CHAPTER THREE

Web-Based Instruction in Organizations: Impact, Advantages and Disadvantages

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INTRODUCTION

Many organizations are currently implementing Web-based instruction (WBI). Approaches to WBI vary according to the type of organization as well as the objectives to be accomplished. Companies interested in retraining the workforce and teaching employees new skills are mostly concerned with effective information-delivery approaches. Organizations focusing on the implementation of lifelong learning and education—such as educational institutions—are increasingly moving away from mere information-delivery approaches (posting on-line syllabi and lecture notes) to incorporating effective interaction-based approaches (utilizing discussions and virtual rooms). Both approaches to WBI are important to accomplish long-term versus short-term goals, as well as conceptualization versus task-oriented outcomes.

This chapter provides an overview of teaching methods focusing primarily on strategies adopted by educational institutions implementing WBI. The review accomplishes several objectives:

• It presents the status of WBI in academic environments and discusses its relationships with other forms of distance education.
• It highlights the paradigm shift (from objectivism to constructivism, from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction) brought about by the use of the Internet and intranets for instructional delivery.
• It evaluates the perceived advantages and disadvantages for key WBI stakeholders (institutions, students and faculty).
• It reports faculty perceptions of the pros and cons of the World Wide Web extracted from an on-line survey conducted at a major East Coast university.
• Lastly, it supports the importance of WBI by highlighting its impact on educational institutions, as well as on other organizations.

BACKGROUND

Khan (1997) defines Web-based instruction as the delivery of instruction to a remote audience, using the Web as a medium. In this general acceptation, WBI places itself as a subset of distance education (DE), which uses a computer network (intranet, extranets or Internet) to provide the educational experience. As such, WBI represents the most recent approach to distance education and grounds its methodological approach on the learning theories and paradigms that support distance education. Some of these learning theories include:

- The open learning model (Kember, 1995) focuses on factors that affect a student’s successful completion of a distance education program, such as employments, family, social commitments, etc.
- Situated learning theory (Lave, 1988) argues that learning is a function of the activity, context and culture in which it occurs. While classroom learning involves abstract and out-of-context knowledge creating, situated learning involves social interactions. Learners become part of a “community of practice” moving progressively from beginners to novice, embodying beliefs and behaviors of the community.
- Cognitive flexibility theory (Jacobson & Spiro, 1995) refers to the capability of adapting responses to changing situational demands. This capability is a function of both the way knowledge is represented (e.g., along multiple rather than single conceptual dimensions) and the processes that lead to learning. The theory places emphasis on the presentation of information from multiple perspectives. Cognitive flexibility theory is especially formulated to support the use of interactive technology, such as videodisc, hypertext and Web-based learning environments.
- Individualized or self-regulated learning theory (Hammond, 1993) holds that learning is supported through providing access to individualized information beyond the basic representations (i.e., free navigation in an open hypertext/WWW environment). Students that need additional information may obtain explanations of the same concepts from different perspectives, and from different symbol systems (Hammond, 1993).
- Multiple intelligences theory (Gardner, 1984, 1993) suggests that there are a number of distinct forms of intelligence that each individual possesses in varying degrees. Gardner identifies seven primary forms: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, intrapersonal (e.g., insight, metacognition) and interpersonal (e.g., social skills). The implication for learning is that instruction should focus on the particular intelligence of each
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