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Alejandra de J. Magana de León

Purdue University

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The phenomenon known as globalization and the development of the communication and information technologies have influenced our society; it can be expected then these two factors have reached education as well.

A specific aspect of technology in education and in the learning process is e-Learning and its benefits and challenges; therefore, it is imperative to consider "...that it is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has a one sided effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that" (Postman, 1993, p.5); and that the new technologies have become an educational problem, a challenge, an opportunity, a risk and a need. (Burbules & Callister, 2001, p.14).

In this essay I present an analysis of the benefits and challenges that e-Learning represents and then I expose my point of view as an instructional designer.

In addition, for the purpose above mentioned, I consider the definition of e-Learning proposed by Meredith and Newton (2003) as "learning facilitated by internet and www technologies, delivered via end-user computing that creates connectivity between people and information and creates opportunities of social learning approaches", and from Alessi & Trollip (2001) I would also add that -it can be used either as a support for on-site learning or support for distance learning, and facilitating instruction or as a tool for delivery instruction.

Just as the same way as we select different learning theories and philosophical approaches to address specific learning needs to be used in different contexts, is the same way that we have to identify relevant approaches for specific learning tasks and groups of students, and then analyze how technology could be used to meet those needs. (Bates & Poole, 2003). This is the challenge, and once it has been reached, consequently we have the benefit.

We need to be aware of the limitations and dangers of e-Learning. It is not educational panacea or replacement for face-to-face teaching. E-Learning has an important role to play but it needs to be used carefully and selectively. Here are some of the benefits as well as challenges that as instructional designers should take in consideration:

On the one hand, because of the nature of e-Learning, there are some very specific benefits that face-to face teaching does not have. First, the ease of transmission, communication can be either synchronous and/or asynchronous; it can cover a wide geographical area and can be accessible to a mass audience.

Second, e-Learning provides integration of collaboration with self-study (Clark & Mayer, 2005) and at the same time interactivity with course content, student interactions with instructors, and interactions among classmates, and in addition interaction with the course interface, and vicarious interaction (Swan, 2003).

Third, the capacity of individualization (Swan, 2003), personalization and program adaptive behavior (Peters, 2002) -considering that learners are different. Not all have the same needs, not all learn the same way, not all have the same previous knowledge (Clark & Mayer, 2005). The great advantage of online learning is that it can facilitate economies of scope, which is the tailoring of course materials and approaches for learners with different needs. This places even more emphasis on course designers to understand their learners and how they differ, and to craft suitable learning environments to meet a variety of needs.

Fourth e-Learning provides the capacity of incorporating simulations to accelerate expertise (Clark & Mayer, 2005; Swan, 2003), virtual reality (Alessi & Trollip, 2001), and expert systems (Peters, 2002). These mean that technology “provides additional tools for accessing, representing, transmitting and storing knowledge” (Bates & Poole, 2003). In short: flexibility.

These learning capacities can, in some way, allow practice with automated tailored feedback (Clark & Mayer, 2005), active learning, learner control of pacing, hands-on problems, multiple exercises, variety of presentation styles, frequent testing, enhance motivation, guidance and support, etc. (Swan, 2003).

On the other hand, if challenges are not correctly addressed, then such undesired consequences as transfer failure due to lack of job analysis, failure to accommodate human learning limits and strengths, and high attrition rates (Clark & Mayer, 2005) can hardly be taken backwards.

First, students need guidance when using the Internet (Meredith & Newton, 2003), merely giving them access and learning tasks is insufficient, learners need to “develop the skill of online communication” (Meredith & Newton). E-Learning requires self-discipline and the ability to work in relative isolation (although well-designed online courses provide ample opportunities for online communication and community-building). Self-discipline and independent learning are skills that can be taught. Students need to be gradually introduced to e-Learning, so that these skills can be developed under the guidance and supervision of a face-to-face teacher. The teacher has a very important role- “teacher immediacy” (Swan, 2003) in focusing and facilitating learner activities in this way, as well as presenting the materials at a suitable level for the participants.

Second, motivation is a critical issue. It is not a question of making learning 'fun', but ensuring that the learning activities are learning-oriented, engaging and stimulating. The use of audio-visual media, self-testing, collaborative learning, quality feedback, project work, and educational games, are all valid educational techniques to increase motivation and eventually intrinsic, self-guided learning (Alessi & Trollip, 2001).

Third, we have to make a balance among the variables of the “training environment” (Clark & Mayer, 2005) of e-Learning such as: a) the “digital gap” (Castells, 2001; Clark & Mayer) which

consists of the impossibility to have Internet access to a great proportion of the society, b) the time and management for designing and developing the materials, c) cultural factors in institutions such as the acceptance of and routine familiarity with technology, d) the budget (Clark & Mayer), and e) the copyrights of not only the external materials incorporated, but also for the materials produced by the designer within the organization (Noble, 1997).

Peters (2002) argues that e-Learning is a “paradigm shift”, but I believe that is not the case. However, I do agree with Peters that e-Learning has the potential to radically change teaching and learning. We have to consider a critical design issue that is the extent to which direct experience can or should be replaced by online experience. Virtual experience can add to or enhance personal or direct experience.

My point is that learning is about “reconciling and relating different ways of knowing about the same thing until we have a comprehensive and sometimes deep understanding” (Bates & Poole, 2003), and technology within a well designed instruction allow us to learn in those different ways.

Gibson (1996) suggests “that unique characteristics of the medium may afford and constrain particular kinds of learning” (as cited in Swan, 2003). Such affordances and constraints, in turn suggest certain strategies and approaches that might enhance the learning effectiveness of e-Learning (Swan). This is our challenge as instructional designers in order to provide the best learning experience for the learner.

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