DISTANCE LEARNING IS HERE TO STAY: ACCEPT IT, IMPROVE IT, USE IT APPROPRIATELY

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Abstract: *Distance Learning (or E-Learning), using the Internet, is a reality today, and an inevitable direction for the future in Higher Education. Thus it is vital that anyone involved in academia learns about the status of the field, what software is available, how can one use the new technology and approach, what are the pros and cons of this new mode of sharing knowledge/teaching/learning/ and how it can be used at its best. This article makes a brief presentation of the current status in the field of distance learning, of available sources of information and tools which are most commonly used (such as Blackboard, WebCT, Elluminate), the advantages and disadvantages of online education; it presents a comparative performance of students in the two teaching modes. Observations from the own experience of the author are also presented.*

Keywords: *Distance Learning, E-learning*

Introduction

[http://www.worldwidelearn.com/elearning-essentials/index.html]

E-Learning is an umbrella term that describes learning done at a computer, usually connected to a network, giving us the opportunity to learn almost anytime, anywhere.

E-Learning is not unlike any other form of education - and it is widely accepted that e-Learning can be as rich and as valuable as the classroom experience or even more so. With its unique features e-Learning is an experience that leads to comprehension and mastery of new skills and knowledge, just like its traditional counterpart.

Instructional Design for E-Learning has been perfected and refined over many years using established teaching principles, with many benefits to students. As a result colleges, universities, businesses, and organizations worldwide now offer their students fully accredited online degree, vocational, and continuing education programs in abundance.

Some other terms frequently interchangeable with E-Learning include: online learning, online education, distance education, distance learning, technology-based training, web-based training, computer-based training (generally thought of as learning from a CD-ROM).

There is a huge amount of information, in print and online on distance learning. This paper will give an extensive list of online references since they are the easier to check, in two forms: some more important, at the end of the paper, in alphabetical order, others, in the text of the paper, by category, and some with the author's comments.

1. Distance Learning Sources of Information

A good place to start as a source of information on distance learning is Wikipedia, the free on-line Encyclopedia: http://en.wikipedia.org

- There are numerous topics on Distance Learning that can be found there, some of which are:
- Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)
- History of virtual learning environments
- Learning Management Systems
- Content management frameworks

- E-learning, Computer-assisted language learning
- Blended learning
- Computer-based testing
- Distance education
- Flexible Learning, Learning & Development
- Microlearning
- Online learning community
- Virtual education
- Educational Portal, and
- Others.

2. Distance Learning Tools

There are numerous products available on the market for distance learning today. At CSUN we are using three of them: Web-CT [http://www.webct.com/webct/], Blackboard [http://www.blackboard.com/us/], and, more recently Elluminate [http://www.elluminate.com/]. To see what these tools can do for you go to the developer's page, or try to look at the comparison tools given below.

LMS (Learning Management Systems) are also called, CMS (Course Management System), or a VLE (Virtual Learning Environments). LMS platforms come in two forms, open source and commercial. Below is a list of some of the LMS platforms that are available is presented in Table 1. Each of the LMS platform listed in Table 1 has a webpage on Wikipedia. Another place to find information on LMS is Eric Wolfram's page: Directory, Learning Management Systems -- an evaluation of LMS solutions, software and services, research he started in June 23, 2005. [http://dir.wolfram.org/learning_management_systems.html]

Many Course Management Systems are listed at: http://www.edutools.info/item_list.jsp?pj=8. This site allows one to run a comparison on up to 10 Products, selected by product name from an available list. The page gives you the developers name and then makes an automatic comparison on several important criteria and sub-criteria as given in Table 2. There is a page with archived Course Management Systems reviews, made in 2005, and a new CMS review web site.

[http://www.edutools.info/static.jsp?pj=4&page=HOME, with an attached How to explanation page http://www.edutools.info/static.jsp?pj=4&page=HOWTO.]

The site allows you to obtain extensive information on a product that you select from a list of products obtaining products features and their descriptions; compare products and make a decision on which product to select based on the results of the automatic comparison it made for you. There are four distinct approaches to comparing products:

- By Product Name -If you know which products you would like to compare
- By Features - If you do not have a clear set of products in mind, but you have some ideas about features you want.
- By Preselected Group – if you are new to the product and feature selection process. Products have been grouped by either certain features they have or have been identified as useful for certain audiences.
- Compare products by developer - This option gives you a list of products by developers.

Very good materials on online teaching can be found on the site of the National Education Association Higher Education site at: http://www2.nea.org/he/abouthe/techip.html.

3. How should a student choose a Distance Learning Program?

A good page which can help a student decide if distance learning is for him/her and how to choose a distant learning higher education program is About.com http://distancelearn.about.com/od/onlinecourses/u/OnlineCollege.htm The site gives you advise on the following issues: Choosing an Online College, Online College Accreditation, Types of Online Degrees, Online College Profiles, Online College Admissions, Funding Your Education, Online College Success Tips and offers several articles on the distance learning topic.

There are numerous prestigious Higher Education Institutions who are moving into the E-learning direction, to name just a few: MIT[http://www.core.org.cn/OcwWeb/index.ht] and Purdue University [https://www.continuinged.purdue.edu/distance/], and the California State University System, but the list is very big and constantly growing. In a desire to share all teaching/learning knowledge with anyone in the world interested, MIT placed all their course material online in what is called Welcome to MIT's OpenCourseWare:a free and open educational resource (OER) for educators, students, and self-learners around the world, which does not require any registration. Information on the Distance Learning Systems Gorup at California State University, Northridge can be found at http://exlweb.csun.edu/dl/.

4. E-learning is inevitable

It is the belief of the author of this paper that E-learning is inevitable, it is here and will stay. Some of the reason are given below, based on the conclusion the author drew from various seminars/workshop on Distance Learning that she did at international conferences (ARA - Chisinau, Moldova, 2006, ARA - Brasov, Romania, 2007).

- Computer Generation: Young people are more and more familiarized with computers and the internet.
- Fantastic computer/internet technology evolution: Very high communication speed, transfer of large files, video communication, real-time interaction.
- Difficult on-campus attendance: Commuting is becoming more and more difficult (most students work, distances to travel are too vast; the cost of gas is constantly increasing, many times working students are out of town missing classes).
- Industry/Business is going online: Geographically dispersed design/manufacturing, less travel and more video-conferencing, exchange of large files at a distance.
- High education is going in online direction: Universities in the US are going in the online direction. E-learning presents many advantages (no need to be physically present on campus, access to more information at the pace of the student, stimulate shy students to communicate.
- Globalization: The economy became global. New emerging technologies: It is impossible for any university to have all expertise on one campus; a need and possibility to get knowledge and expertise from wherever it exists on this globe, other universities, and/or industry.
- Advantages of E-learning: students can learn at their own pace, less commuting needed, better access to the course instructor and to knowledge, good way to experiment with multi-disciplinary, multi-culture environments, combination of asynchronous and synchronous communication possible. Some educators are against distance learning, some are all for it. The best approach is to use it well, and for what it has to offer, and combine it with traditional teaching philosophies to achieve the best student learning results.

5. Disadvantages of Distance Learning

The following are disadvantages of online learning:
- resistance from some educators

- a high learning curve needed from instructors
- a need of familiarity with computer/internet tools by students
- new ways of implementation and knowledge of delivery needs to be discovered and experimented with
- time consuming for instructors to which students have access around the clock
- traditional face-to-face is missing and has to be carefully replaced by virtual real-time interaction (Elluminate Live is a good example of such a tool).

6. Distance Learning Glossaries

- http://www.edutools.info/glossary.jsp?pj=4

  WCET's EduTools provides independent reviews, side-by-side comparisons, and consulting services to assist decision-making in the e-learning community
- http://www.elearners.com/resources/glossary.asp
- http://www2.cdc.gov/phtn/lingo.asp
- http://www.lakenet.org/training/dlglossary.html

  The South Central Regional Library Council (SCRLC) is one of nine multi-type library consortia in New York State.
- http://www.prenhall.com/mischtm/glossary.html
- http://dl.austincc.edu/students/DLGlossary.html
- http://www.worldwidelearn.com/elearning-essentials/elearning-glossary.htm
- http://www.cybermediacreations.com/elearning/glossary.html
- http://www.brandon-hall.com/free_resources/glossary.shtml
- http://www.e-learningguru.com/gloss.htm (a little old, 2004)
- http://www.internettime.com/itimegroup/eglossary.htm (a little old, 2003)
- http://www.learn.com/files/pdf/e_Learning_Glossary.pdf

7. Conclusion

Distance Learning (or E-Learning), using the Internet, is a reality today, and an inevitable direction for the future in Higher Education. Thus it is vital that anyone involved in academia learns about the status of the field, accepts it and integrates it in teaching. It is the inevitable direction of the future, and the advances in computer/internet and more and more performing interactive teaching delivery tools make it possible to offer a virtual face-to-face class environment.

References

All references are from the web and included in the text of the paper.

Communication Tools	Productivity Tools	Student Involvement Tools	Administration Tools
Discussion Forums	Bookmarks	Groupwork	Authentification
File Exchange	Orientation/Help	Self-assessment	Course Authorization
Internal Emails	Searching	Student Community	Registration Integration
Online Journal/	Within Course	Building	Hosted Services
Notes	Calendar/	Student portfolios	
Real-time Chat	Progress Review		
Video Services	Work Offline/		
Whiteboard	Synchronize		

Course Delivery Tools	Curriculum Design	Hardware/Software	Pricing/Licensing
Course Management	Accessibility Compliance	Client Browser	Company Profile
Instructor Helpdesk	Course Templates	Required	Costs
Online Grading	Curriculum Management	Database Requirements	Open Source
Tools	Customized Look and Feel	Server Software	Optional Extras
Student Tracking	Instructional Standards Compliance	UNIX Server	Software Version
Automated Testing	Instructional Design Tools	Windows Server	
and Scoring	Content Sharing/Reuse		

Table 1. [http://dir.wolfram.org/learning_management_systems.html]

Open Source	Commercial
ATutor - Open Source Web-based Learning Content Management System	ANGEL Learning
Claroline -Claroline is a free LMS http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claroline	Apex Learning
Dokeos - elearning and course management web application	Blackboard Inc.
eFront - Open Source Learning Management System	Desire2Learn
Fle3	eCollege
ILIAS - Open Source Learning Management System	Learn.com
KEWL.nextgen	Meridian KSI
LON-CAPA - Open Source Learning Management System with Linked Domains	Saba Software
Moodle - Open Source Course Management System	SAP Enterprise Learning
OLAT - Open Source Learning Management System	**NetDimensions_EKP**
Sakai Project - Collaboration and Learning Environment	**-**

Table 2
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Learning_management_system]