

eLearning: A HEURISTIC APPROACH TO LEARN IN THE NEW CENTURY

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This paper aims to highlight the challenges which will be faced by traditional classrooms, as universities brace themselves against an online offensive in trying to deliver classroom courses to compete with as well as combat the threat of web education, in terms of content needs.

This paper will argue that the future of the University will be on-line, and that we need to anticipate these trends if we as universities are to participate in and shape this future.

Education will turn out to be one of the biggest things on the Net, because more and more people will prefer to study from the comfort of their homes and without the mental stress which a classroom atmosphere brings as compared to online learning where the focus is increasingly going to be on knowledge rather than grades or degrees.

How does eLearning work? eLearning fits into two categories: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous eLearning imitates a classroom, which means classes take place in real-time and connect instructors and students via streaming audio or video or through a chat room. Asynchronous eLearning lets a student access prepackaged training on his own time, working at his own pace and communicating with the instructor or other students through e-mail. Some universities specialize in tailor made eLearning packages that run over a company's servers, which are designed

exclusively to the needs of the organization. Others use an application service provider model and handle everything from creating a training course to storing the information.

An estimated 100,000 courses at U.S. colleges and universities are delivered by some form of distance learning. Among the current and prospective operators of virtual classrooms are established universities located all over the US as well as in UK and Australia that want to expand their reach without expanding their physical plant. Many have already spun off for-profit Web operations such as Columbia University's Morningside Ventures or NYU Online.

This might be another factor that Universities will have to consider before they decide to jump into the fray, as an increasing number of potential online learners will like to look at the mileage they would be able to get from the courses rather than Grades or Degrees, because, as mentioned earlier this is a need based-approach to learning.

Investors are pouring millions, soon to be billions, into the online education market. Conservative figures from analysts at Thomas Weisel Partners, a merchant bank in San Francisco, estimate a \$10 billion virtual higher-ed market by 2005 and an \$11 billion corporate- learning market by the same year. That's \$21 billion from almost nothing. John Chambers, the highly esteemed chief executive officer of Cisco Systems, calls

online education the “killer app” of the Internet.

Here are some of the big players in web education. Michael Milken, his brother Lowell and Oracle’s Larry Ellison run Knowledge Universe, a venture for educational and training companies. Washington Post Co. is knee-deep in ed-ventures, including the reknowned KaplanCollege.com, which offers 500 online courses across nine professions, then there is the education billionaire John Sperling with his for profit University of Phoenix the biggest profit making eUniversity.

Shrewd investors like Allen, Ellison and Milken are getting into education because they think the field could benefit from an injection of good management practices and professional applications of multimedia techniques. They see in the Net’s interactivity a reasonable proxy for a real-life classroom, and why not as most universities have now been offering advanced courses and innumerable training sessions for both students and staff alike, as well as seminars which are definitely more interactive than real time affairs which are mundane most of the time.

In the near future, we will see a great deal of students opting for higher education through interactivity thereby reducing the traditional classroom popularity to a lower level, beyond the bachelors degree. Certainly an imaginative combination of technology and capitalism has the potential to bring much-needed edfficiency to education. As education has grown to compete technology the world over, in the past few years, it has so far resisted all efforts to improve its productivity as the instructor’s material tends to forget or ignore the real needs of the student to bring imagination and creativity into the classroom: by killing this desire to make them participate, they bury their need to pursue further education, as the thought of a classroom makes them think of long hours of

listening passively and memorizing for an endless number of hours or pages or both.

In my survey at Assumption University, with students both at the undergraduate as well as graduate school, I have found out sadly that there is not much interaction with the lecturer as against eLearning; since students are free to choose almost everything by themselves as it is their desire to learn, there is greater interaction,from higher motivational needs.

Returns for growth in knowledge, education, and skills are very high in the United States and seemingly, even higher in developing countires. All signs point to the value of education and knowledge in the new economy, nay E-economy, as my paper itself argues.

The vast imbalance between the supply and demand for quality education provides an enormous, untapped global market. By all accounts countries, companies, and individuals that don’t invest in knowledge are destined to fall behind. In most places, the only way to obtain sufficient access to a pool of skilled knowledge workers is to create that pool through education and training.

The thirst for U.S. knowledge and know-how has taken countless foreign students to its shores. Yet this is only a tiny fraction of those who could benefit from American higher education. With the Internet, higher education and technical training could well become a major U.S. export, says Andrew M.Rosenfield, chief executive of UNext, an educational Web company backed in part by Milken’s Knowledge Universe. Rosenfield’s vision for his company embraces the whole world: “Only 0.1% of the world’s population has the chance to go to Stanford or Columbia, let alone Harvard,” he says. “We’re going to focus on the other 99.9% who want quality education. Brazil, for example, has 200 million people but its college participation is under 5 %”;for every student who goes to

Harvard, there are 199 others who have the skills but not the money.

eLearning will be big, but will it be profitable? After all, the public has grown accustomed to getting information for free on the Web, like it has on network TV: so, will it be like so many dot-coms that can produce revenue but not profits?

Education is fundamentally different from consumer goods; it is not a product like the books, shoes and appliances most dot-coms offer. How is it different? Whereas most dot-coms compete in price, educators will not necessarily be required to do so. This is especially true for the business education market.

(A case in point would be my own assessment and experience at Assumption University, where hundreds of graduates from other universities register for a graduate school program, despite the fact that they will pay several thousands more than the publicly run universities. Why?)

Similarly, Corporations do not want 'free' education for their employees. They want prestige education and quality education and are willing to pay for it. Education will be one of the few areas on the Internet where the more you charge, the greater the demand will be. Doesn't everyone want to go to Harvard?"

Of course you can charge a premium only if you deliver quality and prestige. So far Internet companies have been repurposing educational material; now there is an opportunity to select excellent content and deliver it anywhere in the world.

I guess the same will apply to the context of education in Asia, as Universities will have to think of supplementing online education using multi media technology as well as integrate it with some time in the classroom in order to provide a spirit of team-based activity learning.

Can capitalism deliver quality education? Peter Drucker clearly thinks it can.

"The best online instruction is as good as the best in-class experience", he says.

A single sale to a corporate human resources department can produce hundreds or even thousands of customers, whereas consumer goods must be sold one by one to millions of customers.

Moreover, chief executives and their boards aren't likely to haggle over price in training and educational programs. There is a premium today on managers with broad outlooks, plus there is the need for technological refreshment among engineers and other specialists. At a time when it is hard for employers to retain the best people, job-enhancing education, delivered at an employee's convenience, but at company expense, can be an enormously attractive perk.

What are the advantages of eLearning?

- Teaching institutions can reach many more students without having to expand their physical plants.

- Online education is convenient (no moving, no commuting, no leaving the house even) and collaborative (students in China and Minnesota can work together on presentations).

- Time and money. Consider how much your company spends in sending people to training—airfare, hotel bills, phone calls home. eLearning eliminates costs by allowing a specialist to train an entire group anywhere in the world without leaving the office. It also offers more accessibility to the instructor and more flexibility for the student.

- With its vast bag of technological tricks, the web can offer a multimedia approach potentially equal to the best-equipped classrooms in the world. Globally, those conveniences have even greater effect, particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America, where more than two thirds of citizens are under 20 years old.

- Although web education is still in its infancy, teachers seeking to boost their technology skills can choose from a growing variety of online offerings ranging from intensive skill boosting courses to labor-intensive master's degrees.

- As more and more data become available digitally on the Internet, the importance of the Internet-based resources for academic research would increase significantly.

- Internet and other telecommunication systems open a new era in academic research. Thanks to the Internet, research sources are added with a huge amount of fast processible data that is easily accessible, no matter where research is being undertaken, (national boundaries, languages or cultures do not separate the "virtual community").

What are the challenges?

- Executive recruiters and senior managers voiced concerns about whether an online degree was really the full equivalent of the in-person kind. This is not because they doubt that the work is as demanding (it generally is) but because half the value of a traditional MBA lies in face-to-face discussions that spark ideas and build team-leadership and negotiating skills, besides nurturing inter personal communication skills.

- There is still doubt on whether you can get the same quality of experience in a virtual classroom.

- eLearning tends to isolate students physically, which can have negative effects on team building and sociability. Students with an aptitude for verbal expression may suffer in the virtual classroom. Those who feel shy about speaking up in a lecture hall may be more likely to ask their questions in this environment.

- Employees having to learn on their own time may tend to be slow as there is no deadline to complete.

- Generally speaking, it is still impossible to conduct a comprehensive academic research in education using the Internet resources only.

- Using the Internet as a source for academic research might cause a set of problems; for instance: "searching" replaces reading. It is possible for the Internet users to extract just "pieces of information" found with the keywords instead of getting "the whole picture" by reading a book or an article.

- Compilation instead of thinking and analyzing. "Pieces of information" downloaded from the Internet can be successfully combined in a readable, scholarly looking file. In this case, thinking, analysing, interpreting, sensing, judging and evaluating, the basic human skills do not have precedence or preference.

However, the Internet resources should be considered as an important source of additional information in the chosen field of study. In some cases, those resources should be given a preference compared to printed materials because they can be accessed and searched fast and easily; this access is usually unlimited, in terms of time and space; digital format of the Internet resources allows to better utilize huge amounts of data and to create a personal electronic database; they can serve as interactive research tools in forms of information exchange and collaborative projects.

The conventional classroom must be flexible enough to be a traditional lecture hall, a circular conference room, a computer lab, a library, the global discussion room and back to the individual brain using both synchronous and asynchronous models of learning, including group discussions and analysis.

Educators, business and political leaders must work together to make sure that quality education is not compromised too much by greed, ignorance or incompetent academicians.

Eleven decades of education: where is the Thai curriculum today?

A close examination of the Thai education system reveals that the curriculum in schools is in gross disarray; consider some of these distinct inequalities which exist in the land of smiles.

Thailand has one of the highest income imbalances in the world with the Prime Minister's net worth set to be in excess of U.S \$ 1.1 billion or about 45 thousand million baht making him one of the richest in the world as against a large part of people in the northern parts of Thailand who live way below the poverty line. This income imbalance shows the vast social, educational and cultural divide with the onus on this man to redress the issue. It would be interesting to note here that three of the world's richest people have a net wealth which is equal to that of seventy small nations with a total population of 660 million people, with Thailand and its rich Prime Minister lending validity.

What should Thailand do now?

Narrowing this socio cultural gap through the use of technology and improved standards of education needs to be top priority and who else other than the Prime Minister himself would be more aware of this? With his education in the US and a thorough understanding of technology and its rapid change he needs to be spending more time to change the education system from its grass root level.

1. Education should be the key to sustain economic growth, eradicate poverty and alleviate the standards of the people. No country has succeeded without educating its people; Thailand is a case in point. The government therefore needs to place education on top of all its priorities, and recognise eLearning.

2. The Thai curriculum should be focusing more in imparting knowledge through English education, help learners to

think in order to prepare them for a globalized world which is increasingly dominated by the use of Information and Communication Technology oriented economies.

3. Most people in Thailand work for about 14 hours a day 7 days a week while in most other countries it is for 8 hours, 5 days a week, which makes me feel that this imbalance is the result of a poorly managed education system where quality education is both lacking and unaffordable to the masses.

With today's eLearning, companies can train salespeople to use a new product, even if offices are in scattered locations. On the academic front, eLearning allows people to take online classes from universities in a variety of subjects. Such heavyweights as Stanford and Harvard now offer nondegree courses over the Web; others offer entire degree as well as graduate and doctoral programs entirely online.

Conclusion

A university which evolves and adapts itself to an ever changing environment, stands a better chance of survival, particularly in a world we cannot hope to control; the global village, poses more threats to traditional educational institutions than other organizations as there is wider access now to people through the internet and its sibling eLearning and they have to re-invent themselves if they are to survive into the next millennium.

In an upwardly mobile, fast-changing world, better known as the knowledge economy, education is becoming a lifelong activity for ambitious people. With its vast interactivity and multimedia capabilities, the Web is by far the most efficient means of delivering this valuable but intangible product. B2C is yesterday's story. Education-to-business (E2B) and education-to-consumers (E2C) is this century's story.

(Feedback, questions and comments are welcome. Email me at : Rsrinath@au.edu)