Chapter I

Perspectives on Online Teaching

Introduction

The general focus of the chapter is on the various perspectives of online teaching. Specifically, its objective is to review what has been published in the academic literature about the online teaching environment and its various aspects.

Background

Online education refers to the use of the Internet for teaching and learning. What started many years ago as distance education has evolved to make full use of the technologies available today to enrich the educational experience of the participants (Sherritt & Basom, 1997).

Distance learning programs are constantly being developed by numerous colleges and universities, yet not enough has been done to research the impact of technology on the teachers (Turoff, 1997). As more courses move online, educational institutions and teachers alike are challenged in terms of pedagogy, course content and delivery, and administrative and technology support (Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1996).

An increasing number of colleges and universities offer online programs (Goral, 2001). Distance education is moving into every industry; online training is bigger than online education (Carnevale, 2003). Faculty members are pressured by the changes stemming from education globalization and the potential of information
Information technology (IT) changes the teaching and learning environments dramatically (Massy & Zemsky, 1995). The entire educational environment is affected by advances and changes in IT (Jellinek, 1998; Margolis, 1998). The availability of information and the way it is accessed has changed. Over recent years, there has been an increase in the use of technology to support education. The students who enroll in distance education programs find out that they must learn on their own while the teacher is taking on a facilitator role (Knowlton, 2000; Martine & Freeman, 1999). When teaching online, typically, the teacher posts a syllabus, mini-lectures and course materials, discussion questions, and other assignments for the students. There are deadlines the students must meet in order to receive full credit for their work. However, the students are responsible for their learning, for class interaction, and for the discussions that take place, mostly in written form.

The discussions that occur in the on-ground classroom occur online as well. Yet, one finds that the online discussions follow a more structured format. Starting with an initial question or commentary posted by the teacher or a student, subsequent comments posted by participants appear in order, or in a thread. The discussion thread is represented by the message flow, usually in time order: A threaded discussion is simply a hierarchical ordering of messages (Ko & Rosen, 2001). The participants can follow the discussion and reflect on every message that is part of the thread. Unlike spoken conversation, the written form of the discussion allows extended time for reflection and the ability to go back and revisit message fragments, thus supporting an iterative, incremental approach to understanding what is being conveyed in the discussion thread.

The Internet makes it possible to reach across geographical and political boundaries. It offers a great mechanism for disseminating information. Distance education allows the working adult learners to continue their education or stay current in their profession. Students and teachers are separated in space; the classroom reaches across geographical distance (Cyrs, 1997). Online education comes as a natural improvement, where the Internet is the medium used to support distance education. Furthermore, online education affords access to courses that may not be available in a traditional format (Ben-Jacob, Levin, & Ben-Jacob, 2000).
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