Quality Online Learning in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional education systems alone, despite the essential role they have played and will continue to play in learning, are simply not capable of serving the world's growing and changing needs. The knowledge explosion, driven by the power of the network to connect people and spread ideas, has changed the very nature of learning. We must innovate and develop new modes of learning, both formal and informal, that meet the demands of the knowledge-driven economy in this Information Age. This chapter begins by identifying the technological changes that are affecting all societies and how these changes will specifically impact postsecondary education. The topic of course delivery within this chapter is viewed as a cultural issue that permeates processes from the design of an online course to the evaluation of an online course. This chapter will examine and review key components of, and tools for designing high impact online courses that support student learning and provide suggestions for faculty teaching online courses to assist in creating high quality online courses that supports teaching and, consequently, facilitates opportunities for student learning. Suggestions for conducting course evaluation and a feedback loops for continual improvement of the online learning and teaching will be addressed.

BACKGROUND

Technology broadly defined has been transforming human life in one way or another for thousands of years (Jerald, 2009). However, beginning in the 1990's, this technological change came at an exponentially faster rate due to factors such as increased competition in a global economy, automation, workplace change and policies increasing personal responsibility. As the world's labor markets evolve in the digital economy, we cannot predict what specific jobs will exist in the future, however what is clear is the shift from print to digital is a profound transition in how human beings learn (Pearson Learning, 2014). Currently, there are 84 million students enrolled in higher education worldwide. According to Ryan Craig (2014), "Global demand for higher education is forecasted to reach 160 million by 2025 – if online learning captures even half of this growth, there would be 40 million students requiring online education."

The advent of the personal computer, the Internet and the electronic delivery of information have transformed the world from a manufacturing, physically-based economy to an electronic, knowledge-based economy. Whereas the resources of the physically-based economy are coal, oil and steel, the resources of the new, knowledge-

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based economy are brainpower and the ability to acquire, deliver and process information effectively. Ryan Craig (2015) in his new book titled *College Disrupted: The Great Unbundling of College Education*, has argued that "technology may bring more change to teaching and learning than college leaders anticipated." Online learning will center the learning around students rather than the classroom, tailoring education to the needs and abilities of individual learners, and making life-long learning a practical reality for all (Balanko, 2002).

The global economic crisis and especially the unemployment of youth have prompted the urgency to develop educational systems that are aligned with the needs of the society it serves. Statistics from the United Nations indicate that one half of the global population is currently under the age of 25 years. The Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012) has examined this young population from its 33 member nations and concluded that 39 million or one in four 16-29 year olds were neither employed nor enrolled in some type of education or training program.

Those countries that invest in a 21st century education benefit immediately by transforming an outdated system to a more sustainable approach. Educators worldwide must develop challenging and relevant learning environments to prepare the future workforce of tomorrow (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). Using digital education to connect students anywhere at any time has been touted as a viable option especially where access to post-secondary education is limited (Hosie & Schibeci, 2005). The Internet will "democratize" knowledge, increasing access, lowering the cost and improving the quality. (Moe, 2000). There should be no doubt that online learning is vital to all disciplines involved in education in the 21st century (Ternus, M. et al, 2007).

By 2020, there will be 55 million job openings in the United States. Sixty-five percent will require some postsecondary education. Our current system will fail to produce those skilled workers, falling short by 5 million postsecondary credentials (Pearson Education, 2014). Ryan Craig (2015), also indicated in his book that the future of post-secondary education online degree programs will focus on "customizing course offerings where there is a true bottom line return for the majority of students in terms of graduation, employment, and wages. "A one-size-fits- all approach, Craig explains, "is no longer viable for the majority of students." Packaged courses and degrees need to be transformed to smaller units, i.e., modules and micro-degrees allowing students more flexibility in their program of study.

A module is a set of independent units that can be used to construct an online course. An experiment at Massachusetts Institute of Technology is being conducted where students will develop an online course from parts they have assembled themselves online (Craig, 2015). This approach would allow students to retake any module where the student possibly struggled and not require the student to retake the entire course. Another approach is a micro-degree which offers online courses in high demand content areas in the job market. Generally, the online courses, which are an outgrowth of a MOOC, are shorter and allow the student to work at their own pace. A certificate is provided at the completion of the program.

It may first be helpful to highlight three myths and misconceptions about online teaching and learning. These myths/misconceptions are held by students, faculty, and administrators and influence any discussion about the quality of online course delivery (e.g., White, n.d.):

1. Online teaching and learning is 'worse' (or 'better') for meeting student learning outcomes than face-to-face courses.
2. Online teaching and learning is easier and more convenient for students and faculty than face-to-face courses.
3. Online teaching and learning is less interactive for both student and faculty than face-to-face courses.

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