Getting the best out of online courses

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ABSTRACT

At some point or other we pursue further studies to improve the quality of our professional and personal lives. Yet the education and training industry continues to grow outside the traditional boundaries of formal education institutions. Associated with this growth is the proliferation of courses on the Web, some of which will be of questionable quality. This article outlines basic implications that the online choice has for prospective students. Snippets of student experiences are included to illustrate how online courses might fail to match individuals' needs. Nevertheless the role of technology in education is appreciated.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a booming field, opening up wonderful opportunities for both students and provider institutions. The growing use of electronic means to deliver single units of courses or entire degree programmes is a feature of our time. Among the benefits are reduced travel costs, learner-paced studying, learning while you earn, access to a wide variety of courses which are provided "just in time", and the use of the latest technologies. If you are planning to acquire a new skill or qualification, you are likely to consider taking your courses or certain components thereof online. However, there are reasons to be cautious. In the first place, much of what is written about distance education and open learning is intended for course designers and then for teachers, if they are not the designers themselves. What little there is for students is usually in the form of a directory of providers and a list of what is offered. Written from a student's perspective, this article seeks to clarify some of the common issues of online learning.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Without going into historical detail or debating theories, a brief look at some of the developments will help us understand the place of online learning in the field of distance education. While distance education (DE) is understood to involve some kind of media to bridge the separation between teacher and learner throughout the duration of the learning process (Keegan 1986:49; Moore & Kearsley 1996:199), open learning is somewhat fuzzy. Reminding us that the two the concepts are not opposites, Rumble (1989:29-30) lists access, place and pace of study, means of study, content and assessment of the programme, and support services as criteria of "openness". Distance education is seen to be mainly about the means by which education is achieved, whereas open learning stresses the objectives (or outcomes) and character of the educational process. For Rumble (1989:30), the openness of distance education is characterised by "student autonomy and the right of students to assume responsibility for their own studies, rather than belong to an educational institution which assumes responsibility for them". This aspect ties in with Garrison's third generation distance education (Peters 1998:10-11, 16) in which there is greater flexibility of locality, time, learning strategies and resources. It is now becoming increasingly common to use open and distance learning (ODL) as a broader concept to accommodate systems in which distance education offers openness in one or more of the criteria mentioned above, however relatively (Trindale 2000:1-2).

As more technologies and media become available and new educational software and systems are designed, some of the barriers to open learning are beginning to fall away. To the end of providing suitable mediation and dialogue with learners, we have seen computer-based learning supplement print-based correspondence. Now that opportunities to study just about anything and anywhere in the globe are only a click away, the Internet makes it easy for

teachers and students to close the transactional gap. E-mail makes one-to-one teacher-student and student-student interaction possible. Class bulletin boards and news groups are especially useful for student-student dialogue, notices, schedules, and assignment feedback from an instructor. Apart from accessing resources from the World-Wide Web (www), students have the course page, with the necessary links and course information. These are the unique features of online learning, also referred to as networked learning, or computer-mediated communication for teaching and learning.

WHERE TO FIND THE RIGHT COURSE

The first recourse is no doubt local, accredited institutions. Still, you might not find the course or combination of courses that suits your circumstances, in which case you need to take the time to do some necessary investigation. The costs will be very high, and very few institutions have scholarships for international students. Also, the National Research Foundation does not provide funding for short courses or diplomas. However, if you plan and choose well, the venture will be well worth the trouble.

Course databases

Like the printed media, the Web is only a source of information. Your first challenge is to discern the "accuracy, relevancy, authority, and merit" (Votjek & Votjek 1998:1-2) of the website containing the database, and then evaluate the database itself. Tremblay (2000:1-2) evaluates a broad sample of distance education course databases available on the Web. These directories are intended to both provide a central repository of up-to-date information on the many courses and programmes available and to make it easy for users to locate information about courses meeting their specific needs. Tremblay (2000:3-8) rates the databases on these criteria:

- user-friendliness
- search capabilities
- reliability
- course offerings
- course information
- connectivity

Although online distance education directories are generally useful, Tremblay points out that their functionality differs vastly from one to the other. So, do not expect the same search capabilities from all databases. Leave room for disappointment.

National and international associations

Reputable organisations will help you find institutions and courses available either purely online, or as a combination of both online and print-based "off-campus" delivery - that is, traditional distance education. The main advantage is that in most cases the course is subject to the organisation's quality assurance procedures. Here are some sites you may find useful:

Commonwealth of Learning www.col.org
International Council for Open and Distance Education www.icde.org
International Centre for Distance Learning www.icdl.au.uk
Association of African Universities www.aau.org/english
British Association for Open Learning Ltd. www.baol.co.uk
Canadian Association for Distance Education www.cade.aced.ca
United States Distance Learning Association www.usdla.org
Australia's Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs www.deetya.gov.au/tenfields/
Open and Distance Learning Quality Assurance Council http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/odlqc
University Continuing Education Association www.nucea.edu

Distance Education and Training Council www.detc.org
American Center for the Study of Distance Education www.ed.psu.edu/ACSDE/

Trial offer

Some institutions provide prospective students with an opportunity to test the waters before making the final decision to enrol. Take advantage of this opportunity. Seeing how a course is delivered can help you determine if online learning is for you.

Word of mouth

If you know someone who is taking an online course, even if yours will not be the same, find out what his/her experiences are. Besides getting an idea of what to expect, you will have a friend with whom to share your learning experiences later.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR LEARNERS

In any kind of course offering, irrespective of the mode of delivery, it is your responsibility to obtain the information you need. In order to have a clear basis for your enrolment decision, you need to ask some basic questions about the course for which you propose to enrol. The Commonwealth of Learning (1997:3-4) asks the following questions:

- How is the course designed? Make sure that you understand entry requirements, length, level, syllabus, and assessment procedures for the course.
- What institutional regulations affect enrolment in and completion of the course? Find out about workload requirements, extensions, and any penalties that might be incurred.
- Are the course outcomes relevant to your goals?
- How current is the course curriculum/syllabus, and how regularly is it revised to take account of the changes in the subject?
- What credit does the course carry? Compare with other programmes within that institution and check if the credit can be transferred to programmes at other institutions.
- What support is provided to students? How does the provider institution use tuition, assessment, tutorials, counselling, et cetera? Are there study centres, telephone or video-conference and computer facilities offered in conjunction with the provider institution? Is there support from external sources, such as public libraries?
- What are the mechanics of gaining access to the course and to the support provided? Find out what the direct and indirect costs are, and what equipment and software is required. Establish how access will be gained to tutors, other students, research resources and other forms of support.
- What are the conditions and implications for withdrawal from the course?

You also need to know that the provider institution has responsibilities to students. For example, provision of accurate information; access to all students regardless of ethnicity, gender, age, or physical disabilities; course development, evaluation, and review process that is adequate to maintain quality assurance and ensure that courses are culturally sensitive and appropriate for the learners to whom they are made available; and provision of appropriate support for enrolled learners in areas such as advising, instruction, scheduled evaluation and assessment, and protection of student privacy.

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF AN ONLINE COURSE

Online learning, when designed and facilitated well, can engender active learning, promote problem solving, reflection and application, and foster collaboration across cultural and international settings (Bates 2000:27-28; Pincas 1998:123-124; Trindale 2000:14-15). Since any given program or course will fall somewhere on the open-closed system continuum, the use of specific criteria is important for course evaluation and quality assurance purposes.

Perhaps the question to ask is: what qualities does an effective online course have? You are likely to know the answers only after you have embarked on your online studies.

The curriculum

A primary concern with ODL programmes lies in the diversity of social, cultural, and technological contexts across regions and continents. As Trindale (2000:12) puts it, "a distance learning programme devised for a specific target population in a given country might be unsuitable for a different cultural setting; its objectives may not fit exactly users' needs in another kind of environment". With this point in mind, answer the following questions about the curriculum:

- How integrated and meaningful are the courses in relation to one another, and to the entire programme? Is the programme so flexible that you have a basket of loose options and credit points which have to be sorted out by you? Do you see a relationship between the big curriculum goals or outcomes and the more specific course outcomes?
- Does the course equip you with competencies that will contribute to your active participation in the shaping and development of your practice and its context?
- How is your role as learner accounted for in the construction of the knowledge in that particular field of study? Are you just a recipient of facts that are dished out to you by an all-powerful teacher who knows what is good for you?
- Is the way you are assessed formative and developmental? Do you know the criteria on which your work will be assessed? Do you receive clear feedback that contributes to your learning and growth? Are you given a chance to participate in your own assessment? Is what you are assessed on relevant to the life roles you will carry out as practitioner in your field?

Course design

To establish how well a course teaches, Merrill (2000:4-7) uses five inseparable principles: a problem to be solved, activation of prior learning, demonstration, application, and integration. Learning is facilitated when the learner

- is engaged in solving a progression of real-world problems
- is directed to recall, relate, or apply knowledge from relevant past experience that can be used as a foundation for new knowledge
- is shown (rather than told) through demonstration that is consistent with the learning goal
- is required, and guided, to use the new knowledge to solve problems
- can reflect on, create, explore new and personal ways to use the new knowledge or skill.

As you are presented with new information, Merrill (2000:3) advises that you determine how much of "tell, show, ask, and do" there is. Most courses stop at only two strategies: telling you general information, steps in a procedure, or events in a process, and asking you to recall information or remember steps and events. However, in a good instructional design you will also be shown a demonstration of a process or a specific procedure, and be required to do some kind of problem solving activity, such as analyse, formulate, compare, interpret, classify, synthesise, or perform a procedure.

Overall, you should see a close relationship between the course outcomes; assessment procedures; selection and sequencing of topics, and activities and resources through which the outcomes will be achieved. There should be enough instructional variety to accommodate your learning style(s), and the wisdom you bring to the learning environment.

Technical matters

Learning materials come in various forms: books, audio and video recordings, interactive courseware, and other kinds of documents available on the Web. None of these replace each other, they are complementary. New technologies create new opportunities for information distribution and interactivity. But all technologies and media should be considered simply as tools, even if absolutely necessary, in open and distance learning. In fact, Trindale (2000:14) maintains that any tool comprises all the human factors and qualified work involved in conceiving appropriate teaching and learning perspectives and strategies.

Note how Jonassen (1999:225-230) distinguishes tools specifically associated with open learning environments:

- *Cognitive tools*
  They are generalisable computer tools, intended to facilitate specific kinds of cognitive processing. As intellectual devices, they are used for visualisation, organisation, automation, or supplanting thinking skills.
- *Knowledge-modelling tools*
  Modelling tools help learners articulate their understanding of real-world phenomena through representation tools, such as databases and spreadsheets; dynamic modelling tools, like graphs, tables and animations; performance support tools that automate some of the cognitive tasks, such as calculators and templates; and search tools for information gathering.
- *Converstion and collaboration tools*
  Various communication tools are used to support collaboration within group participants and encourage conversations about problems and activities students are working on. Telephones, live video conferencing, groupware, e-mails, listserves, and bulletin boards are among such tools.

Can you identify some of these elements in your online course? Are you using them optimally?

WHAT SURVEYS REVEAL ABOUT STUDENT EXPERIENCES

In an attempt to enhance the quality of course design and delivery, Galusha (1997), Hara and Kling (2000) and others report on learners' frustration with online learning. Unfortunately, not much is known about the quantitative nature of these studies, and evaluation of the research design and methodology is beyond the scope of this article.

Galusha (1997:4-5) and Hara and Kling (2000:19-22) find the most common problems to be: poorly designed course materials; lack of feedback or contact with the teacher; lack of support services, such as the provision of tutors and technical assistance; alienation and lack of experience of online learning. Hara and Kling (2000:10-17) reveal students' experiences in a specific postgraduate course "at a major university" and some factors contributing to the distress, including

> If I have one complaint about this [course], it is that time goes so quickly. I can be hooked up with a computer for a whole day and then realise that I haven't had a dinner or I haven't prepared my lesson plans.
>
> I did not enjoy our class excursion ... because the technology did not live up to expectations.
>
> I don't really like turning on the computer and finding that I have eleven messages on my e-mail. It's a pain. ... just time consuming ...

> One of the problems is that I'd like to have feedback. A kind of constant feedback. With ... this distance ed., I guess you don't get that kind of feedback.
>
> I am not satisfied with these articles that I found so far, so I'm doing more research.
>
> This computer is frustrating. I would imagine it is like sitting in class and only understanding some of what is being said, then asked to answer a question. I have felt ... panic ... isolation ... frustration ... anger.
>
> ... I don't know exactly what the instructor wants.
>
> I want to complain, but it's not the instructor's problem, or the [course's] fault. It is my problem. There is nothing she can do about it.

Hara and Kling (2000:19) also report some positive comment, which should not be ignored:

> I do believe you are all the best classmates and instructor I have ever met. I can see your hard work, your enthusiasm, and your patience learning along. I'd like to say that the most successful condition I've learned from this class is: warm ans supportive class atmosphere.

Peters (1998: 61-62) provides some of the reasons for the unfortunate circumstances in which students find themselves from time to time. The cursory manner in which written assignments are treated is probably due to "the workloads of the markers and their lack of time, rather than any indolence or indifference. What is more serious is the inadequate insight into the importance that the instructional written dialogue can have in distance education. In general this special form of dialogue is underestimated." Peters (1998:62) goes on to say that "when distance education universities were conceived, a mistake was made with regard to supplementary written dialogues because these were seen as a burdensome obligation in the context of marking assignments - something that is on the periphery of the learning and teaching process". As can be expected, the influence of traditional academic learning culture is still strongly felt. "There is very little inclination to resist or even abandon the tried and tested imparting of knowledge by expository methods in favour of untried, labour-intensive ... and time-consuming autonomous learning" (Peters 1998:94).

How you can make the best of online learning

- Make the right choice first time.
- Take advantage of all student support facilities.
- Initiate calls to tutors, lecturers or students for assistance.
- Familiarise yourself with the course technology and develop the necessary skills.
- Participate in discussions and be heard.
- Take your courses seriously and give of your best.
- Create connections between your studies and other areas of your life to make learning meaningful.
- Dare to complain.

CONCLUSION

If little seems to have been said about the many excellent online offerings, it is because the responsibility of finding out lies with you, based on your needs. What we have sought to dispel is the exaggerated notion of the superiority and convenience of international online programs. We have pointed out what you should expect and, by implication, what minimum standards teachers and instructional designers should uphold when designing for the Web. Online facilities are only as good as the underlying learning perspectives, goals, methods and

the corresponding implementation (Trindale 2000:15). Whatever choices we make, we cannot just use technology because of a blind belief that it is good for us. As a necessary part of our communication systems, technology should be used to serve our educational ends, rather than allowed to mould education and courseware for commercial interests (Bates 2000:18; Sullivan 1983:25-26 and Watts 1998:214).

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