Foreword

The past decade has seen the rapid growth of Internet based education, commonly referred to as "distance education" or "online learning." While the technology to enable online learning evolved gradually during the previous decade, it was only in the late 1990's, with the emergence of comprehensive course management systems that faculty and college instructional development staff began to invest the time and effort to build fully online courses and, eventually, programs. Today, almost all community colleges and most four-year public colleges and universities offer some online programs; there has been significant penetration in the majority of private two and four-year institutions and a lesser amount in four-year liberal arts colleges. The current form of distance education has also spurred major growth in the for-profit sector of higher education in the U.S. Today, nearly one quarter of students in higher education do some portion of their coursework in online courses, and that percentage is continuing to grow (Allen and Seaman.[1]

Equally remarkable is that student outcomes demonstrate that students are learning as effectively online as in the classroom. The latest Department of Education meta-study, while calling for more study, goes so far as to draw the conclusion that online courses achieve marginally better outcomes than classroom courses, and that blended courses appear to achieve the best results of all.[2] The significance of these findings, which compare a form of learning that is still in its infancy with a thousand year old tradition of classroom instruction, can hardly be exaggerated. Where will online learning be in another decade, if parity with the classroom has already been achieved?

I believe that further dramatic advances will be made. These will grow out of a key difference in faculty attitudes toward distance education versus classroom-based education. That difference is the relative readiness of faculty to work collaboratively, embrace standards for course design and delivery, and commit to a process of continuous improvement in their online courses. Sadly, this is not characteristic of face-to-face higher education. While educational theory has steadily advanced in recent decades, most college faculty continue to teach their classroom courses in a manner more influenced by their own experience as students than by the research findings of those who study the learning process. A corollary of this observation is that most instructors make only minor changes in the organization and delivery of their courses over the years. They may update their course content to take account of the latest information on the subject, change discussion topics, and introduce new technology to provide visual and multimedia support, but the basic organizing principles are largely unaffected.

I make these observations, based on more than 40 years of teaching and administrative experience in higher education, in order to highlight the change in attitude that college instructors appear to undergo when they make the transition to Internet-based distance education. If we speculate about the causes of this significant change in attitude, there are a number of obvious factors:

Learning to teach in a new media, faculty cannot fall back on the models they assimilated during their own education.

The inherent community-building characteristics of the Internet appear to influence the attitude of faculty toward collaborating, sharing, and adopting best practices.

The many organizations that have sprung up to support faculty in their new roles in distance education are serving as influential communities engaging faculty on issues of technology and pedagogy in ways that have no real parallels in traditional, discipline-based, faculty organizations.

Training in course design and delivery appear to faculty as a logical step in their transition to online teaching, once they have accepted their need for training in the use of course management tools and online media.

Faculty's greater dependence on technology and instructional design staff in order to succeed in online teaching exposes them to greater staff influence on their attitudes toward course organization and pedagogy.

I am sure there are other factors as well, but it is the end result that concerns us here. That result is faculty's much greater openness to re-examining their learning objectives and teaching strategies and to re-designing their courses to be more effective. Once started down this path, many are prepared to continue the process as more research and experimentation with distance learning suggest further potential improvements.

These trends have spurred the creation of internal standards by many schools engaged in developing online courses and programs, the development of standards of best practice by accrediting bodies and national associations,[3] and the adoption of the Quality Matters Rubric[4] for the design of fully online and blended courses by schools across the country. This concern with standards is leavening the quality of distance education. Basic principles, such as the importance instructor presence, student engagement, and active learning, have been widely accepted and built into virtually all standards for online and blended course design and delivery. However, there are many avenues yet to explore and many opportunities to build on the early successes of distance education, as our understanding of the online learning environment continues to grow.

This book explores one of those opportunities. It grows out of the fundamental insight that we can categorize college courses by the type of learning they promote, and that different design and delivery strategies may be appropriate for each of these course types. Both faculty and instructional designers should benefit from the thorough exploration of the implications of this insight, and the distance learning community as a whole will benefit from subsequent efforts to build courses according to these principles and evaluate the outcomes for students. It is efforts like this that insure that distance education will continue to advance toward its potential as a no-compromise alternative to face-to-face study.

ENDNOTES

[1]   Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2009). *Staying the Course; Online Education in the United States, 2008.* (Sloan Consortium, November, 2009). Retrieved from http://sloan-c.org/publications/survey/pdf/ staying_the_course.pdf, for data on the growth of enrollment, programs, and positive attitudes toward online learning in higher education.

[2]   Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2009). *Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning; A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies.* (U.S. Depart-

ment of Education, 2009). Retrieved from www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opepd/ppss/reports.html.

[3] See, for example "Best Practices for Electronically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs," (http://www.ncahlc.org/download/Best_Pract_DEd.pdf) which has been adopted by the eight regional accrediting bodies in the U.S.

[4] See www.qualitymatters.org.

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