



2022, vol. 9, issue 1, 126-131

RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6794834>

Teaching online in higher education: an ever-challenging method of teaching

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Abstract

The importance of e-Learning lays in the economic development, both of the individual and of the society, as the economy worldwide nowadays requires an educated, highly skilled and technologically literate labor force. There is no question about the fact that E-learning has become more and more used and indispensable in large educational areas, starting from middle school to academic educational programs. The future will bring new discoveries in this field and, subsequently, teachers and students will have to adjust to a new educational era, mainly based on E-learning.

Keywords: e-learning, online teaching, higher education

Introduction

We will begin this paper by stating that *e-Learning* means different things to different people. However, this ambiguity may help us the many aspects of *e-Learning* that cannot be encompassed by any simple definition. The term *e-Learning* has been represented various things, such as *e-education, distance education, open learning, virtual learning* and *multimedia learning*.

The importance of *e-Learning* lays in the economic development, both of the individual and of the society, as the economy worldwide nowadays requires an educated, highly skilled and technologically literate labor force. Moreover, as a response to a changing economy, jobs evolve and workers need to learn new skills throughout their lives. As such, *e-Learning* is one such response to the society's need for rapid, lifelong, both formal and informal learning.

Various definitions of *e-Learning* have been postulated throughout time. Partridge and Edwards (2005) wrote:

“e-learning has been defined by the American Society for Training and Development as anything delivered, enabled or mediated by electronic technology for the explicit purpose of learning, or more recently as instruction and learning experiences that are delivered via electronic technology such as the Internet, audio, videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV and CD-ROM. Technology delivered e-learning is where the learner is never in physical close proximity to the instructor and may be delivered via a blend of asynchronous and synchronous technologies. Technology enhanced e-learning is where the learner has the opportunity to meet face-to-face with the instructor, being a supplement to traditional, on-campus learning” (Partridge and Edwards, 2005:316).

Cohen (1999) proposed the following research definition:

“e-Learning includes all applications of technological solutions to the problem of finding the best match between the needs of a given set of learners with their individual learning demands to learn a given content, using a given set of learning tools” (Cohen, 1999:298).

A more straightforward definition is provided by Popovic, Lindic, Indihar Stemberger and Jaklic (2005):

“e-learning is the use of the Internet and other related technologies to deliver, support and enhance teaching, learning and assessment” (Popovic et. al., 2005:314)

One of the most modern definitions of e-Learning is given in the Cambridge Dictionary (2020), as *“learning done by studying at home using computers and courses provided on the internet”*.

Within the general context of learning, all learners have their own psychological makeup, alongside their preexisting knowledge, skills and abilities. Thus, the process of learning takes place when there is a congruence between the learner’s immediate requirement to solve some task and a series of learning opportunities. Consequently, teaching occurs when these learning opportunities are created and delivered, making the teacher’s job not so much in knowledge creation but in creating a knowledge delivery environment. This knowledge environment represents more than just presenting knowledge (as in the “traditional” university lecture hall). In an idealistic situation, beyond the “lecture”, the instructor should package, sequence and deliver knowledge, skills and abilities to be learnt in response to each learner’s unique needs.

Let us see what we understand by knowledge here. Thus, we consider knowledge not only the information acquired, but also the ability to apply this information to some problem or task. Nycs & Owoc (2004) suggested the following key features to help characterize knowledge:

- domination (knowledge is a basis of any reasoning),
- inexhaustible (the use of knowledge does not deplete it),
- simultaneity (the same portion of knowledge can be used by many users at the same time),
- non-linearity (a small amount of knowledge can cause serious consequences as well as large amount of knowledge can be completely usefulness).

Of course, these characteristics do not provide the definition for knowledge; still they help us understand why it is so difficult to convey knowledge from one person to another. One of the reasons is because the learner must share a common problem or task with the teacher, made clearer especially when we define knowledge as a psychological state.

Role of the Teacher in *e-Learning*

In *e-Learning*, the role of the teacher is not limited to being the presenter of knowledge, as *e-Learning* requires more from teachers than lectures. As such, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) can be used for “traditional” teaching; it also can be useful for *e-Learning* as it enables teachers to package learning opportunities in an increasing number of alternative ways so as best to meet the varying needs of different students.

e-Learning has been gradually evolved to online learning, as education taking place over the Internet. This is by far the most popular approach nowadays. Whether embracing emerging tech, incorporating intelligent learning management systems, or designing blended classrooms, now more than ever it is imperative that academic leaders, faculty, and administrators alike come together to ensure that our pedagogies are progressive, organic and continually break new ground. Advancing education innovation requires continuous visionary leadership from all disciplines. Together we will challenge our teaching and learning paradigms, reimagine the learning experience, and ideate on how disruptions in education today will shape the innovative classroom of tomorrow.

Benefits of *e-Learning*

The benefits of online teaching are numerous, as online distance meets the needs of an ever-growing number of students who cannot or prefer not to participate in traditional classroom settings. One of the advantages of *e-Learning* is that the minimum requirement for students to participate in an online class is access to a device (PC, laptop, phone), the Internet and the motivation to succeed in a non-traditional classroom. Thus, online classes give the learner a great method of course delivery unconditioned by time or location, allowing for accessibility to instruction at anytime from anywhere. As such, it is no surprise that learners find the online environment a convenient way to fit education into their busy lives. The possibility of accessing a class from any device with Internet access, 24 hours a day, seven days a week is an important incentive for many of today’s students.

Some of the main advantages of *e-Learning* include:

- **Convenience:** 24/7 access from any online device (PC, laptop, phone, tablet); accommodates busy schedules; no commuting/ no search for parking.
- **Enhanced Learning:** increased depth of understanding and retention of course content; more meaningful discussions; emphasis on writing skills, technology skills and life skills like time management, independence and self-discipline.
- **Leveling of the Playing Field:** Students can take more time to think and reflect before communicating; shy students tend to thrive online; anonymity of the online environment.
- **Interaction:** increased student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction and discussion; a more student-centered learning environment; less passive listening and more active learning, alongside a greater synergy and sense of connectedness.
- **Innovative Teaching:** student-centered approaches; increased variety and creativity of learning activities; address different learning styles.
- **Improved Administration:** time to examine student work more thoroughly; ability to document and record online interactions; ability to manage grading online.
- **Savings:** accommodate more students; increased student satisfaction, higher retention and fewer repeats.
- **Maximize physical resources:** less demand on limited campus infrastructure; decrease congestion on campus and parking lots.
- **Outreach:** give students options; reach new student market; appeal to current students thus increasing enrollments.

FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) and *e-Learning*

There are some frequently asked questions about the online teaching and learning process. Some of them are listed below:

“Is an online class the same as a self-paced class?”

Answer: No, as some online classes are similar to independent study, unlike the traditional classes. However, homework, other activities and online class participation must be completed by present dates and times.

“How much time do I have to spend online?”

Answer: Both the student and the teacher should plan to spend at least the same amount of time they spend on a face-to-face class, the teacher probably more.

“Do I have to log on to class at a particular time?”

Answer: Yes and no. Yes, if it is a conference-online-class. No, if it is on an online learning platform or e-mail, as there will be deadlines by which the students should post their work, the time of completing that work being up to the student.

“Is taking a class online easier than a regular class?”

Answer: Not really, due to the fact that the course content in an online class is usually identical to that of a face-to-face class on the same topic. Some students think that the workload is even more demanding as one has to have to be a self-directed learner, stay motivated and stay on top of the workload independently. It has been observed that the most successful online students/ teachers tend to share the following characteristics:

- Self-motivation/ self-starter
- Good organization and time-management skills
- Familiar with computers and the Internet
- Resourceful and actively seek answers and solutions to questions and problems

“How is online teaching different from traditional classroom teaching?”

Answer: The online model emphasizes an interactive learning environment, designed to stimulate dialogue between teacher and students and among students themselves. The teacher often will be the facilitator that organizes activities engaging students directly rather than relying on lectures and memorization.

“When and where do classes take place?”

Answer: Courses take place wherever the student's/ teacher's device is: at home, at work, on the road – anywhere you can connect to the Internet. Courses are typically organized by week with specific due dates.

Generally, logging in four to five times per week is necessary to give timely feedback and interact sufficiently with students.

Some Principles of Good Online Teaching

Many scholars and practitioners within the field of education, all over the world, have discussed the principles on which a good teaching is based all over time. Most of the principles on which a good teacher should rely on during his teaching process may also be taken into account when speaking about *e-Learning* or the online process of learning and teaching. We will enumerate some of the most important and useful ones below:

Principle 1: Encourage student-faculty contact. The students and faculty can communicate through private messages or via e-mail. This communication allows instructors to be proactive by following up on students who are not participating in chats, discussions, etc.

Principle 2: Encourage student cooperation. Assignments can be created to take advantage of the discussion forums, thus fostering group work and collaboration among students. There should also be considered peer review, project sharing and thread-leaders to moderate discussions. It has been observed that student collaboration leads to a sense of community and higher learning outcomes.

Principle 3: Encourage active learning. Teachers can use online teaching and learning platforms by designing assignments every day. When students reach these platforms or sites, they make choices and they learn from their choices. Active learning also takes place when students work cooperatively. Give students more control, leadership roles and options in what assignments to complete, transforming yourself (as a teacher) into a guide on the side.

Principle 4: Give prompt feedback. Students should be able to see the results of their tests and view solutions to graded assignments immediately after submission. Teachers can and should also promptly respond to students questions, together with providing acknowledgement and information feedback.

Principle 5: Emphasize time on task. Give students something specific to respond to, in the form of a homework via the learning platform. Build in a reward system of points for each post and reply to the handed in homework. In other words, the teacher should make posting and responding mandatory.

Principle 6: Communicate high expectations. In the assignments, the teachers should include course goals and performance objectives, as well as a model assignment submissions that can serve as examples for students to follow. The bottom line is that teachers should be explicit and clear in communicating their expectations to students.

Principle 7: Respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Teachers should create assignments online that offer students various options. Giving students choices in their learning experience increases satisfaction and retention. Consider giving students options as to what format to submit their projects or assignments. For example, they might write an essay, record themselves, develop PowerPoint presentations. There should not be any reason for which all students submit the exact homework or participate in one discussion topic. Variety is the spice of life and the online classes should adapt to the various learning styles of students.

Video Conferencing in The Classroom: The Key for Future E-Learning?!

As time goes by during the 21st Century, we are constantly subjected to an ever-increasing array of technological advances. Communication systems are more sophisticated, choices of technology being more varied and cheaper than ever. Within this global general context, these changes are both exciting and frightening for teachers all over the world, as new technologies keep changing the traditional education concept of a teacher standing in front of their students. As such, the use of technologies, like the Internet, chat rooms, electronic mail and video conferencing, now offer new opportunities for teachers.

Interactive Video Conferencing (IVC) is a technology that enables a simultaneous delivery of both audio and visuals to one or more places. For most people, it is similar to television; still, it has one major difference: it is interactive. The participants involved with IVC are able to hold conversations between people at a number of distant locations in real time, thus being able to observe reactions, body language, voice modulations, etc.

The most outstanding features recommending the use of video conferencing for the process of teaching and learning are listed below:

- *Continuous interactivity* – flexible scheduling promotes more interaction between participants.
- *Relevance* – IVC generally involves the clustering of several small student populations with a teacher positioned at one of those locations, thus allowing teaching to be specially designed to meet the needs of the students involved.
- *Stimulating learning environments* – the use of various sources such as video display, computer display, phone display, as multiple visual and audio elements have the potential to engage students in ways that go beyond typical classroom methodologies.
- *Flexibility* – the flexibility to link with other schools or entities is one of the major features of IVC.
- *Affordable cost* – technology has become more affordable and has greatly improved.
- *Access to information* – once linked to the Internet, learners and teachers can use technology to access information.

IVC Issues – Teacher and Student Technology Resistance

The introduction and use of IVC into the educational process may have some problems, as the teacher suddenly faces a changed dynamics, and usually individuals are not comfortable with change. While some will embrace new technology, others will avoid change where possible. The possible reasons for this may be:

- Individual personality and experiences
- Uncertainty
- Habit
- Concern over personal loss
- Change is not seen as in the interest of the individuals
- Socio-political alignments

The students may resist change for the same reasons as the teachers, still this is a subjective judgement and dealing with both pre-purchase and post-purchase anxiety is part of the IVC tutor classroom management.

Conclusion

There is no question about the fact that *E-learning* has become more and more used and indispensable in large educational areas, starting from middle school to academic educational programs. The future will bring new discoveries in this field and, subsequently, teachers and students will have to adjust to a new educational era, mainly based on *E-learning*. As such, we, as educators, should be one step ahead of the electronic educational electronic development by studying, learning and ultimately applying all the resources of *E-learning* during the teaching process, thus making the transition from the classical educational process towards a totally new, but so necessary environment of teaching and learning.

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