Chapter 1

Multi-Disciplinary Studies in Online Business Education:
Observations, Future Directions, and Extensions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that research in online teaching and learning in higher education should take a multi-disciplinary orientation, especially in settings whose curricula are drawn from several disciplinary perspectives such as business schools. The benefits of a multi-disciplinary approach include curriculum integration and enhanced communication and collective methodological advancement among online teaching and learning scholars from the disciplines that comprise the integrated curricula. After reviewing multi-disciplinary studies in business education published to date, the chapter concludes with recommendations for advancing research in this emerging stream. Some of the primary recommendations include the use of academic discipline as a moderating variable, more studies that incorporate samples comprised of faculty and/or undergraduate students, and the development of more comprehensive measures of student learning.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the delivery of management education via the internet has become increasingly common, even among institutions accredited by AACSB International (Alexander, Perrault, Zhao, & Waldman, 2009; Popovich & Neel, 2005). With increasing acceptance of this educational medium has come increased research attention, approaching 200 peer-reviewed articles on business disciplines during the last decade (Arbaugh, Godfrey, Johnson, Leisen Pollack, Niendorf, &

Wresch, 2009). However, because many of these articles employed research samples that examined less than five class sections within a single business discipline, their ability to inform business school educators and administrators regarding the design, development, and integration of a business curriculum is somewhat limited.

When a business school considers the development, design, and delivery of an online degree program, one might expect that an integrated curriculum of well-designed courses that capture the intricacies of the differences and the interdependencies between business disciplines in a technologically sound manner would be an excellent starting point. However, the business school is multi-disciplinary in orientation, there tends to be substantial variety in the development and delivery of business school curricula, particularly at the MBA level (Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Considering that recent exploratory research suggests that there may be fundamental disciplinary-related differences in the design and conduct of online courses in business schools (Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010), the need to examine online teaching and learning in business schools comprehensively rather than by individual silos becomes increasingly apparent if these schools are to provide a quality educational experience for increasingly demanding stakeholders (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006; O'Toole, 2009).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

In this chapter, we discuss why the relative lack of work that comprehensively examines the business school curriculum in online teaching and learning is cause for concern, and articulate the potential problems that this lack of attention may create for business schools going forward. We also examine both epistemological and practical reasons for which disciplinary differences between components of the business school curriculum

matter in online and blended delivery, and why and how studies of online business education should reflect and better capture these differences. That discussion is followed by a report of the primary findings from multi-disciplinary studies in business education published to date. The chapter concludes with a discussion of potential implications for research specific to business education that could be extended to studies of online teaching and learning in other disciplines. Although this chapter explicitly examines the state of research on online teaching and learning within business schools, we hope that it also may stimulate scholars in other disciplines to consider their fields more comprehensively when designing and conducting research.

WHY SHOULD STUDIES OF ONLINE BUSINESS EDUCATION BE MULTI-DISCIPLINARY?

As the volume of research on online teaching and learning in business education has increased dramatically during the past ten years, scholars have begun to more actively disseminate these findings. Although the volume and quality of research in online and blended business education has increased dramatically, the rate of progress across the disciplines is rather uneven (Arbaugh et al., 2009). Disciplines such as Information Systems (IS) and Management had relatively active research communities, but disciplines such as Finance and Economics have little published research (Arbaugh, 2010a). Worse yet, these scholars tend to communicate only within their particular discipline rather than engaging in cross-disciplinary dialogue with scholars from other business disciplines, let alone scholars engaged in the broader online teaching and learning literature. Although such an approach may ground a study within its respective field, this approach becomes particularly problematic for teaching because students typically receive at least some

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