The Use of Online Technology in the Teaching and Learning Process: WebCT — Communication Technology or Communication Turn-Off?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an evaluation of the effectiveness of a year-one module delivered by a combination of traditional and online teaching methods to leisure and tourism undergraduates. The research further considers the value of the extemporized implementation of computer-mediated instructional settings that do not consider or refer to existing evaluative frameworks, in view of the fact that initiatives often are driven more by pragmatism and policy than pedagogy and theory. The findings show that there are negative and positive attributes to both methods of instruction, but overall, traditional methods are seen as preferable to new online developments. The reasons for this preference are explored and include communication interaction and contact with a tutor. The main positive attributes of the online system are flexibility and accessibility. The issue of appropriateness of online instruction at differing higher educational levels is also considered.

Keywords: attitudes; experience; interaction; learning; online learning; satisfaction; traditional teaching methods; WebCT

INTRODUCTION

The current UK university sector is subject to a diverse range of environmental factors that have increasing influence on traditionally accepted practices. These environmental factors include increasing competition among institutions, a dwindling resource base, and a more academically varied student population due to widening participation initiatives and increasing pressures to increase student numbers. The result of this has led to many universities having to revisit their services both in terms of the subjects they offer and in how they are delivered. There is an increase in pres-
sure to sell their product to a much wider market both at home and abroad and, as a result, universities have had to consider alternative methods by which to deliver the curriculum, with by far the most prominent of these being the utilization of education technology. The use of distance education technology is increasingly perceived as the future of education (Leung & Ivy, 2003; McGinn, 2000; Sistek-Chandler, 2000; Webb, 2001), and it is anticipated that increasing utilization will lead to greater profitability for universities due to its ability to increase and widen provision with little or no significant increase to existing resource structures.

UK government initiatives suggest that post-compulsory education will be delivered increasingly by a range of integrated methodologies, including distance learning packages, traditional chalk and talk delivery, and online student support (Thompson, McGivern, Lewis, & Dierck-O’Brien, 2001). The dilemmas presented by such a scenario are multifarious, with perhaps the necessity to use online technology to teach larger numbers of students regardless of the appropriateness of this type of forum for learning being the most significant to course tutors.

The primary objective of this paper is to provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of a year-one module delivered by a combination of traditional and online teaching methods to leisure and tourism undergraduates. The research will consider further the value of the extemporized implementation of computer-mediated instructional settings that do not consider or refer to existing evaluative frameworks, in view of the fact that initiatives are often driven more by pragmatism and policy than pedagogy and theory.

THE FLEXIBLE FRIEND: ANYTIME, ANYPLACE, ANYWHERE

The expected influence of existing and developing learning technologies is an area that is subject to increasing debate, and authors such as Porter, (1996, cited in Segrest, Domke-Amonte, Miles & Anthony, 1998) contend that new technology will stimulate more change in the upcoming years than universities have seen in the last half of the 20th century. Further, writers such as Van Dusen (1997, cited in Evans & Haase, 2001) state that one of the reasons for the rise of online learning is that “the half-life of what a person learns is getting shorter and shorter” (p.248) and that with the rapid changes in technological and societal practices, the education process is becoming more and more of a lifelong journey. A major factor behind the growth of distance education programs is the opportunity to engage and to learn without being restricted by geographical or time boundaries. E-learning as a medium of delivery for education has many advocates (Leung & Ivy, 2003; Salmon, 1998, 2000; Webb, 2001), due to various possibilities such as the enhancement of access and a more flexible learning experience. Webb (2001) further contends that the Internet is a tremendous equalizer as a source of knowledge.

WebCT AND LEARNING

WebCT is one of several existing managed learning environments (e.g., Blackboard, Domino, and Top Class). Many UK institutions are choosing WebCT campus edition, and 38% of institutions worldwide have selected this system over others (elearning age, 2003). This study concentrates on the use of WebCT as an online teaching medium, as this is the system that currently is utilized by the university in
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