Strategic eLearning

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Abstract

Electronic Education (eLearning) is the art of converting the brainware of the teacher into courseware to be shared and disseminated via electronic media [15].It deals not only with obtaining the right information at the right time but also with a full understanding and processing of the information in the given context. eLearning facilitates "Distance Learning" which is a technology, where the distance between a teacher and a student, or among students, is characterized by the speed of the feedback, i.e. how quickly the student gets the feedback from his teacher – tutor. This type of education cannot exist without electronic education. It means providing the students with the content of a course via electronic media including Internet, intranet and CD-ROMs. Before processing of the materials into this form, it is necessary to develop the methodology, which could be used effectively by distance learning project teams. Such methodology is a keystone in developing national educational program that can positively contributes to better livelihoods for all community levels.

1.Introduction

E-Learning covers a wide range of instructional and educational material that can be delivered on various types of media such as a CD-ROM or DVD, or through the Internet. It includes Web-Based Training (WBT), Computer-Based Training (CBT), distance or online learning, online tutorials and Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS). E-Learning provides the student with knowledge that can be accessed in a setting free from time and place constraints, meaning the student can go through the lessons at his or her own pace. The progress and achievement of the student can be assessed in E-Learning, with custom feedback and evaluation available in an interactive environment. Also the authoring of E-Learning must be done methodically, considering the user interface and effective transfer and dissemination of knowledge. (R. Kurtus 2004).

Distance learning has attracted many educators' attention, being a non conventional tool for knowledge dissemination. Realizing its potent power in sustainable social and economical development, policy makers have included it in the educational systems of their countries.

The vast recognition of distance learning took place because of two reasons: one- the massive developments in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), and two- because of the rising needs of developing countries to foster their local human resources and add value to their national inventories. ICT plays a vital role in the developing process of knowledge communities and hence knowledge economies as it removes the geographical boundaries between countries and avails various and diversified knowledge resources at shorter time and affordable costs. Distance learning has become the main tool for decision makers to facilitate females' education in many troubled and challenged communities where education is either obstructed by social and cultural believes or by poor livelihoods.

This paper does not concentrate on the technical aspects of eLearning, rather it presents a methodology for developing an effective E-Learning program that can be utilized by many educational organizations at local and regional levels. The paper is divided into 2 parts, namely:

1. The challenges and difficulties in E-Learning programs.
2. Developing effective strategic E-Learning programs on national and regional levels.

1.1 Challenges and Difficulties in E-Learning Programs

Despite the fact that people have been learning from multimedia, sometimes delivered over networks, online learning via the Internet is a recent phenomenon that any educator, trainer or specialist needs to get acquainted with; it's an evolving technology with great promise that is under-researched, and popular among universities wishing to appear trendy and cost effective. Let's take a look at some of the issues involved in online learning.

Essentially, most of the traditional issues don't disappear, and a few get worse. For example, the old challenge of tailoring instruction to meet individual learning styles and personal needs is still a challenge. Online learning methodologies can include multiple paths, but generally don't and unlike a classroom teacher, can't adjust a delivery on-the-hop. Language, literacy and numeracy challenges remain as do participant motivation and management. Students are responsible not only for their own progress, but often to ensure their technology is up to date. Just establishing contact with the learning provider can be an insurmountable challenge, for the most experienced computer user, let alone the novice. This leads to frustration, disappointment and ultimately leads to people discontinuing programs. Other issues, such as not being able to contact a lecturer, lack of socialization, slow download times, links that don't work, poor quality media, and uncertainty about what to do and where to go can be very disconcerting, even for the most durable and experienced distance learner.

Unfortunately, many organizations place documents on their Internet/intranet sites and promote them as online learning. It isn't. At most it is an Electronic Performance Support System (EPSS) where people access rules and procedures, legislation and other related information. True, people may learn something from reading their firm's manuals. That's great! But my view of learning (and some of you might disagree) is that it must be structured to include a form of assessment. I don't deny the existence of other learning, including hidden curricula, but from a practical perspective, if you can't measure a change in the learner's skills, knowledge, or attitudes, then you really don't know whether learning occurred. Added to these difficulties is the poor access to broadband networks in other than the major capital cities. This means that it is a brave organization that produces instructional media with audio/video content, and there is no guarantee that anyone will actually be able to access it. This type of media works well on CD-ROM based computer aided instruction programs, kiosks and sales media, but not necessarily on the Internet.

So what are the solutions? My advice is to use multiple media. When designing instructional sequences, one should include multiple options for delivery, interaction and assessment in order to reduce learners' isolation and eliminate environment distractions. There is no reason why you can't integrate a telephone networking session with online delivery of written media, or use a chat session to follow-up a classroom session. Email could be used to gauge individual progress through questioning techniques. Social networks proved to be very effective in bridging the gaps between various communities. An objective test can be designed, delivered and marked online. Information can be downloaded as compressed ZIP, PDF or MS Windows files, read online in HTML, or all of the above. Students can be assigned to teams to collaborate and achieve group project outcomes. And somewhere, if need be, you can have a video/audio footage discussing… particle physics - just in case someone is able to download it. Not only is multiple media good for accessing the differences in learning styles and technological capabilities, but it provides the learning individual with options.

1.2 Developing an Effective eLearning Strategy

The final aim of the eLearning initiative is to strengthen cooperation, increase dialogue and improve links between measures and initiatives at all levels - local, national, regional, as well as between all the players in the field: universities, schools, training centers, decision-makers and administrators responsible for selecting equipment, software, content or services (including the social partners). Partnerships between the public and private sectors will continue to be established, in order to encourage exchanges of experience, technology transfers and an improvement in the way in which business' skill needs are taken into account in conjunction with the measures advocated by the GCC Employment Strategy. [1] Successful strategy for eLearning involves the utilization of all national resources, and unleashing GCC countries potentials to its maximum. There are strategies at the local, national and regional levels. We shall address each level as follows:

1.2.1 On Local Level

Have a published description of your self-directed learning.

This is especially important because it sets the expectations from the start. Students know what to expect and how the course is run. This published description should be made available to all,

prospective students on the school website and on the course website. In some institutions, students are made to acknowledge, through an electronic signature, that they have clearly read and understood the way the institute defines e-learning, and the way the mentor wishes to engage the student. The description should include the student's responsibilities and the mentor's role in the student's learning. It should also provide the student with the collaboration and communication options with the expectation that the mentor is available for the student.

Set a ball park expectation for students to complete their assignments.

Although a key benefit of self-directed e-learning is the convenience of working at an individual pace, mentors should have a time estimate of when to receive assignments. Students should not be encouraged to completely relax with their institute work. Part of self-directed learning is the fact that the student becomes responsible for their learning. Part of this learning is maintaining a good study habit. In many institutes, students are allowed a generous amount of time to complete their work, however there is a deadline. This deadline can be extended when the student files for a course extension request. When time expectations are set for students, it helps them maintain an active study status rather than a passive one.

Clearly communication the course objectives and goals.

For each course there should be set objectives that students must master. It is very important to clearly communicate these objectives and goals to students. Clarity is a key objective in self-directed e-learning; otherwise, students will blindly walk through the course. Some schools have students use a check list to ensure that they have met all the required course objectives for each lesson. Homework assignments should tie into course objectives and the overall course goal.

Give a clear and extensive description of the course projects.

A key success factor in e-learning is clear direction on projects. Because students work on their own, it is very important that they are provided with a clear description on projects. The description should include the goal of the project and the project expectations. In some cases, I have seen teachers ensure that step-by-step guidelines are provided. By providing step-by-step guidelines, students are able to focus on the task at hand rather than spending most of their time trying to understand the project requirements.

Have mentors commit to a reasonable response time.

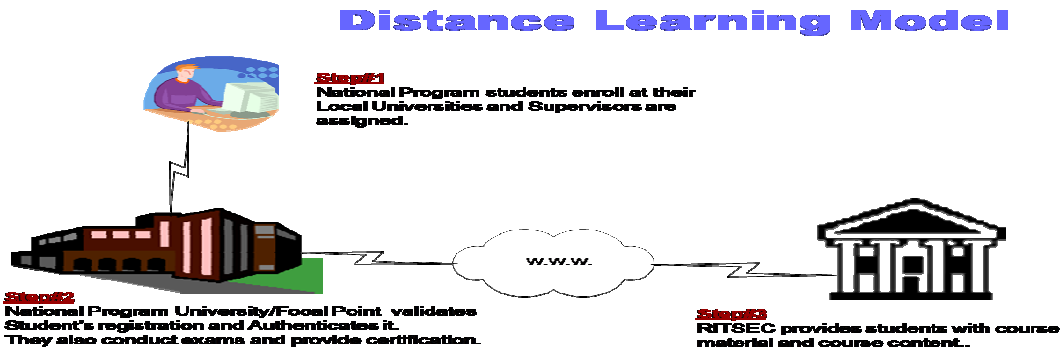
Another key success strategy in e-learning is response time. In this regard, response time is the time it takes a mentor to response to a student. Mentors should commit to a quick response time so that students are motivated to move on with the course.

Provide extensive feedback on projects and homework.

Extensive feedback is very vital in mentorship based e-learning. Extensive feedback allows the students to clearly identify where they have gone wrong, locate the areas of improvement. A good example I have seen at institutions, is that a mentor provides clearly written set guidelines for each project she assigns students, with key areas of focus. She then evaluates each project extensively based on the set guideline, and provides extensive feedback within a reasonable time frame. This example is vital for self-directed e-learners since, they are not in a traditional classroom environment with face-to-face interaction with the teacher.

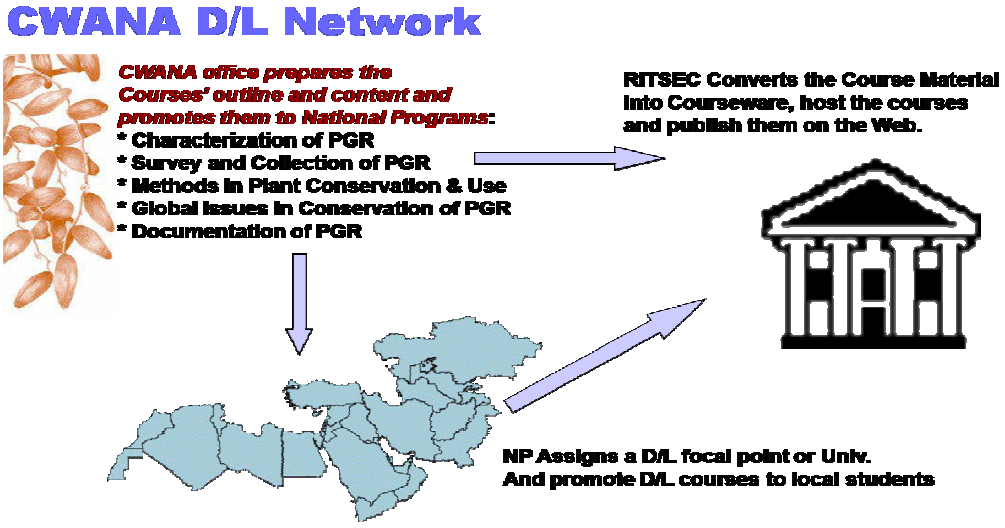
1.2.2.On National Level

The distance E-learning is the most important in the Higher Education in this time for some programs. Traditional short classes needs more effort to send the lectures to the students, because some students face problems of different culture. The best solutions to solve these problems is by using distance Elearning in online e-content and delivering the e-content to the part time students using LMS. Therefore, we should build the courses as 100% online distance E-learning at Taibah University to reduce, infrastructure, circumstances and transportation.



1.2.3 On Regional Level

GCC and Middle East countries have potential resources in eLearning program but vary in the fields of science of which these programs are developed and offered. The Arab League has regulatory bodies that can be utilized to accommodate such knowledge. I suggest that when one country has a good eLearning program in Agriculture for example, other courtiers can utilize this opportunity and enroll their local students into those programs and vice versa. The following model represent this fact which will help the rational use of resources.



Conclusion

E-Learning provides an unconventional way for reaching out to communities, and plays an important role in maximizing the educational impact. E-Learning is not a work of one educational institute; it requires collaborated infra-structure, skills, and efforts to become a reality. Establishing local area focal points and center of excellence is the key to a successful implementation of such programs. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is vital for E-Learning programs' design, development, and implementation and monitoring.

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