Chapter 9

The Consequences of e-Learning

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It is time for realism regarding the applications of information technology to education and training. People learn; electrons do not. Accordingly, the dust will eventually settle from the flurry of activity related to “e-Learning,” in all of its manifestations, and the foregone conclusion will stand out: learning is hard work. There is value in remembering this conclusion because in this Internet era, there is sometimes the impression gained that all the human effort involved in learning and in the achievement of excellence has been removed by information technology and knowledge management.

Since the inception of the world-wide web, nothing has changed about the ways that people learn (Bransford, Brown, and Rodney, 1999). In fact, there is nothing electronic about learning. Learning is a process that includes the actions of study and practice (Swezey and Llaneras, 1997), sometimes for years (Ericsson and Lehmann, 1996), and the assessment of effectiveness as a change in the learner (Skinner, 1953, 1954), a change that might be observed and documented by others or even by the learner as a self-evaluating authority. And one important advantage of a book as a repository of managed knowledge for learning is that it is easy to use (Brock, 1997). The impact of web-based instructional delivery and assessment of competence, however, will have a profound consequence on pedagogy, particularly as the art and science of teaching are tailored to the needs and status of the individual learner. The consequence will be a rational pedagogy that most of us only dreamed about as students ourselves. This is evidenced by the volume of emerging commen-
tary that addresses the current and potential impact of the world-wide web and automated instructional delivery on education and training (Eamon, 1999; Hodgins, 2000; Krantz and Eagley, 1996; Lange, 1999; Tennyson, 1999). A common denominator within this stream of important and timely discussion is the attempt to cope with individual differences among learners and to overcome them.

Those of us who now write editorials for our colleagues to read and ponder were once students ourselves. We sat there in large classes. We listened to lectures that were sometimes inspiring, more often not. We took notes as the professor spoke, and we studied a textbook. We managed our learning under the strict temporal constraints of a course. We sometimes experienced “just-in-time” learning on the night before an examination. We recited on objective tests, usually, and these evaluations gave rise to grades, typically a distribution of letter grades that intended to show our intellectual competence in a subject matter relative to the competence displayed by our student colleagues. Indeed, the mission of the academy was to present information in a constant format and then to document individual differences in the use of that information. Even though many of us excelled academically under such circumstances, we all harbored a nagging suspicion that something was fundamentally flawed and unfair about the whole thing. That was the correct feeling to have.

All of us knew then that the impact of the instructional delivery media, typically lectures and books, and the assessment methods, typically objective tests, would differentially affect the members of a diverse group of students taking a particular course. All of us knew then that the students in a class were not equally advantaged in academic background, motivation, maturity, study skills, and available energy to undertake learning within a competitive academic context. There was a tacit failure by the academy to adopt course admission criteria and course exit standards of excellence that would address individual differences as a factor to be solved by the academy. Instructional delivery media, together with organizational constraints, failed to accommodate those differences and to overcome them. We now look with fascination at the applications of information technology in education and training, and some of us may wonder how our own careers, and those of our students, might have developed differently if we had used the world-wide web, simply because this technology has occasioned an enlightened and compassionate understanding of individual differences among learners.

It will no longer be business as usual within academe, and the transformation will produce a global, egalitarian, shared, and ultimately optimistic sociological context for education and training. The reason is that the
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