ONLINE LEARNING COSTS MORE . . . OR DOES IT?

At every higher education gathering we’ve been to in the last few months, someone stands up and states with great authority, “Even though they think that distance education (or online learning) can save money, we all know that it can’t. In fact, it may even cost more than traditional classroom instruction.”

The “they” in question usually refers to administrators (if the speaker is a faculty member) or to legislators or other external policy makers (if the speaker is an administrator). When this statement emanates from relatively novice distance educators—those who are in the throes of the developmental stages of their first online offering or who argue from an N of 1—we can chalk it up to inexperience. Any first-time teaching experience is bound to take more time than one that has been repeated and refined over time. But when experienced distance educators who have been in the game for a long time are vehement that online education may be more costly, we need to examine this idea seriously.

What lies behind the notion that online education is more expensive than traditional methods? The primary reason is the amount of time that faculty spend developing and delivering online courses, which, in most folks’ experience, is in excess of what they spend developing and delivering classroom-based courses.

The commonly held belief that student enrollment in online courses must be limited in order for the experience to be effective is a consequence of the labor-intensive pedagogies employed in most of today’s online courses. Student/faculty ratios of 12, 15, 20 or 25 to 1 are cited as the norm—and even those relatively low ratios are frequently accompanied by persistent complaints from faculty about increased workload.

Of course, many well-established distance learning institutions like the British Open University, SUNY Empire State College and the University of Phoenix control their costs despite low student/faculty ratios by following a different production paradigm. Courses are designed, developed and packaged by highly skilled academic teams. Students taking the courses are then “tutored” by adjuncts, who are less costly to employ than full-time faculty, in a variety of institutional configurations.

Herein lies the clue to the cost conundrum of online learning. What these nontraditional institutions have done is to reconceptualize the way in which online courses are developed and delivered. They have recognized that the more one replicates the traditional campus model, the more one’s operating costs will resemble or exceed traditional campus costs, especially if one relies on the same student/faculty “contact” as traditional models. Yet the tutoring model is only one of many techniques that can be employed.

Other online models seek to create a structure that avoids funneling all communication through the instructor. Because the Internet permits active participation by all students in every discussion, many faculty who become involved in online education feel obliged to respond to dozens of student postings each day. Alternate models are emerging that focus on student-to-student communication and do not obligate the instructor to respond to every individual contribution. Using learning teams as a primary part of the learning process, for example, is one way to engage students with one another. In this model, the instructor comments on or evaluates the results of the process, making needed adjustments as it goes along. Well-designed learning experiences that provide learners with links to external resources, whether net-based or not, also move the focus of course activity from relying on the instructor as the sole source of knowledge.

The use of computer-based assessment techniques can be part of the solution to the problem of teaching greater numbers of students online while, at the same time, improving the quality of their learning experiences. Students cannot know, without being told, what instructors believe to be the core facts and ideas needed to pass a course. Assessment instruments make those expectations explicit and allow students to assess their progress against them. Low stakes quizzes and other computer-based exercises can provide feedback to students on their progress, identifying students who are at risk at an early stage, while preparing them for formal examinations at the end of the term. The inclusion of computer-based quizzing capabilities in commercial course management systems as well as the emergence of special purpose software such as Mallard (developed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) alleviates much of the labor-intensive process of grading student assignments.
Another approach to designing more cost-effective online courses takes advantage of existing instructional software—whether commercially-produced or university-created—to eliminate much of the time faculty spend in developing and presenting content. Software that has been vetted through a collaborative process will almost inevitably be of higher quality than any single instructor can produce. Such software actively engages students in the learning process without constant demands on the instructor. Faculty can be more judicious about how they spend their time, intervening when students have questions or problems requiring more personalized attention. The use of frequently-asked-questions (FAQs) is a less sophisticated yet similar technique used by experienced faculty to respond to routine or repetitive student questions, thus enabling them to manage their time more effectively.

As we grow more experienced with online learning, we will discover still more ways to improve the experience for both students and faculty. By moving away from what Bill Massy has called the handicraft approach to teaching and taking advantage of the exciting capabilities that information technology, we can create new learning paradigms that are both effective and affordable for all of our students.

—CAT

********************************************************************************************************************

DEJA VU

Yogi Berra, the master of malapropisms, is reputed to include among his language mangling utterances, "It's deja vu all over again." Whatever its damage to the English (or French) language, it seems most appropriate to describe our current quandary regarding how to deal with teaching/learning and the online world.

It was just 20 years ago that most institutions began to break away from the propensity to develop and maintain local systems for library automation. A number of commercial efforts had begun to emerge that offered nearly all (sometimes more) the functionality of the local system. The advantages were mostly on the cost side—the outsourcing company spread the development and maintenance costs over a larger client base and was able to offer similar functionality at less cost. It took a surprisingly long time to break down the "not invented here" mentality, but ultimately the cost savings won out. There are less than the fingers-on-one-hand locally developed systems still in existence. And, most of those have been turned into commercial business ventures by the developing institution.

In the last 10 years similar question about local efforts to provide institutional administrative support systems began to arise. The question wasn't whether institutions could write and maintain such systems but rather whether or not it was cost effective to do so. Exacerbating the situation was a multi-year programming backlog and the emergence of the Net. After all, the question went, just how different are the financial systems at institution X from those at institution Y? Wouldn't it make sense to outsource the development and maintenance of such systems, leaving the local data processing staff to worry about a small number of local modifications? That way, development and maintenance costs could be defrayed over a large number of institutions, all using the same basic platform for financial reporting, or student registration, or human resources. This presented a tougher choice than the library example as institutional administrative systems were (and still are) considerably more idiosyncratic than the more mature, more standardized, library applications.

It seems safe to say that this issue has been decided as it was in the library example. Cost considerations have won out over concerns for local peculiarities. Somewhat different from the library example is that for many large institutions, the up-front cost of moving to outsource is in the tens of millions of dollars.

The locus of the argument has shifted from libraries, to administrative systems, and now to the core function of the institution—teaching and learning. The arguments are basically the same, cost vs. local idiosyncrasies. The cast of characters has, however, changed dramatically. Instead of a small community of librarians, or a still small, but somewhat larger, group of administrators, it now encompasses the entire faculty. For the greater institutional community it is no longer a back office issue, but one that strikes at the core functions of the institution.

There isn't anything like the MARC record to provide an underlying standard as there was in the library and the idiosyncrasies of teaching are personal rather than institutional. To make matters even more difficult, most of the outsourcing contenders have been in the business for barely a few years with products that are sometimes more promise than real.

We can expect to hear the same arguments proffered. The products in the market aren't able to handle this or that situation; to use them would require that we change (slightly or significantly) the way we do "business"; they can't possibly be as good as the "systems" we already have in place; we can develop whatever we need in-house cheaper, or better, or faster. Such points of view will cause the supply side to grow much faster than the demand side for several years. And, just as the administrative systems solutions were an order of magnitude more expensive than the library solutions, the teaching/learning solutions will ultimately be an order of magnitude more expensive again.

John Maynard Keynes once observed that "in the long run we are all dead." Lord Keynes notwithstanding, in the long run we will make the same choice that we did in the cases of libraries and administrative systems. Long term cost savings to the institution (and the consequent saving to the tuition payer) will win out over local idiosyncrasies of the faculty. Just as with the case for administrative systems, teaching/learning systems with the capability of local personalization will carry the field. One advantage for the early adopter, as it was in both the library and administrative systems cases, will be that the new partner can be influenced in its design and development efforts.
It is déjà vu . . . all over again. Only in this case it will appear to happen in slow motion, driven primarily by the perception of dwindling market share and competitive disadvantage, not by the cost savings.

—RCH

THE LEARNING MARKETPLACE

The Leadership Forum recently held a workshop in Atlanta called "The Learning Marketplace" attended by about 150 people. The idea was to create a venue to bring together buyers and sellers of commercial products and services that support network-based, technology-mediated learning environments. By most accounts, the event came off as we intended. We were gratified that nearly all attendees found it useful and many offered excellent suggestions for improving future sessions.

Particularly noteworthy was the observation by many that the company representatives gave presentations that were not sales pitches. (Of course, there were a few who thought that any time a company makes a presentation about its products and services, it is by definition a sales pitch.) Our goal was to help our higher education colleagues gain an understanding of this emerging marketplace and enable them to make decisions that will advantage their institutions within it.

To us, this means understanding the ways in which each company is positioning itself as it moves into the future. Some of the attendees were disappointed that we did not spend more time explicating the various features of each product or service. Because these companies seek to serve the same market, inevitably their feature sets will converge. What one company lacks today will be included in its next version if the market demands it. So features, to us, are somewhat ephemeral.

What really matters, we believe, are such questions as whether the company will be around next year (or will it be subsumed into a larger entity), with whom has it formed alliances that will enhance the value of its products and services, and whether it is committed to the concept of enterprise wide academic computing and IMS compliance as a fundamental strategy?

We intend to repeat The Learning Marketplace three times each year, moving its location from the east, to the mid-west to the west. We will announce specific dates and locations within the next month. As this market grows and changes, we anticipate greater diversity in the kinds of companies that are represented and a variety of venues that reflect the maturation of that market. Our continuing goal is to identify both market leaders and market trends that help you know that your own decisions are the right ones.

—CAT

SUBSCRIPTIONS, ARCHIVES, RE-POSTING

To subscribe to The Learning MarketSpace, click here.

Archives of The Learning MarketSpace, written by Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg and published from July 1999 – February 2003, are available here.

You are welcome to re-post The Learning MarketSpace on your intranet without charge. Material contained in The Learning MarketSpace may be reprinted with attribution for non-commercial purposes.

Copyright 1999, by Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg.