



Chapter VIII

Online Teaching and Learning: Essential Conditions for Success!

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INTRODUCTION

Today the global education community is faced with a unique problem. Learners in every location must acquire new skills, be literate, and understand constantly changing dynamics. The challenge has always been to balance the need for intense and personal interaction to learn conceptual information with the reality of limited financial resources. Distance education has been viewed as a way in which to offer lifelong learning to those who are geographically separated from traditional institutions, have obligations that limit their ability to attend regular courses or have other exceptional challenges.

Distance learning in various forms has been around for a long time. Traditional distance learning environments were based on correspondence through passive media (paper, audio and video broadcast). Now, developments in network and communication technologies have provided the ability to offer online courses to large numbers of individuals. With the changes in electronic communications, and the resulting transformed model of distance learning, individuals expect interactivity and close to “traditional” classroom-based education.

This shift means that distance education is now seen as a viable alternative for a myriad of “just in time” professional development and

lifelong learning opportunities. These include informal courses, professional development tutorials, and even full degree programs; however, we are still uncertain about the conditions that are essential to create a successful venture. The growth of online courses, enhanced by the ease of access, media attention, and interest from the private sector, has increased demand, and efforts are underway to respond with various online learning activities. Thus, it is timely to study these courses since it is essential that institutions take the lead to ensure that courses are pedagogically sound, organizationally strong and institutionally supported. Frequently, however, institutions are unsure about where to begin and what issues to consider as they make this transition (Ehrman, 1995).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss online education from the perspective of potential course developers, and to offer a view of the issues necessary to consider for success for the institution and for the learners. The author has many years of experience in researching and teaching various types of distance learning as well as having designed and taught online courses. The ideas in this paper draw upon those experiences, reviews of pertinent literature, and on interviews with instructors, potential instructors and students of online courses.

PERSPECTIVES

Examples of traditional courses being offered using a variety of telecommunications methods (electronic mail, computer conferencing, two-way audio/video, satellite delivery) have been widely discussed in the literature (Harasim, 1993; Hiltz, 1990; Rice-Lively, 1994; Schrum, 1992; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). Results of studies have concluded that this form of education is effective for well-motivated students. More importantly, it is clear that one should not simply take a traditional course and place it on any form of educational network (Schrum, 1998; Wagner, 1993).

The growth in the practice of lifelong learning is reflected in large numbers of students who are nontraditional in age and responsibilities. These individuals frequently must overcome concerns about time, distance and money that traditional students do not have. Online and independent learning offers one potential solution to these issues and now military, business, and nontraditional educational providers have begun to investigate its potential. As the number and types of online courses have grown, many educational institutions have

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