Chapter 79

Online Instruction:
Is the Quality the Same as Face-to-Face Instruction?

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to explore the benefits, limitations, and opportunities of online instruction in higher education. Steiner and Hyman (2010) posit that online courses have become an increasingly popular means for teaching university students and an alternative to face-to-face classroom instruction. In addition, Serlin (2005) believed that some learning activities can be done better, or more extensively, in an online setting. According to Serlin (2005), this is partly because students feel a significant amount of anonymity, which makes them less inhibited about participating in discussion, and in other online activities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter was conceived with a purpose to contribute on the debate about online classes versus face-to-face learning. According to Ganesh, Paswan, and Sun (2015), about 23 percent of college graduates have taken online courses, and of those, about 15 percent have earned a degree completely online. Furthermore, Sugar, Martindale and Crawley (2007) asserted that fifty-six percent of the university administrators stated that online education has become a critical long-term strategy at their respective institutions. The discussion explores how online instruction is perceived as an effective format for delivering courses to remotely located or severely time-constrained students (Steiner and Hayman 2010). Online learning is defined by Cook (2014) as a term referring to a diverse array of instructional technologies and approaches that have in common their use of the internet. The discussion explores the interplay between technology and education.

Online Learning Defined

Online learning is defined by Natarajan (2006) as an instruction which is delivered by:

- The separation of teachers and learners which distinguishes it from face-to-face instruction;
- The influence of an educational organization which distinguishes it from self-study and private tutoring;
- The use of a computer network to present or distribute some educational content; and
- The provision of two-way communication via a computer network so that students may benefit from communication with each other, teacher and staff (p. 250).

Distance learning is defined by Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) as a learning environment where students and teachers are separated by distance and sometimes by time. Online education is defined as a process by which students and teachers communicate with one another and interact with course content via Internet-based learning technologies (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). In addition, according to these authors a course is considered an online course if 80% or more of the content delivery is done via Internet.

Characteristics of Effective Online Instructors

Salmon (2000) cited by Bennett and Lockyer (2004) identified the following characteristics needed by online instructors in order to be effective:

- An understanding of the online environment;
- Technical skills in using the features of the software;
- Online communication skills to engage learners;
- Content expertise to support learners' knowledge construction; and
- Personal characteristics, such as adaptability, positivity and confidence (p.232).

In addition, Stewart, Goodson, and Miertschin (2010) listed faculty characteristics that appeared as beneficial for successful online instruction as being adaptive, technologically literate, self-disciplined, able to work without social reinforcement, and not a procrastinator; and having an independent work style, good time management skills, a highly developed work ethic, collegial relationships with other faculty, strong grasp of the content area, ability and interest in instructional design, and ability to develop and maintain connections with on-campus personnel (p. 189).

Effective Implementation of Online Teaching

Ganesh, Paswan, and Sun (2015) reported that effective online teaching is associated with factors such as student-to-student interaction, student –to- instructor interactions, instructor support and mentoring, lecture delivery quality, course content, and course structure (p.68). I have taught an online graduate course at my current institution for the past ten years. While there is a belief that online instructors are to operate as facilitators rather than source of information as in face-to-face. This is not always the case I found that the hard way in my online course. Students need my presence in order to ensure they are on the right path both in their activities and their projects.

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