

Does E-Learning Improve the Communication Among Students and Lecturers?

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INTRODUCTION

This article reports on a survey that investigates the role of e-learning in improving the communication in learning environments. The results are drawn from the analysis of data collected from a sample of 420 university students in Greece. The study focuses on the contribution of e-learning to facilitating the communication among fellow students and the communication among lecturers and students. The results of this article are useful for both practitioners and academics.

Internet technologies are spread across almost all aspects of modern life in business, entertainment, education, and learning. Students in developed countries are already not only computer literate, but also they are becoming the drivers of change for the future economy. E-learning services and courses are on offer in more and more universities and other educational institutions in an attempt to deliver higher quality in learning. The starting point of the implementation of distance education was in 1874. The University of Illinois has since been offering correspondence studies. It is certain however that since 1874 technology and its applications in learning has dramatically changed. E-learning as learning process in general is a not a simple issue. There are many stakeholders, and they are related within the learning environment. Tutors/teachers, administration and authorities, students learners, parents, and institutions all have a different point of view on the whole system. The similarities and the differences between education, teaching, and learning are quite ambiguous (Kroksmark, 1995). As a result, education is the science of training, and respectively learning is the science of teaching. The definition of education includes the complex procedures of teach-

ing and learning, where teaching all the differentiated duties of a teacher is concerned.

The term “e-learning” refers to the use of Internet technologies in order to share information and enhance knowledge (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 1996). According to Rosenberg (2001), an e-learning system has the following characteristics:

- It is based on a network,
- It focuses on the broadest view of learning
- The participants use computers to get information and knowledge.

E-learning is not the end to classroom training. In fact, classroom training will be redefined to focus on those aspects of learning that are best accomplished when:

- Person-to-person interactions are required
- Opportunities for learning improvements need to be identified
- Team efforts are a priority
- Evaluating tasks
- Participation of experts with the group is needed

E-learning provides opportunities for students who may not be able to pursue an academic degree or participate in continuing education programs because of difficulty accessing a traditional educational setting (Messina, 2002). By using a variety of technologies, including correspondence education, distance education, virtual classrooms, computer-mediated communication, and computer-mediated instruction, e-learning connects students and faculty without the constraints

of having to be physically present at a conference or on the university or college campus. E-learning offers many distinct advantages to individuals who may find it inconvenient or even impossible to attend traditional educational institutions because of location, work schedules, and/or increasing family obligations. Also, as e-learning class attendance is not required, there is a significant reduction in costs. E-learning is coming to fill the gaps left from conventional learning. In our days, more and more universities and organizations offer e-learning courses (Sanderson, 2002).

BACKGROUND

E-Learning Terminology

A wide range of terms can be found in the literature that are used interchangeably for e-learning. Nichols (2003) discusses terms such as online learning, mixed-mode learning, blended learning, resource-based learning, Web-based, Web-distributed, or Web-capable. According to Sun Microsystems (2002), e-learning spreads across two worlds, namely, the world of information technology and the world of education and training. In general, as the world of e-learning evolves, terms like e-learning, technology-based learning, and Web-based learning are constantly changing and used differently by different organizations and user groups.

According to Urban and Weggen (2000), the term e-learning can be seen from the *technology-based learning* perspective, where e-learning covers a wide set of applications and processes, including computer-based learning, Web-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. E-learning can be defined as the delivery of content via all electronic media, including the Internet, Intranets, Extranets, satellite broadcasting, audio/video tape, interactive TV, and CD-ROM. Yet, e-learning is defined more narrowly than *distance learning*, which would include text-based learning and courses conducted via written correspondence. From the *Web-based learning* perspective, the term *online learning* constitutes just one part of technology-based learning and describes learning via Internet, intranet, and extranet. Levels of sophistication of online learning vary. A basic online learning program includes the text and graphics of the course, exercises, testing, and recordkeeping, such as test scores and bookmarks. A sophisticated online learning program includes

animations, simulations, audio and video sequences, peer and expert discussion groups, online mentoring, links to material on a corporate intranet or the Web, and communications with corporate education records. Finally, from a *corporate e-learning* perspective, the term *e-training* is also used to describe corporate training conducted via e-learning.

Benefits of E-Learning

Cheong (2002) and Scanlon, Jones, Butcher, Greenberg, Ross, Murphy, and Tosunoglou (1996) refer to the most important e-learning benefits that are listed below:

- Reduction of the educational expenses, which are mostly achieved from the minimization of the personnel commuting and traveling.
- Establishment of a dynamic educational context.
- Possibility of adjusting the parameters of the educational material to the idiosyncrasy of the educating groups.
- Content is fully up-to-date and reliable.
- Nowadays learning is continuously available on a (24/7/365) basis, i.e. availability from anywhere at anytime.
- No delays in the start of the courses.
- Courses are universal. This factor is quite important, especially in multinational companies.
- Creation of virtual communities and communities of practice is supported.
- Scalability is also supported, as far as it concerns the number of the participants.
- Leverage of a company's investment in the information technology field is achieved.
- Increase of value added to customers' service.
- Brings dynamic role changes in stakeholders (i.e., lecturers, students, parents, etc.).

Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, and Nunamaker (2004) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of both traditional learning and e-learning, which are shown in the following tables.

Communication in the form of either of class discussion or of immediate feedback is presented in Tables 1 and 2 as distinguishing factors between traditional learning and e-learning. This article focuses on the communication issue and investigates if e-learning can contribute towards effective communication.

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