

# Chapter 15

## Practices and Tools in Online Course Delivery

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### ABSTRACT

*Education continues to evolve to meet changing educational needs, budgetary pressures, and evolving lifestyles of different students. Distance and online education has become a greater force in the portfolio of products offered by colleges and universities. This chapter reviews recent trends in the courses and methods of delivery offered to meet the changing needs of students.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online education is often defined as involving the Internet and web-based technologies to deliver distance education. It can be delivered asynchronously, where the students and instructor do not communicate in real time, using web-based technologies such as asynchronous discussion boards, electronic repositories, social media platforms and e-mail. It can also be synchronous, where the students and instructor communicate in real time using web-based technologies such as chat rooms or video conferencing over the Internet. Also, many courses tend to be hybrid or blended, where course delivery uses some combination of online and traditional practices (Horn & Staker, 2012)

According to the Sloan Survey of Online Education, about 30 percent of American college students take at least one course online (Burnsed, 2011). Traditionally, non-traditional, working students represented the major target market. However, this is changing as traditional students in virtually all colleges and Universities are incorporating at least some online courses into their programs of study. In fact, online education has become routine with 65% of graduate programs across the country using the Internet to deliver classes (Norton & Hathaway, 2008). However, many colleges and universities are still struggling to discover how to provide a quality educational experience. Menchala and Bekele (2008) found that a variety of technologies and learning styles as well as instructor and administrative support are required to achieve an engaged, productive,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3930-0.ch015

and collaborative classroom experience. In terms of hybrid or blended courses, Ambient Insight has predicted an annual increase of nearly 10 percent over the next five years for primarily blended learning.

This chapter offers a review of new trends as well as a variety of strategies and technological solutions that educational institutions, academic administrators, and faculty could employ to improve online education. The chapter addresses current trends in online education, some of the common models and technologies, advantages and disadvantages of hybrid courses versus “pure” online and traditional courses, emerging software and information systems that support teaching and learning online, faculty perceptions on distance education, and strategies for overcoming existing challenges of the classroom today and tomorrow.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Distance Education Today**

Distance education is often defined as instructional delivery where the student is not in the same physical space as the instructor and other students. Most distance education today is delivered via Internet technologies. Distance courses can be completely synchronous where the instructor and students meet together in virtual environments such as live chat, video, or audio streaming at the same time. They can also be completely asynchronous where the students and instructors use web-based technologies such as discussion forums, blogs, wikis or social networking tools to communicate at different times and on their own schedules. Courses can use a blend of synchronous and asynchronous communications and technologies to enhance the total experience, which we refer to as hybrid classes. In addition, hybrid classes can mix a traditional face-to-face class with different online technologies. For example, many

university courses use information systems like Blackboard/WebCT for course management. It is also not uncommon for a live class to be broadcast via streaming Internet video and also archived for later Internet viewing.

The value of distance education continues to grow in importance. A recent study, “Going the Distance: Online Education in the United States, 2011,” reports “that more than 6.1 million students took at least one online class during fall 2010—a 10.1 percent increase over the year before” (Lytle, 2011). While this represents a slowdown in online course growth, it still far exceeds the growth in traditional higher education. Furthermore, with the continuing cost of tuition rising and economic downturns across the country, providing an alternative means of educational delivery benefits everyone. Less time and cost in traveling, more potential course availability, and greater access and convenience all contribute to the value of distance classes (Jackson & Helms, 2008).

## **TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES FOR ONLINE EDUCATION**

### **Integrating New Technologies into Online Education**

According to Bates (2012), some emerging technologies are being quickly integrated into online learning environments. These include:

1. Tablets (i-pads and similar) are expected to be used more frequently in online learning as well as in the traditional classroom. They offer greater flexibility and mobility than traditional laptops and content from publishers are now readily available for this format.
2. Learning analytics are expected to become more common in online environments with tools to track students’ progress and achieve-

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