Online Learning for Public Institutions

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Keith Sullivan
Dalhousie University, Canada

INTRODUCTION

Three factors have accelerated the need for continuous learning for public administration employees: (1) improvements in information technologies that provide greater opportunities to gather, store, and transmit knowledge; (2) the increase in jobs required to produce and to manipulate knowledge; for example, the Canadian federal government estimates that 75% of its employees are knowledge workers; and (3) employee mobility is increasing, as shown by a yearly turnover of 40% of the U.S. workforce, or approximately 50 million employees.

Therefore, continuous learning is becoming an important issue for employers and employees. In a survey of the 50 U.S. state governors on higher education issues, the most important issue was encouraging lifelong learning (Klor de Alva, 2000), leading to a need for learning management, where an organization controls internal and external knowledge as an important performance factor for both individuals and the organization.

In the past, continuous organization learning in the public sector was associated with dedicated central learning centers. For example, the Canadian federal government's education center for middle- and senior-level public servants, the Canada School for Public Service, had two large centers with classrooms and libraries, one with residential capacity.

Most of the new knowledge obtained by public servants required large expenditures of capital and time in order to move employees and instructors away from their places of work to learn together in classrooms. Not only is this model expensive, but it also places a significant gap between learning a concept and being able to apply that concept to daily work. Online gives the learning manager a new tool that might be more cost effective (Langford & Seaborne, 2003).

With the development of new information technologies, many leaders are questioning the place-bound synchronous classroom model as the best model for developing educational experiences. For example, U.S. governors' next three important higher education issues after lifelong learning were (1) providing opportunities to obtain education anytime and anyplace via technology, (2) requiring postsecondary institutions to collaborate with business and industry in curriculum and program development, and

Figure 1. (Wild, 2003)
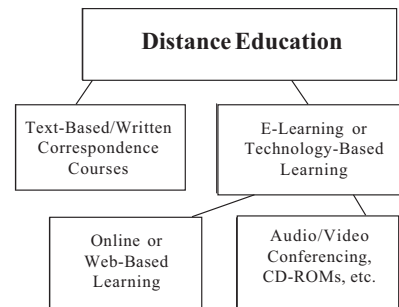
(3) integrating on-the-job experience into academic programs (Klor de Alva, 2000). The new instructional model that is emerging delivers smaller units directly to the employee and very close to their work site or home; it is often called online education.

WHAT IS ONLINE EDUCATION?

As shown in the following diagram, e-learning is a subset of the more comprehensive term *distance education*. Text-based written educational experiences that have been delivered for many decades (often called correspondence schools) are the other part of distance education. E-learning can be divided further into the delivery of education via electronic media such as CDROMs, audiotapes, and so forth, and online learning with instruction based on the Web. The military uses the interesting descriptive term *advanced distributed learning* for online education, which paints a wonderful image of how information technologies work (i.e., streaming the learning experience throughout the world).

BACKGROUND

In 2001, Pearson, the large British media group that owned 50% of *The Economist*, believed that there was "a potentially vast market for electronically delivered teaching

material." The U.S. alone spent $800 billion on education in 2000, and in that same year, 40% of all U.S. college classes were using Internet resources (Scardino, 2001). In February 2004, Global Network Academy reported 35,766 online courses in 8,052 programs.

IBM and Microsoft have workplace online programs in order for their employees to obtain advanced degrees and credits. The companies cover the cost of the courses, and the workers take the courses at home on weekends. IBM employees obtain their degrees from the University of Texas at Austin, while Microsoft employees enroll at the Oregon Health and Science University's School of Science and Engineering (*Information Week*, 2002).

Warwick University in Britain and Acadia University in Nova Scotia require all students to use laptops for their studies, and students at public colleges in Massachusetts must own a laptop computer in order to enhance their online learning. Spearheaded by the University of Dundee in Scotland, more than 50 schools in 16 countries are working together to develop an online medical school called the International Virtual Medical School. One of the objectives is to counter the pattern of medical students going abroad for their education and not returning to their country. The degrees are to be granted by individual universities, all of which are accredited. The plan is to have students in a clinical setting about 30% during the first two years of the program and 70% in the following years (Mangan, 2002).

The University of Phoenix Online and the University of Athabasca have been two of the most successful online universities. The former has grown over the last few years from 19,000 to more than 65,000 students. This university does not have a physical campus and is not developed for the employees to meet any faculty or students on campus (A. Siegrist, personal communication, 2003). The admissions criteria for an undergraduate degree are a high school diploma and access to a work environment that allows application of the learning concepts. University of Phoenix Online trades on the New York Stock exchange as the Apollo Group. In September 2000, the initial offering was $14 and traded for more than $77 in February 2005.

The University of Athabasca has more than 30,000 students, doubling its enrollment from 1999 to 2005. The programs are based on an open university model that does not require any level of prior academic achievement. They have gained the respect of Canadian traditional universities by allowing students to transfer Athabasca credits into traditional universities. However, it is not hard to final examples of failures. Many online programs founded during the Internet boom did little but hemorrhage money. Pensare, an online MBA company using Duke courses, and Quisic, an online program developed with the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, were scrapped. SUNY Buffalo had an online MBA program that lasted only 18 months.

In mid-September 1997, the California Virtual University (CVU) enthusiastically opened its doors, promising a Web site that would feature the online and distance education offerings of all California accredited colleges and universities. By April 1999, all that remained was a listing of online courses and programs offered by other California institutions. CVU's plans for a virtual library and online guidance counseling service were abandoned.

The University system of Georgia started a pilot program in 1997 with 8,000 laptops, requiring students at Clayton College & State University and Floyd College to lease laptops for $300 per semester. Students and faculty praised the program. But the state university system went $1.5 million in debt from the three-year experiment, and Georgia decided to end mandatory student laptop leasing programs. Students now are required to purchase laptops (Chronicle of Higher Education Online, 2001).

Many people believe that online learning cannot be as effective as traditional classroom learning with certain subject matters. The argument, even from technology knowledgeable people, is that the humanities are ideal for operating via electronic text, but areas that require any degree of physical dexterity and direct observation, such as general medicine and specialities like brain surgery, do not seem compatible for online teaching (Levinson, 1997). However, there is no empirical evidence to support this view, and it ignores the growing trend of medical personnel remotely interacting with patients through scopes and sophisticated testing.

There is a gender difference for online learners. According to a study of the American Association of University Women, women find greater levels of difficulty taking online classes than men do. Interviews were conducted with 500 students, predominately female, of which almost 33% were pursuing degrees, not just a few courses for enrichment or career advancement. The study concluded that women essentially were adding a third shift, of coursework to their regular jobs and homemaking/childcare duties. In addition, the cost of online classes was adding stress, because the funds required for tuition, online subscriptions, and equipment were equivalent to traditional classes (Chronicle of Higher Education Online, 2001).

FORMAL INSTITUTIONAL ONLINE LEARNING

The remainder of this article analyzes formal institutional online learning. Like many aspects of the virtual world, writers spend a lot of time looking at the *e* (electronic) part of an e-concept and less time on the other aspects of the concept; in this case, the *l* (learning) part. Both parts are

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