can acquire in the same way one gradually gets to know how to use a new fangled smartphone.

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For example, in a face-to-face setting, class discussions often get dominated by a small handful of vocal students. Time constraints also mean that discussions tend to be boxed-in and consist largely of reactionary comments rather than reflective ones.

However, in the online space, a faculty member could, using asynchronous discussion tools, design online discussions that avoid these problems by allowing all students to participate equally in a discussion, and participate over a longer period to encourage more insightful and reflective debate. Faculty could also assess a student's learning using rubrics that reward students for the quality of their contribution to the discussion and how well they articulate and present their arguments.

In essence, learning design helps to string learning activities together into a coherent and cohesive learning experience whether those learning activities are conducted online or face-to-face.

Conclusion

Whereas 10 years ago the idea of online academic programmes might have been viewed with some suspicion and skepticism, it is clear that online education represents new growth opportunities for many institutions.

Success in online education requires institutions to address three key "gears" for online education success, namely learning technology, learning content and learning design. Importantly, institutions that invest heavily in learning technology are unlikely to reap commensurate returns in online education outcomes unless they also pay close attention to learning content and learning design issues.

Organisations that are able to get all three gears working together smoothly will be best positioned to quickly take advantage of opportunities arising from online education.

Notes

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Online Education Notes

Online education notes are concise papers designed to share information and best practice relating to online education particularly in the context of higher and executive education.

The information presented here has been compiled from published sources and is not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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