Chapter 10

Student Perceptions of Virtual Education: An Exploratory Study

Anil Kumar, Poonam Kumar and Suvojit Choton Basu
University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, USA

Over the years instructors and administrators have worked together to provide education to students in academic institutions. The role of the participants in this educational system were well-defined. Instructors and administrators were responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and the methodology used was simple: the instructor transferred the knowledge to the students. The merging of computers and communications technology is transforming the way we teach and learn. Physical classrooms are being replaced by electronic classrooms. The roles of the participants are being redefined where the instructor is becoming a facilitator in the electronic classroom and students are participating in these classes from anywhere and at anytime. Questions that arise for universities include: Is this the future of higher education? Will electronic classrooms replace traditional classrooms? In this study we explore and discuss the perceptions of students in a mid-western rural university regarding virtual education. Implications for the participants in the educational system are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancements in computers and telecommunications technology in recent years is impacting “where” and “how” instruction is taking place. It is changing the concept of a classroom with physical boundaries, as well as pedagogical approaches. Technological advances are making it possible for education to be delivered electronically anywhere at anytime. The Internet provides access to courses, teachers, resources, and educational institutions for students who are located in different parts of the world. Educational and commercial institutions are using the Internet to deliver courses over the World Wide Web. These institutions store and transmit data digitally in different forms, e.g., text, voice, graphics, video, etc., across geographical boundaries, over the Internet. Web-based technologies are also enhancing the potential for two-way communication between students and teachers. This increases the richness of data that is transmitted over the Internet and helps in providing students an environment that promotes learning in real time.

In the March 10, 1997 issue of Fortune magazine, Peter Drucker predicted that “universities won’t survive” thirty years from now. Already there are several schools that have begun offering courses over the Internet. Online training or courses are becoming a big business worldwide. Many institutions are experimenting with electronic delivery of courses or entire academic programs and considering whether to make major investments in this technology. For example, the University of Phoenix is the largest private university delivering online degree courses to 56,000 students. The traditional institutions of higher education are also moving towards virtual instruction. Penn State (World Campus), the University of Minnesota, UCLA (Home Education Network), Lansing Community College, and Florida’s Gulf Coast University are other examples of institutions delivering instruction electronically (Gladieux & Swail, 1999). California has developed its own California Virtual University, which offers about seven hundred courses online, but no degrees. Virtual education has become a billion dollar industry that will continue to grow in the future.

Higher education institutions are also forming partnerships with the private sector to support their move towards virtual classrooms. Western Governors University (WGU) which was formed by the governors of seventeen states in partnership with Microsoft, Sun Systems, IBM, and AT&T, started as the nation’s first exclusively virtual university in 1998 (Blumenstyk, 1998). WGU offers three degree programs and certificate programs. Cardean University, an online “academy” established by UNext, an Internet education company includes as its partners Columbia University, the University of Chicago, Stanford University, and the London School of Economics and Political Science. The Jones Education Com-
Intelligent Adaptable e-Assessment for Inclusive e-Learning
Lilyana Nacheva-Skopalik and Steve Green (2016). *International Journal of Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies* (pp. 21-34).
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