

Chapter 5

A Model for Meaningful E-Learning at Canadian Universities

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ABSTRACT

There is no questioning the growth of e-learning in universities around the world. Whether or not we are doing it effectively and meaningfully is where the uncertainty lies. In this chapter, two e-learning researchers from Canada offer their perspective on e-learning in that country. This perspective includes a snapshot of the Canadian e-learning landscape as well as the results of a multi-university research study called the Meaningful E-Learning or MEL project. The authors explore four themes derived from the MEL project and represented by the acronym HIDI (human interaction, IT support, design, and institutional support) in relation to three e-learning scenarios. While each element of HIDI is recognized as important, the criticality of institutional support and design cannot be overemphasized in the pursuit of excellence in e-learning.

INTRODUCTION

There is no dispute about it: e-learning has exploded in popularity (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Cramer, Collins, Snider & Fawcett, 2007; Kerns, McDonough, Kolynch & Hogan, 2006; McCord & McCord, 2010; Muirhead, 2007). Still, there is uncertainty about whether or not we are doing it effectively and whether or not it holds meaning for us.

In this chapter, we explore contemporary e-learning literature from student and faculty perspectives and share the findings of a multi-institutional mixed methods study called the Meaningful E-Learning project—the MEL project. In our discussion of the findings of the MEL project, we pay particular attention to four concepts represented by the acronym HIDI: human interaction (H), IT support (I), design support (D), and institutional support (I). HIDI

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8363-1.ch005

was a model that emerged from the MEL study. Given the extensiveness of the MEL project and the largeness of the dataset, there are a number of papers associated with it. The first paper was published in the Fall 2014 issue of the Canadian Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; the second paper was published the Fall 2014 issue of the International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning. Each manuscript provides recommendations for further research and possible directions for e-learning initiatives. By comparison, this chapter applies the HIDI model to specific e-learning scenarios in Canadian university settings.

As suggested above, in the latter part of the chapter, we provide an up-close look at e-learning practice in three contexts: an RPN to BScN blended learning program offered to nurses by Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario; two pre-licensure nursing programs (a program offered at three campuses in northern British Columbia, Canada and a second program offered at a private university in San Diego, California); and the use of iPads as a teaching and learning tool in an undergraduate business program also offered by Nipissing University. Each e-learning scenario is discussed in relation to the HIDI model. The chapter closes with our views on the potential of meaningful e-learning in Canadian universities.

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A Definition of E-Learning

The definitions of e-learning in the literature are numerous and, at times, confusing. In this chapter, e-learning is understood as learning that may occur outside of the face to face setting and typically involves a variety of learning technologies and teaching approaches (Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). It is not to be confused with distance learning which, historically, has been defined as geographically distributed learning and, presently,

involves online or internet-supported educational strategies. Instead, e-learning has adopted some of the characteristics of both distance learning and online learning and refers to the integration of pedagogy, instructional technology, and the Internet in teaching and learning environments. Based on this definition, e-learning environments may include face-to-face (f2f) classrooms in which instructional technologies (e.g. learning management systems, video- and web-conferencing, mobile applications, etc.) are used; blended and web-enhanced learning environments; and fully online learning environments (Salyers, Carter, & Barrett, 2010a; Salyers, Carter, Barrett & Williams, 2010b).

The Landscape of E-Learning in Canadian Universities

In Canada, like elsewhere in the Western world, e-learning in universities has reached participation levels that necessitate the attention of faculty, teaching and learning staff including instructional designers, and academic and senior administrators. As evidence, in a 2012 report called *Online Learning in Canada: At the Tipping Point. A Cross-Country Check-Up*, online learning—a specific kind of e-learning—has been described as “thriving across the country at the post-secondary level” while “new investments are being made to support its continued growth and development, particularly in Ontario and in British Columbia” (Contact North | Contact Nord, p. 2). Six Canadian universities focus specifically on online and distance learning. These institutions are Royal Roads University (British Columbia), Thompson Rivers University (British Columbia), Athabasca University (Alberta), Memorial University (Newfoundland and Labrador), TÉLUQ (Québec), and Centre collégial de formation à distance (Québec). By comparison, all Canadian universities participate in different forms of blended learning and some universities offer dual delivery—usually online and face to face—versions of courses.

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