The Functions of Distance Learning

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Abstract

Basically, there are two types of college students on university campuses: one is the traditional students who graduated from high schools and then entered to a college directly; the other one is the untraditional students who entered into job markets first after graduating from a high school and then decided to go back to universities to receive further education. Some of these untraditional students might quit their jobs when they decide to go back to schools. Some of them, however, still hold a full-time position at work when they become students again. The number of untraditional students is continuously growing in university campuses (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002). Ely (1997) proposed that maintaining a balanced life from work, family and school is not an easy task for these untraditional college students. To help these students alleviate their time management problems among work, family and school, some innovative instructional pedagogies are developed. One of the pedagogies is to deliver courses through synchronized or unsynchronized internet courses. Under such a teaching environment, students would watch pre-recorded course contents on the internet. All of the other class activities, such as participation, examinations, class discussion, homework assignment, etc., are also conducted on the internet, i.e., without face to face interactions between the instructor and students. Although it is hard to monitor and control students' learning process, Webster and Hackley (1997) found no differences in teaching effectiveness between courses conducted in classrooms and in technology-mediated distance learning environment. Nevertheless, Akhras (2012) suggested that the objective of learning should not be limited to obtaining knowledge only. An ideal learning process should be able to help learners understand who they are and enhance their motivation to learn. To this respect, frequent face to face interactions with instructors and with other classmates would be an important component in a learning process. Since limited or no face to face interaction is presented in internet teaching environments, delivering courses throuhg the internet probably would not induce self-learning or arouse students' motivation to learn. As a result, internet teaching might not achieve what most people think it would achieve, i.e., a substitute for face to face classroom teachings.

1. Teaching through the internet

The concept of life-time learning has brought many people going back to school to receive education againl. Furthermore, countries all over the world emphasize the importance of education, especially university education, to their nationals. As a result, the number of untraditional students in university campuses is increasing rapidly [1]. Generally speaking, untraditional students are those who come back to school after being in the job market for several years. Ely (1997) pointed out that these students usually would have to balance their daily lives among school, office and family [2]. In order to alleviate time management conflict for these students, universities developed distance learning courses to help them pursue educational trainings. Distance learning courses include correspondence courses, teaching through television programs or videos, and sending instructors to a place away from the campus to teach. Nowadays, teaching through the internet has become the major system for distance learning. And this type of teaching mechanism has already spread to traditional students.

Teaching through the internet is a product of advanced technology. The major functions provided by internet teaching, however, had long been fulfilled by other types of distance learning, e.g., corresponence courses. The main reason to provide internet teaching to students is unchanged: let students take courses in their most convenient time and at their most convenient place. Theoretically, distance learning would make it easy for untraditional students to take courses as far as their time management problem is concerned. As for how much education or knowledge they would get out of this type of teaching mechanism is probably not an easy question to answer. Webster and Hackley (1977) proposed that teaching effectiveness to those who participated in distance learning was probably the same to those who participated in classroom teaching [3]. When distance learning courses are aimed for untraditional students, learning effectiveness of the students might not be different from courses taught in classrooms. This is because untraditional students are older, more

mature, and come back to school to learn out of their own will. These students have high motivation to learn and appreciate the opportunity to learn.

Two recent developments related to the application of internet teaching might cast some doubts on the effectiveness of the pedagogy. One is offering internt teaching courses to traditional students, and the other one is granting university degrees with a program contained nothing but internet teaching courses.

2. Functions provided by internet teaching

Ehler (2009) identified five distinct characteristics for internet teaching: (1) learning could take place in any time, at any places; (2) instructors would play the roles of knowledge distributors as well as learning facilitators; (3) learning does not have to be connected with educational institutions; (4) learning occurs within social networks; and (5) learning does not center around instructors [4]. Functions provided by internet teaching revolve around these five characteristics.

First of all, the powerful, all-encompassing internet provides students with the opportunity to learn whenever and wherever they want to learn. Both synchronized and unsynchronized internet teaching would enhance class interactions that would not happen in other types of distance learning. Secondly, internet teaching could really provide convenience to untraditional students who are interested in lifelong learning. Those who are motivated to learn would get to class materials very easily, as long as an internet connection is provided. It is different from taking correspondence courses to which a fixed mailing address is needed in order to receive class materials. Thirdly, internet teaching would improve the quality of distance learning, both in teaching and learning. The development of information technology and multi-media softwares makes it possible to design an internet teaching course as similar as the one taught in classrooms in every aspect.Fourthly, internet teaching would help instructors monitor students learning progress by examining how much time a particular student spent on the course or how much interactions he/she engaged in class discussions. In other words, instructors could make internet teaching an individualized course that won't be easily done in the classroom teaching settings. Fifthly, students have the opportunity to set up their own paces to learn. Taking notes from lectures are not necessary for students; they could always go back to the teaching materials whenever they need to. Lectures, discussions, comments and homework assignments are all recorded and kept on the course website. Students could review class teachings over and over again. That would certainly help students avoid misinterpreting what the instructor delivered in the lectures. Lastly, students who don't feel comfort enough to actively participate in face-to-face class discussions would be able to express their opinions on the internet. All they need to do is to take time to think through a subject then type in their opinions onto the course website. They don't need to make quick comments, nor do they need to conquer their inner fear of speaking up in public before joining the class discussion. Every participant in the internet teaching class really gets a fair chance to learn for themselves and from others.

Internet teaching is the product of rapidly advanced technologies. It is also an innovative teaching pedagogy. The best scenario for internet teaching is to keep the advantages of face-to-face teaching while providing other beneficial functions to either instructors or students. The keys to creating this scenario lies in university's objectives of delivering internet teaching programs as much as in students' motivations to take internet teaching courses. Technology will not cause damages; inappropriate applications of technology, however, would probably bring about negative consequences.

3. Problems with internet teaching

Even though internet teaching could be a substitute for classroom teaching, the quality of internet teaching is still a debatable issue. How attentive students are while taking an internet teaching course is the first issue that bothers some educators. Under classroom teaching settings, instructors would have the immediate opportunity to observe students' learning behaviors. Whenever deviated behaviors occur, instructors could remind students of the behaviors and try to get students back on the right track. For internet teaching, instructors would have a hard time to tell if students are taking classes following the assigned schedules let alone the students' learning behaviors or how attentive students are. For those who are highly motivated to learn, instructors would have nothing to worry about. However, when taking internet teaching courses becomes an easy way for some students to get a university degree, the issue has turned into a big concern for instructors.

The second issue is related to a misconception about internet teaching that would de-motivate instructors to deliver internet courses. The misconception is that instructors who are teaching internet courses would spend much less time than those who are delivering face-to-face courses in educating students. Some agrued that instructors only need to record class lectures beforehand and put them on the internet. The recorded lecture don't even have to be three hours long for a three-hour long class. After students watch lectures on the tape, they should then raise comments or questions on the internet. If students do not ask any questions after watching lectures, instructors seldom have to sit down with students discussing class materials, which would often be the case in classroom teaching situations. Again, the misconception would only be true when students are not highly motivated to learn. Students would certainly raise questions or comments on the internet when they are taking the opportunity in hopes of bettering themselves. Instructors would spend an enormous time reading and responding students' comments and questions to a point that the class discussion seems like a never ending one. In other words, internet teaching would probably exhaust instructors if students are serious learners. It would bring uneasiness to instructors if students only want to take advantages of not coming to a classroom to learn.

The last, but not the least, issue is the fact that the outcome of internet teaching would probably be limited to the delivery of professional knowledge. It would sacrifice other educational functions that are equally important to university students. Akhras (2012) pointed out that the purpose of learning should not be limited to obtaining knowledge only. An ideal learning environment should help learners understand who they are and enhance their motivation toward learning. Frequent face to face interactions with instructors and other classmates would be instrumental in forming such a learning environment [5]. To this aspect, Pyoria (2007) and Bates (2005) indicated that distance learning could only provide students with articulated, unconscious knowledge. It would not induce self-learning or arouse learning motivation [6] [7].

4. Quality assurance of internet teaching

The pedagogy of internet teaching has been developed and applied for more than ten years. At the outset, supporting hardware and instructors' familiarity toward internet teaching are two important factors to make this teaching pedagogy successful. Currently, hardware and familiarity are no longer the problems. Instead, the keys to making internet teaching a functional pedagogy lie in: (1) students' motivation and needs, (2) universities' motive of providing internet teaching courses, (3) the integration of technology and course contents [8] [9] [10].

Theoretically, the reason why students take internet teaching courses is because the convenience involved in the learning process [11] [12]. Both good and bad aspects would be associated with the notion of convenience. The good aspect is that students could learn whenever they want to learn; the bad aspect is that students could skip a class easily. Screening and soliciting highly motivated students is therefore an important factor to make internet teaching a successful pedagogy. Universities should somehow find a way to identify students' personal needs and motivations that would put them in the suitable position of learning through the internet. Other than students' motivations and needs, the reason why university offers internet teaching courses would also impact the quality of internet teaching pedagogy. Universities should make internet teaching courses as a knowledge disseminator, not as a degree grantor. In other words, internet teaching courses should not be used as a tool to expand student body. The reason is that students might be driven by the desire of obtaining a university degree instead of wishing to acquire knowledge from internet teaching programs. Universities that offer formal degrees should come up with a mechanism that makes internet teaching settings as similar as face-to-face settings. The mechanism should also evaluate students' efforts and attitude in the process of earning a university degree. Another important factor in terms of maintaining the quality of internet teaching is the extent to which technologies could be embedded into course contents. For example, courses that would require students to make presentations in front of an audience are probably not suitable for internet teaching. This is not to say that internet teaching could not be applied at all; rather, internet teaching should only play an auxiliary, facilitative role in the teaching process. Classroom teaching is still needed for certain courses to achieve some educational objectives that are beyond the commandd of internet teaching.

5. Conclusion

Universities do not offer any internet teaching courses are running against the trend of the future. Nevertheless, offering a university degree to students who only take internet courses would generate some negative impacts in terms of the quality of university education. For traditional students, taking internet teaching course might also be a troubling issue. University administrators should realize the pros and cons of internet teaching and try to find ways to do away with negative consequences. Only then teaching through internet could really be a powerful pedagogy to deliver university trainings to the public.

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