

# Chapter 24

## ‘O’ is for Organic: An Ecological Perspective for Online Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*Participants with diverse backgrounds, various expectations and different teaching/learning styles either individually or within communities are attracted by the benefits of online learning presented by the ‘any time and any place’ motto. Although this motto is perceived as a factor for freedom, diversity of learners, institutions and instructors, together with the differences in affordance of technology may set limitations which need to be resolved. An ecological perspective introducing analogies between online learning and organic agriculture may help maintaining an online learning ecosystem where all participants cherish the feeling of freedom and regardless of their diverse backgrounds or competencies, perceive that their needs are understood and responded equally. Online learning and organic agriculture have more than the letter ‘O’ as a common denominator for achieving successful and sustainable ecosystems of their own.*

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces an organic online learning outline from the ecological viewpoint. The outline can be tailored for various solution attempts on meeting diverse needs and expectancies of the online learning communities. Main arguments can

be listed as follows: (1) Online learning is a system in which the components (learners, instructors, developers, tools and suppliers) are interdependent, (2) Freedom is a natural instinct and yet an important aspect which should be respected in online learning practice and (3) Interdependency and freedom describe an ecosystem; an online learning ecosystem where components depend on each other, yet each component preserves its

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own identity. These arguments are discussed by making analogies between online learning and organic agriculture.

There is more than the letter 'O' as a common denominator for organic agriculture and online learning. In their historical perspective, both show similarities in terms of driving issues and landmarks. Both have first incubated in broader fields and have become self standing subjects with defined terms and standards. Both are driven by the advances in technology serving basic human needs: education and nutrition.

According to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations, nutrition and education are stated among basic human rights. The related articles from the declaration are as follows:

*Article 25. (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food...*

*Article 26. (1) Everyone has the right to education. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*

Online learning is strengthening its position as a possibility responding generally available and equally accessible education needs nearly at all levels of education. Learners with diverse backgrounds, various expectations and different learning styles either individually or within communities are attracted by the benefits of online technologies presenting the 'any time and any

place' motto. Although this motto is perceived as a factor for freedom, focusing on the diversity of the members of the online learning community and their needs and abilities is still necessary in order to maintain both successful and sustainable online learning environments.

International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements' (IFOAM) definition of organic agriculture underlines issues which can also serve as valuable inputs to online learning. The definition, retrieved from the organization's website is as follows:

*Organic agriculture is a production system that sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people. It relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions, rather than the use of inputs with adverse effects. Organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation and science to benefit the shared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved.*

The quoted definition relies on biodiversity, focuses on local conditions and praises tradition. Online learning which has to serve different learning cultures, styles, and expectancies also has to put diversity, culture and tradition in the core of its practice. Throughout this chapter, the historical background, definitions, regulations and standards launched for both subjects are presented. The definitions and principles which also guide the standardization and practice of both subjects are cross-tabulated to highlight intersecting issues. Intersections present hints of liberated online learning ecosystems where all participants would cherish the feeling of freedom and regardless of their diverse backgrounds or competencies would perceive that their needs are understood and responded equally.

Combining tradition, innovation and science in online learning, as in organic agriculture, appears as a clear road to good quality and good practice.

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