Introduction

Global E-Learning Practices: An Introduction

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Introduction

No other educational technology has ever captured the imagination and interests of so many educators around the world simultaneously than Internet and the World Wide Web (Owston, 1997). The interest in the educational use of the Internet and its World Wide Web (WWW) has been so that today the e-learning industry is the fastest-growing sub-sector of a $2.3 trillion global education market, and the market for online higher education is estimated to exceed $69 billion by 2015 (Hazel Associates, 2005). The increased demand for and just in time need for higher education and training coupled with a shift from the labor intensive workforce to a more globalized knowledge intensive workforce has resulted in the rapid growth and expansion of e-learning. The demand to go online has become so significant that universities developed generic learning management systems. Most of these initially looked like a system to manage the existing classroom model of teaching and learning. The teaching community, largely for its simplicity and user-friendliness, accepted these systems quickly. However, soon they realized that what are delivered as e-learning courses are nothing more than lectures notes and PowerPoint files uploaded to the net. Weigel (2000, p. 12) says these courses are “little more than an exercise of posting on the Internet an enhanced syllabus that includes lecture content, reading assignments and practice tests, along with using discussion groups and e-mails to respond to students’ questions,” with very little thought on the pedagogical models relevant to the new medium. Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2000) also expressed similar concern for the Web courses:
It is also evident that many online courses lack basic design consideration and that the Web is simply being used as a medium for delivery of instructions created within another framework. Such transposition from one medium to another may have some value in reaching certain outreach goals, but it also runs serious risks of diluting the original instruction and possibly rendering it ineffective. (p.229)

Although we can find universities that were established to exclusively offer online courses and are still running successfully (e.g., University of Phoenix Online), there are some instances of online universities and courses having started and closed down. A major setback, and often cited by the skeptics of e-learning, is the shutting down of the United Kingdom eUniversity (UkeU) in 2004 for want of sufficient students after considerable resource spending. Besides student recruitment, other problems faced by UkeU were the wrong timing of the opening of the university (just after the dot com bubble burst in 2000), platform development, and impatience to see results immediately (Garrett, 2004). A huge amount of literature is now available before us to study, review, and learn from the mistakes and best practices. A close look into the e-learning use in the educational institutions reveals three typical manners (Bates, 2001; Berge, Collins, & Dougherty, 2000; Laurillard, 2002; Mason, 1998; Mayes, 2000; Mitra, 1999):

1. As integrated in the classroom teaching that works as a supplement to the face-to-face teaching;
2. As a “mixed mode” approach to complement face-to-face teaching, normally called “blended e-learning”; and
3. As an independent mode for teaching and learning as a replacement for face-to-face teaching.

These different ways of using the Web are an expression of new models of learning and teaching, indicating the emergence of a paradigm shift from teacher- to student-centered learning, transmission of old knowledge to the construction of new knowledge, behavioristic to humanistic, inauthentic and context free to authentic and context specific tasks. But such a paradigm shift calls for a new assortment of skills, knowledge, talents, and competencies (Ryan & Woodward, 1998; Salmon, 2000). Berge (2001) and Willis (1992) discuss such skills needed for online learning, requiring new communication patterns and refined time management skills. In addition, they point out the necessity of proper orientation for students to be able to adjust to the new online environment in order to facilitate their success. The global practice of e-learning and innovations by practitioners present a wide spectrum of thinking and use, as we can see in this volume. But, before that, let us deal with the interchangeable use of a variety of terminologies in the field of e-learning.
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