

The case of online learning

Sociology, Communication



Students go to schools to learn. Through their reading on their textbooks, the inputs from the teacher, and their interactions with other kids, learning is facilitated, even enabled in traditional schools. The public school system is also built upon the notion that there is direct interaction between and among the teacher and the students for the impartation and facilitation of learning. With the growth of the Internet, several applications have been developed to cater to the needs of people who want to study on their own pace from the comforts of their home or wherever they want to study.

As such, there are now a lot of online learning programs designed to facilitate the learning in online environments. As a testimony to the growth of online learning, there are now more than 3.5 million students who are participating in various online learning platforms (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 2000). Some of these platforms serve to reinforce the interactions of teachers and students in addition to classroom interactions. There are also companies that offer complete online degrees, thus deviating from the usual method of classroom learning.

Institutions of higher learning in the United States, Europe and elsewhere in the world, are now offering online classes. According to a study of several academic leaders, it appears that students are satisfied with the results of online learning as much as with the traditional learning contexts. As it stands now, most of the institutions offering online learning are those that are for-profit. This is perhaps due to the high costs associated with maintaining the systems and personnel needed for the online learning classes. Perhaps when the costs of the system decrease, more institutions may offer online classes.

It cannot be denied though that online learning programs are on the rise. Post-graduate degrees, particularly, are utilizing online learning programs (Nagy, 2005, p. 80). This paper seeks to look into the online learning phenomenon, the different issues arising from it and the way in online learning differs from traditional schools. Given the differences in approach, it would be necessary to analyze online learning and look at the areas where it works best and at the areas where it is not very effective. In comparison with traditional schools, there are marked differences in online learning settings.

In the first place, students and teachers are no longer “physically present” to conduct the learning sessions and discuss about issues and concerns regarding different topics at hand. The level of discussion has been transferred from physical presence to virtual presence. Moreover, students and teachers alike can no longer see each other. Hence, they can no longer rely on visual and body clues whether they understood each other or not. The interaction tends to be limited to online interactions, which are largely driven by text and written communication.

The Basics of Online Learning Online learning is a high technology variation of distance learning through correspondence, which have been used by schools and educational institutions prior to the Internet’s widespread use and popularity. With online learning, there is a number of technology being used to facilitate the learning process. There are multi-media applications and presentation available through a CD-ROM or through a secure website, emails, blogs, wiki, chat, as well as podcasts and discussion boards among others being used for this purpose.

Most of the time, these tools and equipment are used together to help maximize the learning process for the student. The usual approach in online learning is the establishment of a Virtual Learning Environment, which has a particular kind of user interface so that the student can navigate through the system more easily. A number of universities are now offering online college degrees in addition to the degrees being offered through the traditional programs that they have. Online certificate programs are also widely available.

In addition to traditional schools and online classes, a lot of universities are also using the Internet to provide advice to students, counsel them, and make books and resources available to students wherever they may be (Salmon, 2000, p. 27). There is a trend towards blended learning, in which traditional classroom instruction and online learning are blended together. Through this approach, students are able to maximize their time during the class sessions and they also make use of multimedia to address different topics in their online classes.

Usually, online learning boosts the student's learning capabilities or help them do something specific. The multimedia content may have information only or in some cases, the multimedia applications also require the student to perform some activities or tasks related to the lessons being studied (Salmon, 2000, p. 31). Pedagogical Approaches used in Online Learning Online learning is similar to traditional schools in that it still has to use the pedagogical approaches although there are differences in the way that these approaches are applied to online learning.

In the first place, the instructional design for online learning is also developed by an educator based on the curriculum being followed by the online course. The social constructivist pedagogy is also applied to online learning. Through the different technological tools available, the students and the teachers can collaborate together in different online activities. Through the use of forums, and other interactive tools such as blogs, the students and the teacher alike are able to create content for themselves and for the benefit of the whole class (Lambropoulos & Zaphiris, 2007, p.

106). There is also a conversational model described by Salmon (2000, p. 24), which works best in online discussion forums occurring online. Through the online conversations and collaborations, online students can also develop the cognitive aspect of learning since the senses and the brain coordinates well in doing the online learning. Their learning process though is slightly modified because of the different situation in online learning. Yet, the emotions of students are also engaged in the process of learning online (Areskog, 1995, p. 37).

The difficulty, however, is that detecting these emotions are not automatic and the teacher and students may have to rely on word clues as to the emotional state of a student. After all, nobody can see a person be affected emotionally through the texts being written in chat boxes. Truly, the realm of the physical is no longer present in online learning environments. The behavior of students in online learning environments is also a little more difficult to measure and gauge as they are not able to make a presentation in front of the whole class or catch the stare of the teacher.

If a student is bored during an online class, the teacher has no clue whatsoever except perhaps the lack of paragraphs and sentences being communicated by the student. Perhaps, the teacher or facilitator may be able to detect a bored and sleepy student if he makes an irrelevant remark. The context of online learning is also very different from traditional schools. At least, in traditional schools, students may be able to enjoy the full environment of the academe—the library, the laboratories, as well as interactions with different teachers and students.

This is lacking in the online learning environment. True, the student may have additional learning opportunities online but the experience of being in an academe is still different. Although this is the case, online learning should enable a student to still interact with other people and help them embark on a joint pursuit of learning and discovery of knowledge. Likewise, the pressure emanating from other students is also important in the learning process.