

Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs-The “3 Ts” of Course Development and Delivery of an On-Line Program in a Partnership between a Public State University and the Private Sector

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Abstract: Challenges and opportunities emerge when a partnership between a state university and a partner from the private sector seeks to provide a high quality non-licensure master’s program for teachers and other educators through the most affordable and convenient platform available. Opinions are prevalent as stakeholders speak out in regard course development and delivery. Regulatory approval must be attained for the delivery of academic programs by distance learning as opposed to the traditional face-to-face instructional delivery method.

Introduction

A debate is currently raging among personnel engaged in higher education programs regarding the use of on-line programs for delivering entire degree programs. From professors' vantage points it is a debate that seeks to clarify the efficacy of traditional instruction versus nontraditional instruction as well as issues of academic honesty. From administrators' vantage points the debate also includes survival in an economy that has and continues to be financially impacted by the reality of the virtual classroom. From students vantage points the issues of convenience, cost, and quality instruction are ones that usually emerge. While these concerns may appear to be isolated to these three stakeholder groups, it must be understood that the issues, in at least some fashion are critical to all stakeholders involved in on-line education

Many who teach in higher education programs are concerned about the efficacy of on-line delivery and the possible divisive outcomes that seem to be occurring due to the implementation of this type of instruction. Oslington (2005) indicated that a major inhibitor to on-line education "is securing cooperation of academics (p. 97)."

Most of the literature on on-line education has concentrated on learning outcomes: are they better than face-to-face teaching? What is a proper basis for comparison? If outcomes are not better, is on-line teaching nevertheless cost-effective in certain situations? Behind most of this discussion is an assumption that if the virtues of online learning can be demonstrated, then everyone will rush to implement it. This is naive. The various participants in the modern educational enterprise —academic staff, deans and heads, university presidents, administrators, students, taxpayers — will embrace on-line learning only if it is in their interests to do so. This interest or incentive problem is particularly intense for academics because (for good reasons) they have a great deal of freedom about the allocation of their time and energy among competing projects. Ideally, we would like the incentives for all the participants to be aligned, and for the strength of incentives to be proportioned to the virtues of on-line learning. This would mean that if on-line education is a good thing, then it will be embraced, and if not, then on-line education projects will not go ahead (p. 97).

Along with concerns regarding the efficacy of higher education programs are concerns in regard to academic honesty. It appears rather obvious that the focus on academic honesty is aimed at students in higher education programs completing and submitting their own work. To be more specific, the concern is that students who are not completing work in the presence of instructors are in a position to cheat...to participate in academic fraud. While this would appear to be a fairly obvious possible outcome, a limited study conducted by three professors at Arkansas State University indicated that another significant possibility of academic fraud occurs when teachers engaged in on-line learning through university programs are completing assignments when children are present in their classrooms McBride, Milligan, and Nichols (2006). If this is indeed a pervasive problem, the stakeholder group in the on-line learning debate becomes much larger.

Compton and Schock (2000) observed that "in response to tight schedules and the booming popularity of the Internet, schools throughout the United States are developing programs that allow non-traditional students to attend classes and even complete their degrees on-line...in addition to convenience, most distance learning courses don't require new or different technology than students may already own" (p. 16). This reality indicates that a major cultural change is on the horizon and is rapidly emerging.

Johns Hopkins University (2004) recognized that the use of nontraditional teaching was beneficial to students not only for convenience, but also for efficacy. They observed that students received more consistent instruction and a reduced cost when nontraditional methods were incorporated. The following characteristics were observed:

- *Less expensive.* 20% to 30% less time is required of the participant compared to a similar traditional course or in-service. This means less time away from the job for training.
- *Consistent.* All learners or participants receive the same information.
- *Motivating.* Individuals learn at their own pace, in their own way, thus enhancing their understanding of the content and improving their knowledge retention.
- *Empowering.* All individuals within an organization can have access to the same information and can participate in training without fear of embarrassment.
- *Enabling.* Performance is improved when there is a direct link to allow the learner to transfer new knowledge and skills to the job.

Greener and Perriton (2005) discussed the economic impacts of on-line programs in higher education including the reality of survival in a competitive market. The competitive market exists among universities within close geographic locations, but also globally. A major concern is that these challenges will be ignored in the

changing marketplace. Ignoring these challenges “is naïve, and runs the risks of allowing the more extreme forms of the ‘new’ economic model of networked learning to colonise discourses of democracy and student-centredness (p.67)

A Current Practice

“What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.” This 3000-year-old quote from the NIV Bible (Ecclesiastes 1:9) came to mind as the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership in the College of Education at Arkansas State University began discussions about delivering the graduate program in Educational Theory and Practice in a totally on-line format. The newly appointed vice-president for academic affairs proposed that the faculty utilize a new delivery mode via a partnership with a private entity known as Higher Education Holdings, referred to as HEH. The proposal was made in May with the goal of having the program implemented beginning with the fall semester which started in August. The online degree would consist of ten 3-semester hour courses. All courses would be delivered in five week sessions, as is typical of the regular summer terms at the university.

In 2008 faculty in the Department of Educational Leadership, Curriculum, and Special Education (ELCSE)—a department in the College of Education—agreed to utilize Higher Education Holdings (HEH) as a vendor partner to deliver a non-licensure MSE in Theory and Practice (METP) online. HEH would provide (1) technical production assistance for online delivery, (2) academic coaches to assist students and professors, and (3) marketing services.

The partnership between the university and HEH almost immediately created concern with some faculty. Some of the issues of concern included: (a) the lack of faculty to design courses without infringement upon academic freedom, (b) the commercialization of higher education, and (c) the lack of connection to students through the use of coaches to oversee students’ work. HEH proposed that faculty use a standardized format so that all classes would look similar to the students enrolled in the courses. To illustrate their point, they presented a Course Development and Delivery notebook depicting options of what a “typical” class might look like. Some faculty interpreted this to mean that their freedom to design their courses was being taken away and immediately began expressing their opposition to the partnership with HEH. Questions about academic freedom and intellectual property rights were raised. The concern seemed to be that the HEH model would be a template-driven, cookie-cutter technology that stifled faculty creativity and productivity.

Other faculty who were not directly involved in the project soon hopped aboard the opposition train arguing, much like David Noble (1998), that the partnership with a private entity was equivalent to commercialization of higher education. The fear expressed was that a faculty member would design and implement their course only to have it taken away by the university and used over and over, perhaps without their participation. Noble (1998) presented basically the same argument against using technology twelve years ago when he said, “Today faculty are falling for the same tired line, that their brilliance will be broadcast online to millions.” Some skeptical faculty members insist that what they do cannot possibly be automated, and they are right. But it will be automated anyway, whatever the loss in educational quality, because education, again, is not what all this is about. It’s about making money. In short, the new technology of education, like the automation of other industries, robs faculty of their knowledge and skills, their control over their working lives, the product of their labor, and, ultimately, their means of livelihood.” Noble was writing at a time when universities were first looking at a new platform for course delivery via the internet, WebCT, which is now owned by Blackboard.

Noble (1998) further states, “Today the universities are moving rapidly to commercialize their instructional activities in much the same way. Here the instructional process, classroom teaching, is converted into products such as a CD-ROMs, Web sites, and courseware. These products are then converted into marketable commodities by means of copyrights and licenses to distribute copyrighted instructional products. Like the commercialization of research, the commercialization of instruction entails a fundamental change in the relationship between the universities and their faculty employees. Here, faculty who used to develop and teach face-to-face courses as their primary responsibility as educators are transformed into mere producers of marketable instructional commodities, which they may or may not themselves ‘deliver.’”

Once Arkansas State faculty voiced their assent, all graduate courses had to be transformed into five-week, Internet-based courses modeled on the HEH format. However, the curricular challenges were the least of the difficulties to be faced. On-campus graduate courses usually capped enrollments at 20 students; the new target enrollment for classes run through HEH was in the hundreds.

ASU faculty members develop the courses and deliver them with the assistance of highly qualified academic coaches authorized by the ELCSE department chair. For this particular non-licensure program that is

based on the National Board Certification, academic coaches must meet the requirements that they have a master's degree, a teaching license, teaching experience, and National Board Certification.

Each coach works with students in groups of up to twenty-five. The use of coaches is not intended to insulate faculty from students but to make possible quality educational opportunities to a larger number of students. Professors work directly with coaches who have the following responsibilities:

- Monitor student participation and reach out to inactive students.
- Assist students with technology as needed.
- Provide assistance with logistical or personal issues as outlined by the Faculty prior to the course start.
- Respond to all emails within 24 hours, including weekends.
- Assist the Faculty with communications with students.
- Establish inter-rater reliability between Faculty and Lead Coaches in assessing student work.
- Facilitate asynchronous discussions according to Faculty criteria.
- Participate in weekly team meetings with the Lead Coach and/or Faculty member via conference call.
- Synthesize student assessment data for Faculty to use in determining how to further adjust their instruction.
- Facilitate a safe, comfortable online learning environment for students, and encourage students to complete the course successfully.
- Recommend grades on assignments for Faculty approval.
- Participate in ongoing professional development provided by HEH and/or University Faculty on topics related to course content, online facilitation, and job responsibilities via online learning modules.

While there was some initial resistance to using the HEH media format to implement the complete graduate degree online, five of the ten courses have been taught to date using the format without any significant negative experiences. As with anything new, minor glitches have occurred. The increase in enrollment necessitated a paradigm shift on the part of faculty and how they interacted with students. Having used a variety of strategies among the five courses delivered to date, the professors have been pleased with their ability to develop the course as they thought best. They have been pleased with the support provided by HEH. Each one has had a positive experience with the lead coach and academic coaches assisting the professor. Each faculty member has received positive feedback from students taking the courses. This process has required an open mind and the realization that there are multiple opportunities through this venue.

After completion of each course students provide feedback and an evaluation of the course. Evaluations have generally been positive, but comments in a least some of the courses indicated that students were not prepared to encounter the amount of work that was assigned. Students mostly indicated that the delivery format and organization of courses was a positive experience, but it was apparent that some either entered the program thinking there would be a diminished workload or were told by somebody representing the program that there would be a diminished workload. This simply was not the case as evidenced by comments such as "I thought this course could accommodate the life of a working professional, but I spent far more time than expected completing the week's assignments."

In conclusion, while the timeframe imposed upon the faculty to implement the online degree was almost unrealistic, the faculty rose to the occasion and created high quality classes. Despite the initial resistance, the program has been quite a success.

Two Graduate Students – Two Viewpoints

Two graduate students were interviewed in regard to their feelings about on-line instruction. Henry, a beginning principal, started in an on-line degree program and dropped out to pursue a program that blended on-line and face-to-face instruction. Yvonne completed a degree program in educational leadership that was totally face-to-face and regrets not having completed her program in an on-line format. While Henry's journey reflects the feelings of many students who were educated through more traditional means, Yvonne's story reflects the argument presented by Compton and Schock (2000) they stated that, "in response to tight schedules and the booming popularity of the Internet, schools throughout the United States are developing programs that allow non-traditional students to attend classes and even complete their degrees on-line." Furthermore "in addition to convenience, most distance learning courses don't require new or different technology than students may already own" (p. 16).

Henry's Story

I began the on-line program due to its convenience and attractive pricing that was available. I did not have a lot of experience with on-line instruction, but thought the convenience would be excellent since I have to work so many evenings. Also, I am a single parent with two boys in high school.

I soon realized that I was in over my head. The pace of the course I was taking was much too fast and I missed the interaction with other students and with the professor. I really didn't like the format. After three weeks in the program I dropped out and pursued a program that blended on-line and face-to-face instruction. It just worked better for me. I think one factor was my age. When I started in college twenty-five years ago computers hardly existed. I was not raised in the computer culture and am still uncomfortable with it. It was just too impersonal for me...and was it ever intense. Don't ever let anybody tell you that on-line courses are easier or that they require less work.

I don't know whether I am old fashioned or just plain old, but the total on-line format didn't work for me. I dropped out, lost my money and pursued a more traditional program with the same university. I am happier and the pace is easier for me. The downside is convenience. I have so many night time activities being a high school principal and the travel to and from the university is about sixty miles each way. It will be a difficult two or three years for me while I purse and finish my degree, but I am convinced that I made the right decision.

Yvonne's Story

I completed in a program of total face-to-face instruction when I received my Master's Degree and am excited about enrolling in a program that is totally on-line as I begin a postgraduate program. Aside from my regular teaching duties I contract with a virtual school as a teacher for students who have either dropped out of the traditional high school or have been removed from school. I utilize technology extensively in my traditional teaching role and in my role as a virtual school instructor.

For me the face-to-face graduate program that I completed was dull and boring. The program was delivered in my home town and I attended courses one night per week for eighteen months. It was about as convenient as I could ask for from the standpoint of not having to drive a long distance. Being the mother of two young children who are preschool age, it was still inconvenient to leave them one night per week, not to mention the cost of babysitting.

I found the courses, with the three hour lecture format to be pretty uninspiring. We were divided into work groups and I really felt as if I was the only one who really wanted to work. I ended up doing most of my group's work and it really didn't seem fair.

On the other hand, I have completed one on-line course. There was group discussion through the discussion board and I had great interaction with others in the course as well as with the professor. I worked at my pace and did most of my work when my children had gone to bed. I would sometimes work after the school day in my classroom after my students had gone home and after had prepared for my next-day instruction. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the opportunity to complete my next degree on-line. I will only be responsible for me, I won't have to hire a baby sitter, and it is a format that I am very comfortable with. Given the choice of a face-to-face program or one delivered on-line, I would pick the on-line program in a heartbeat.

Tribulations or Triumphs – Conclusions

The reality of the world of instruction changing is emerging as a global issue. Many stakeholders are involved. The stakeholders include university administrators and professors, children in the world's schools, and even venture capitalists. Each of these stakeholders has valid concerns regarding the emergence of on-line education. Most of these concerns are shared by each of the stakeholder, but some are not.

Whether or not a private sector vendor shares the multitude of stakeholder concerns is a hotly contested debate. Those teaching programs affiliated with the private vendor feel as if there is a mutual concern for the critical common issues in on-line instruction. Those who do not teach in the programs are concerned that that the

partnership is viewed more for financial considerations and less for academic considerations. The debate continues to rage with little end in sight.

For certain, on-line instruction through many outlets is a global reality. Who and how the stakeholders will be impacted appears to be fodder for continuing debate.

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