

Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online learning

(Book Review)

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Distance Learning and University Effectiveness: Changing Educational Paradigms for Online learning challenges the university administrators and faculty by making a case that new technological capabilities necessitate the pedagogical, research, and administrative changes in distance education. It engages the readers in the discussion that the existing pedagogies, reward systems, organizational structures, procedures and policies in higher education are not supporting today's distance education in the form of online learning. Furthermore, the book proposes a need for change in traditional and conventional face-to-face methods of education to take advantage of technologies used for distance education. Overall, the book intends to support the premise that while technology is one of the transformational causes for colleges and universities, it is also one of the primary enablers of the needed changes.

The chapter authors, representing a broad spectrum of international expertise, present their perspectives on the idea that new and innovative educational paradigms and learning models are needed for online learning. While the majority of the chapter authors have backgrounds and experiences in information systems, information technology, information management, and business and public administration, there are some who extensively work as educators and instructional designers. Thus, even though the stronger focus of the book is on planning, developing, organizing and controlling the quality of distance education programs, pedagogical changes and challenges are also discussed. Using several examples of their own distance education programs, the chapter authors provide both conceptual and the practical points for consideration. In an attempt to provide coverage of instructional, structural and organizational issues, the editors also organize the book into three sections. The first section focuses on pedagogical changes, while the second and third sections concentrate on structural and organizational issues. This framework positions the chapters of the book so that they form one organized structure, enabling better understanding of the interconnections between pedagogical and organizational issues. The following is a brief section-by-section review of the book.

Section I sets the scene by discussing strategies and paradigms for distance education. The section consists of four chapters. The opening chapter brings reasons and research data to support the importance of improving the quality of education in online learning. It contends that given tools and technologies available, if designed properly, distance education courses can be more effective than face-to-face courses. However, the chapter concludes, the increase in the quality of distance learning is dependent on the faculty and their commitment to excellence in teaching and learning. In the future, the chapter adds, the institutions of higher education will be forced to re-evaluate the quality of teaching as they become more visible to the public, to legislators, and to prospective student. The second chapter of Section I builds on this appealing argument of effective distance education by proposing application of a set of instructional design principles. The author of this chapter puts forward a six-level design model that she believes to promote congruency and consistency among different

components of distance education programs at the institutional level. Using a set of procedures and guiding questions for each level of design, together with a description of a sample program, the chapter is rich in offering practical guidance within the proposed conceptual framework for planners of distance education programs at institutions of higher education.

The strong emphasis on the role of instructors in promoting the quality of distance learning and the importance of their appropriate use of the communication tools and technologies set the stage for the following chapter on e-moderating in higher education. Chapter 3 introduces the concept of e-moderating to capture the wide variety of roles and skills that online instructors need to have. It begins by identifying a list of competencies and skills for e-moderators and continues with providing practical and step-by-step suggestions for recruiting and training them. The chapter brings the issue to a close by providing an exemplar and examining the services and costs of such training and staff development programs for colleges and universities. At the end of this chapter, the reader, once again, is reminded of the fundamental role of interaction in online learning and the need for successful and productive e-moderators.

Section 1 concludes with a chapter discussing community-based distributed learning. As a concluding chapter, chapter 4 serves as an interesting complement to section 1 in that the debates between globalization and anti-globalization of education are examined. Basing their arguments on a middle ground and on the incorporation of the concept of community-based learning within the idea of globalization of education, the authors of the chapter defend a very interesting viewpoint. After analyzing the issue of how quality in technology enhances global education, the chapter authors suggest that educators and educational decision makers should build respectful partnerships with communities in an attempt to create a global learning environment, incorporating local knowledge and culturally relevant learning experiences. Two pilot programs are also presented as evidence to show how strategic partnerships may be used in the design and delivery of such programs.

Section II focuses on the instruction, course development and quality issues in distance education. Seven chapters in this section discuss various instructional issues from course planning, organization and instructional strategies to student satisfaction and challenges surrounding assessment, learning styles and cultural issues. The section opens with Chapter 5, which provides practical guidelines and discussion on the development of online courses. The chapter is built on the idea that while technology for course delivery will change, the effective delivery of content remains dependent upon appropriate instructional design techniques. The chapter authors are persuasive as they propose applying nine principles of Web-based design to help course developers overcome the challenges of creating student-centered learning environments. Given many visual examples and easy-to-apply practical and step-by-step guidelines, Chapter 5 is a highlight of section II.

Following Chapter 5 is Chapter 6, which makes a similar argument but from a different perspective. Chapter 6 adapts the systems theory, as a framework to analyze elements of distance education and to propose a model for designing and developing distance education programs. Using components of an organization as a system namely input, process, output and outcome the chapter encourages developers and planners to use the proposed Educational Process Model to rethink the entire process of developing distance education programs. Chapter 7 shifts the reader's attention from the design and development of the distance education system to market driven factors that influence the acceptance of distance education. On the basis of the analysis of the results of a survey administered to a large group of MBA distance education programs, the chapter generates five constructs that correlate with student satisfaction. Using these factors as a guide, the chapter discusses some operational and administrative issues.

Chapters 8, 9 and 11 take a more specific approach and focus particularly on assessment of student learning and student cultural differences. Chapter 8 begins this discussion by suggesting an alignment between course learning objectives, instruction, and assessment and by examining issues related to effects of the instructor's pedagogical beliefs and perspectives, including course design on online assessment. Establishing the needs for engaging students with the materials and course content in a meaningful way in an online course, the chapter suggests a number of assessment strategies. Chapter 9 compares assessment strategies in two sections of a graduate programming course, where one was on campus and the other online to identify differences in perceived test performance. In addition to confirming some of the previously raised issues, the chapter adds one more area of concern for the distance education developers and instructors.

If one skips Chapter 10, which does not directly relate to assessment of student learning and is primarily focused on modular Web-based teaching, Chapter 11 concentrate on students learning. This chapter makes an interesting, yet very important argument on the impact of cultural diversity on group interactions through technology. The chapter captures the reader's attention as soon as it begins presenting cases and scenarios that highlight some

cultural differences. Even though the discussion challenges the distance education administrators and developers by raising important questions, it does not provide practical guidance. Examples are also limited in scope and implications.

Chapter 10, as indicated above, presents modular Web-based learning and teaching and also presents the teaching model as a new and innovative design and delivery method for online learning. Given that the chapter is more in line with general design and development issues, it is not clear why it is grouped with chapters that focus on assessment of student learning. In spite of the many figures and examples presented, including a new and innovative approach for e-learning materials, Chapter 10 is somewhat abstract and difficult to follow.

Section III presents issues and strategies for building an organization for successful distance learning programs. Five chapters in this section discuss the ways in which online programs can become cost effective. The first chapter in this section, Chapter 12, proposes the idea of using the strength of the Internet for supplementing and adding value to traditional face-to-face classes rather than replacing them. To further support this argument, the chapter introduces the concept of “e-store” to promote faculty created materials and to provide new ways of packing and delivering education that have greater potential for rewarding the faculty developer. The following chapters in this section, Chapters 13, 14 and 15, examine ways in which institutions can maximize their return on investment for distance education offerings. Chapters 13 and 14 are very intriguing for distance education planners in the time of reduced budgets. During the time that distance learning has proven to be no cheaper than traditional education, and the likelihood that it is not going to get any cheaper, these chapters provide very interesting and appealing implementation and organizational models to make online learning cost effective. The next chapter in this section, Chapter 15, proposes the idea of an inter-university education network. Using a case study, the chapter explains the cost- and market-oriented advantages of co-operations between universities. Building on the idea of a modular approach to designing and delivering instructional products and high costs for development and operation of such high quality trainings, the chapter provides case evidence in support of market advantages of co-operation between universities. The chapter also discusses some problems and questions about managing open education networks in a co-operational environment. The final chapter, Chapter 16, concludes the discussion by providing research data to show that students perceive a face-to-face course supported by a Web site to be more useful in enhancing their academic performance. It makes a case that a Web assisted course which could blend the best of both face-to-face and online learning is an ideal way to enrich the student learning experiences.

In sum, the book is impressive in many respects. It aims to offer new and innovative ideas on the structure and organization of distance education in form of online learning. Although the book does not cover all issues related to online learning, it contains a wealth of useful ideas and approaches. The many examples, cases, guiding questions, figures and tables provide excellent practical ideas and guidelines for planners and developers of online learning programs. The insights presented in the book also reflect both richness and diversity.

The book is not an introductory book. It also cannot be described as 'everything you wanted to know about e-learning', but it might help in answering some of the questions that should be asked about e-learning. For readers who are relatively new to the field of e-learning and who are looking for a straightforward introduction, this book is probably not the best choice. But it will no doubt be a great source of inspiration and innovation for those who are actively involved in the design, development, implementation and organization of Web-based distance education. The size of the book and the concepts presented make it difficult to review, however, I have read most of its chapters with interest and pleasure.