
TEACHING AND LEARNING IN E-LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

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Teaching through the Internet and the World Wide Web is rapidly becoming an established practice in many educational institutions. Much has been written about the technology and its potential but very little has been written about what the teachers actually do online (Salmon, 2000). The new technologies have the potential to offer many advantages over traditional formats but the literature suggests that many of these assumed goals are often not being met in practice (Oliver, 1999). What could be the factors that impede successful online teaching and learning?

According to Housego (et al., 2000), strategies for implementing the new Web-based technologies need to be founded on good teaching practice. Online lecturers should acquire the new competencies and they should be aware of the potential of the technology in order to enhance learning. What are the required skills to be an effective lecturer teaching online? To undertake their responsibilities in an effective way, online lecturers need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to perform the task. Early recommendations for lecturers teaching with technology include technology skills and techniques such as familiarity with aspects of hardware, software and troubleshooting (Harmon, 2000). But Salmon (2000) argues that teachers do not have to master the technology. Indeed, recent researchers (Margerum-Leys & Marx, 2002; Songer et al., 2001; Zhao & Cziko, 2001) recognize that being a competent technology user is different from knowing how to teach effectively with technology. Barr and Tagg (1995) have called for “learning paradigm” that requires the movement towards “learner-centered” or “active learning”. The new paradigm has called

for a shift from simply “delivering instruction” to “producing learning”.

According to Collis (1995), “it is not the technology but the instructional implementation of the technology that determines its effects on learning”. It is up to the lecturer to creatively apply the technology and to determine how learning among the students is achieved. According to Webster and Hackley (1997), lecturers teaching online courses must learn how to control the technology and project a positive attitude to achieve effectiveness through distance learning. It is evident that the implementation of technology in education has posed new challenges to the users.

Barker (2002) has suggested that three skills are required for teachers working in an e-learning environment. First is the ability to design and create teaching and learning materials for online use thus requiring pedagogical skills. These skills are similar to those needed to prepare and use conventional teaching and learning resources. Second is the ability to use a range of different software tools to conduct his/her tutoring tasks effectively and this requires technical skills such as the skills to communicate using emails, preparing notes with a word processor, initiating and mediating asynchronous course forums. Organizational skills are also required to be an effective lecturer in an e-learning environment. Lecturers have to develop the ability to organize their own activities as well as those of the students who are following the particular courses. Examples of such activities are collecting and archiving students’ work for assessment, archiving and maintaining personal teaching resources, and constructing timetables or schedule for learning activity/courses.

From a workshop participated by 25 experienced online instructors, several more roles of lecturers teaching with technology were highlighted (as reported by Goodyear ,et al (2001)). One that is very significant is the role of a lecturer as a facilitator. Barr and Tagg (1995) noted that e-learning has changed the teaching approach from “teacher-centered” to “student-centered” where students are expected to be interactive and independent learners. Active learning involves student learning the subject matter through problem solving, hands-on exercises and assignments that allow knowledge building and construction. Lecturers should be able to frame the problems, respond to queries and weave the thread of online discussions (Harasim et al, 1995).

So, what is the implication of this article to our job as lecturers? Do we perceive the use of some of the e-learning methods like online course forum, student forum and OLT as effective online learning tools? How much do students learn from them? Do our students actually rely mainly on the face-to-face classes only for learning? Should they not be independent learners in order to survive in this e-learning environment? Lastly, have we as lecturers done our part in creating a “student-centered” learning environment? The answers to all these questions may vary from one lecturer to another. Competency levels of lecturers and students’ “unreadiness” (if there is such a term) could be barriers but other factors like the reliability of the technology and inappropriate university policies should not be underestimated.

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