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The Evolution of Online Education at a Small Northern Ontario University: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

One of the major influences on university education in Ontario is the growing use of Internet technologies. These new technologies have led faculty and learning experts at universities to talk about online and technology-enhanced learning with a fervour not often found on most campuses. Among other things, these discussions have challenged well-known understandings of what has historically been called distance education.

In this paper, we examine a cross-section of publications on distance and online education and reflect on our professional experiences in relation to the evolution of a teaching and learning centre in our small university in northern Ontario. In addition to supporting the teaching and learning needs of an on-campus community, our Centre oversees the development and delivery of online courses for students at a distance from the physical campus. Within the context of this Centre, we represent the Academic Director and a faculty member completing doctoral studies on technology-enabled learning in the United Kingdom.

As a conclusion, we propose that the geographical distance and possible isolation of northern Ontario can be considerably reduced through online education and that it is no longer appropriate to speak about distance education. As Wenger (2004) suggests, many remote and rural communities as well as individual learners in these communities can access information and even gain inspiration from online educational experiences. To achieve this, faculty continue to require resources including pedagogical supports, mentorship, and also inspiration to capitalize on the potential and opportunity of online models and strategies.

Résumé

Une des influences majeures sur l'enseignement universitaire en Ontario est l'utilisation croissante des technologies en ligne. Ces nouvelles technologies ont amené les enseignants et les experts en apprentissage dans les universités à discuter de l'apprentissage en ligne et de l'apprentissage amélioré par la technologie avec une ferveur rarement rencontrée sur d'autres campus. Ces discussions ont notamment remis en question certains préceptes bien établis sur ce qu'on a, historiquement, défini comme étant de l'apprentissage à distance.

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Dans cette étude, nous faisons une analyse transversale de publications portant sur l'éducation à distance et l'apprentissage en ligne et proposons une réflexion sur nos expériences professionnelles en lien avec l'évolution d'un centre d'enseignement et d'apprentissage dans notre petite université située dans le nord de l'Ontario. En plus de soutenir la communauté se trouvant sur le campus au plan de ses besoins relatifs à l'enseignement et l'apprentissage, notre Centre supervise le développement et la dispensation des cours en ligne pour les étudiants qui sont éloignés du campus physique. Dans le contexte de ce Centre, nous représentons le Directeur universitaire (*Academic Director*) et un membre du personnel enseignant faisant des études doctorales sur l'apprentissage habilité par les technologies au Royaume-Uni.

En terminant, nous proposons que la distance ainsi que le possible isolement géographique du nord de l'Ontario puissent être considérablement réduits par l'éducation en ligne et qu'il ne soit plus approprié de parler d'éducation à distance. Comme le suggère Wenger (2004), de nombreuses communautés éloignées et rurales, de même que des étudiants individuels dans ces communautés peuvent puiser des informations et même de l'inspiration à partir d'expériences d'apprentissage en ligne. Pour ce faire, les corps enseignants ont toujours besoin de ressources, incluant le soutien pédagogique, le mentorat, et même de l'inspiration pour profiter au maximum des opportunités et du potentiel offerts par les modèles et les stratégies d'enseignement en ligne.

Introduction

Information and communication technologies connect people, places, and ideas in ways that have redefined our understandings of time and space. As many of us in higher education institutions struggle to harness the power of these technologies, boundaries between regions, nations, and institutions themselves have blurred because of these same technologies (McIntosh & Varoglu, 2005; Steeples & Jones, 2001). In universities in particular, teaching and learning methods and social structures have also been dramatically affected.

While the benefits of educational technologies are significant, their challenges are equally real. Understanding the terminology is one such challenge. The recently coined term blended learning demonstrates this point. For many educators, the use of a text-based asynchronous technology in combination with a face-to-face learning experience is blended learning. For others, blended learning is more in keeping with the view held by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) who underscore its transformative potential. According to Garrison and Kanuka, the online portion of the blended learning experience enables connectedness with a larger community of learners through anytime and anywhere tools.

At the heart of this paper is the term distance education and related practices. Both the concept and strategies of distance education today generate confusion due, in part, to the recent evolution of online learning environments. With a history of serving learners unable to attend the physical campus of a university for more than two centuries (Bell & Tight, 1993), distance education, from a historical perspective, has embraced practices that fall outside those used by the mainstream of the academy. Because of this history and practice orientation, some critics view distance education as an alternate and lesser teaching and learning experience. Moreover, because online technologies are the cornerstone of many contemporary distance courses and programs, online education has likewise been criticized.

The critics do not appear to have considered that online methods have fundamentally abolished the concept of geographical distance. Whether the distance has been taken out of distance education remains a matter of contentious debate although some will argue that distance has been irrelevant for some time (Cairncross, 1997). For some, distance education remains a distinct niche market (Fisher, 2009). Perhaps it may be better stated that the distance factor has merely been modified.

The aforementioned language discrepancies and evolving notions of distance can result in misunderstandings and pedagogical tensions for today's university faculty. Adding to these strains are an awareness of and sensitivity about the fact not all students are technologically privileged.

Many higher education institutions are experiencing these phenomena.

Because online education methods can serve students who live near and far from the university campus; the supports for instructors no longer divide neatly into face to face and distance supports; and our university is immersed in determining the right mix of supports for instructors, this paper explores the following three areas:

- The influence of distance education models on contemporary university teaching including online teaching
- Philosophy and methods in the context of serving learners at a physical distance from the university
- The relationship between technology and pedagogy in online education

Exploration of these topics is based on a limited selection of Canadian and British literature. Each topic area is considered separately; a discussion of findings in the context of our university is presented in the latter part of the paper.

A Consideration of Select Literature

The following pages present findings and observations in relation to the three topics noted above. This review serves two main purposes: first, it grounds the reader generally in relevant findings and viewpoints; second, this review work positions the discussion of our university's recent experiences with online learning with a focus on strengths, challenges and opportunities.

Distance Education Models and University Teaching including Online Teaching

This first topic considers how distance education models and recent advances in educational technology have affected university teaching and learning practice. These practices include approaches called blended learning, flexible learning, and virtual learning, all of which are generally understood to involve some component of online learning.

A basic understanding of the identity of distance education is a valuable starting point for this discussion. According to Shale (1990), distance education has always struggled to define its identity. While Shale asserts that distance education claims an existence involving physical separation between the teacher and the student, he further argues that "it [distance education] cannot define itself" (p. 333).

If distance education did not possess a clear identity in 1990, achieving a distinctive identity in 2012 is an even more daunting task. Complicating this identity are the easy availability of large quantities of information, the rapid development of new online technologies, and meanings of space and time that simply did not exist as recently as 1990. The outcome is tremendous pressure on institutions to become increasingly flexible in how they think about time, place, instructional pace, delivery methods, and learner entry (Fisher, 2009). According to Bates (2008), distance has become something psychological and/or social rather than geographical. For example, a student who lives physically in China may enjoy learning relationships and interactions with classmates and instructor in Canada through online strategies. Likewise, a student enrolled in an online course may actually live in the same community as the university (Carter, 2008a, b; Carter & Rukholm, 2008).

Distance education and, in turn, online education have been discussed from a variety of perspectives including the concept of transactional distance (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009). Transactional distance emphasizes the role of context in learning design and learning as a function of experience. Extrapolating from these ideas, there is evidence that the separation between the teacher and the learner typically found in early distance education programs can be minimized through online technologies and strategies. Therefore, when transactional distance is the framework for understanding an online experience, the focus is again something psychological rather than geographical.

Serving Learners at a Physical Distance from the Campus: Philosophy or Method?

As previously noted, Bates (2005) and Fisher (2009) have highlighted the transformed nature of time and distance in the context of online learning. While, in 2012, distance is largely regarded to be something different from physical separateness, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) claim that the term distance education is not redundant. According to these experts, there is still a need to speak about distance education since it involves unique pedagogical principles and practices.

Distance education practice, according to Bates (2005), is less a philosophy and more a method of education. In other words, distance education provides the opportunity to study on the student's own time and in locations of personal choice. At the same time, implementation of technology within this

method has the potential to change the form of the environment and the act of teaching and learning. As Benson and Samarawickrema point out, "[t]here may be important implications that emerge from aspects of separation, depending on whether students are studying primarily on-campus, off-campus, trans-nationally, or in specific contexts such as the home, the workplace, fieldwork locations, or other places made possible by mobile learning technologies" (p. 5).

The catchment area for our university is geographically large. The conundrum, based on the opportunities for interaction and community in online education, is whether or not to call serving students who live 500 kilometres from the campus distance education. We also recognize that removing the notion of distance from the distance education equation represents, for some, a challenge to traditional conceptualizations of space and location (Edwards & Usher, 2011); further, removing distance can confuse key stakeholders, notably instructors and students. Students as well as teachers may behave differently than they would in a face to face classroom.

The Relationship between Technology and Pedagogy in Online Education

Programs involving physical separation between teachers and students are best positioned if they are constructed around pedagogies that reflect the changing realities of 21st century learners and technological advances. One pedagogical option that makes sense in today's educational landscape involves distinctions based on levels of connectedness. Consider the following idea taken from a 1996 description of distance education: "there are opportunities for two-way communication and a quasi-permanent separation of the teacher from the learner; there is use of technical media; and there is a quasi-permanent absence of the learning group, with a focus on individuals" (Keegan). Although framed in 1996, many of these same characteristics are hallmarks of online learning today as an experience grounded in collaboration, community, and connectedness (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

McIntosh and Vargolu (2005) propose that, when institutions "buy into" a collaborative model of education, they are making decisions about teaching and learning. They are choosing methods that support synchronous and asynchronous interactions as well as individualized learning. Theoretically, this approach enables institutions to reach large numbers of students and thus achieve larger economies of scale (Daniel, 1998) while also responding to the special needs of individual learners (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005).

The practice and pedagogy of lifelong learning is a further important variable in this discussion. More than ever before, we are required to continue to develop skills and knowledge to stay competitive in an information-based society (Schuetze & Slowey, 2000). Advances in educational theory including social-constructivism and changing workplace demands require us to pursue constant upgrading and learning. Additionally, the general consensus is that today's lifelong learner should not be encumbered by traditional modes of teaching, time constraints, mobility issues, and the financial demands of traditional degree programs. In this climate, the flexibility of "online" is a valued commodity and the knowledge experience is community based.

The online approach to knowledge production is markedly different from other conceptualizations of knowledge creation in higher education. In days past, teams of disciplinary experts produced knowledge and acted as gatekeepers of it. Today, this understanding of teaching and learning is undergoing evolution; teaching and learning are now experiences of engagement and community.

Anderson and Dron (2011) suggest that distance education is a historically situated technical-social construct derived from specific epistemological roots, development models, and technologies. Today, based on the need for education to span geographic and now temporal notions of "distance," there is a trend to identify different generations of distance education based on technology. This technologically deterministic view, however, does not address pedagogy which, according to Anderson and Dron, needs to holds superior value in the learning experience.

According to Anderson and Dron (2011), the pedagogy that drives modern distance education, including online education, is connectivist pedagogy. This pedagogy is defined as a process of building networks of information, contacts, and resources applicable to real problems. A key assumption is that ubiquitous access to networked technologies exists. The need to build and maintain flexible networked connections is vital, as is the need to access vast amounts of information. The learner's role is not to memorize information but to possess the competence to find and apply information when and where needed. Notably, connectivist pedagogy challenges those in higher education to develop heightened sensitivity to the types of skills and training required by the 21st century lifelong learner. It may, therefore, offer a glimpse into the future.

Discussion

At this point, our purpose is to consider the experience of our small northern university in its development of a teaching and learning centre with particular expertise in online teaching and learning. To appreciate this experience, a little history is helpful. The roots of our university reach back more than 100 years as an institution dedicated to the preparation of elementary and secondary school teachers. In 1992, it received its charter as an independent university and continues to be a primarily undergraduate university with a reputation for excellence in teacher education, the arts, science, and professional programs including business and nursing. By reputation, the university is known as a high quality academic environment that is student-focused. Engagement is a point of pride, and the university scores well on national student engagement measures. As support for this claim, in the Canadian University Report (2010) published in Canada's *The Globe and Mail*, the university was first or tied for first among all participating small universities (enrolment between 4,000 and 10,000 students) in seven categories. In categories focused on teaching and learning, the university did particularly well with the following scores: Quality of Teaching and Learning (A-), Instructors' teaching style (A-), Student-faculty interaction (A), and Class size (A+). Clearly, commitment to high levels of faculty-student interaction in a small collegial setting is the university's strong suit.

Over the last five years, the university, like many other universities in Ontario, has existed in a highly competitive environment. In an effort to serve new markets as well as support students living in northern Ontario and other parts of its catchment area, the university, in its 2010 strategic plan, declared a commitment to technology-supported learning including online learning and the aforementioned teaching and learning centre.

Respecting that the teaching and learning centre is still in its early days, there have been challenges. Two principal phenomena have emerged: concern that online education can be a lesser educational experience and a hesitation by some faculty to connect with and use existing teaching supports. Notable is the evidence that teaching supports are important in post-secondary settings (Carter, & Brockerhoff-Macdonald, 2011). These circumstances have resulted in some internal soul searching in terms of how the Centre can better connect with the faculty it is designed to serve.

As suggested earlier in this paper, the association of online education with traditional forms and models of distance education may influence the acceptance of online education. Additionally, some faculty members still require significant levels of mentoring and the opportunity for successful experiences within well designed and thoughtfully delivered courses. Thus, while the university champions a tradition of engagement with learners and philosophies of learner-centeredness and constructivism, there is work to be done to demonstrate that these same values can be achieved in the online setting.

The university's northern location is also significant to this discussion. While there is some interest in the possibilities of blended learning, there is some hesitation to use fully online methods with students living in rural and remote locations. Clearly, face-to-face classrooms with their physical interactions are incredibly valuable. The challenge is to replicate such interactions through online means when the student's ability to relocate is not possible.

These complexities may be tied to design and delivery issues that enhanced infrastructure and resources may be able to address. Such resources include new and improved technologies. As important, however, is a need for passionate individuals who want to diversify their teaching strategies and who are willing to bridge any knowledge and skill gaps they may have.

Further, whether we consider distance and online education to be philosophies or methods or niche experiences, both represent commitment to meet the learning needs of students (Bates, 2005; Fisher, 2009). Moreover, there is little denying that today's university students live in communities near and far from the university base and often have busy personal and professional lives (Carter & Rukholm, 2008). Today, time is as much a complicating factor as geography in the lives of students.

The reluctance of some faculty to access the supports of the Centre may be due to a wide variety of variables, including the challenge of finding time to access resources and explore alternate modes of teaching. It is also plausible that, as the technological affordances and infrastructure within the university evolves, so, too, will the desire to embrace online and other forms of technology-supported teaching and learning. As well, our university does have a long and established history in educational excellence. Hence, if the Centre is perceived as the hub for online education, it is possible that those who are not comfortable with technology may not access it as frequently as they might otherwise. The trick, then, is in getting the balance right.

Although there are some pockets with challenges, there are likewise many pockets of unique online success at our university. Enrolments in online courses continue to grow at an annual rate of 20%. Previously, online courses occurred mainly in our professional schools. Now there are online course

developments occurring in all faculties.

Programmatically, the university has launched an online bridging program for registered practical nurses in Ontario; its success is exceptional with more than 100 students in the program at the time of writing this paper, versus some 20 students in the first cohort of the program less than two years ago. Our Master of Education program is fully online with courses filled to capacity, versus lesser numbers in the same courses offered face-to-face. Online programs in the School of Business continue to grow, too. These programs involve partnerships with several Ontario community colleges as well as an exclusively online commerce degree for other students.

Ongoing conversations and a proposal are underway within our Schulich School of Education. The goal is to ensure that pre-service teachers benefit from mentorship and successful online teaching and learning experiences. The proposal will ensure that entry-to-practice teachers are appropriately positioned to handle the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities that online contexts offer.

Additionally, there is a distinct growth on the campus in the area of blended learning. More and more professors teaching on campus are complementing their classes with course sites, while other teachers are exploring the use of mobile devices in their classes. One example is the iLearn project, which involves the use of iPads in the School of Business. In addition to providing technical expertise, our teaching and learning centre is playing a key role in the instructional choices made by instructors as well as in evaluating this important pilot. Other research and scholarship, including a study called Meaningful e-Learning, is occurring at the university.

Conclusion

As a leader in education over time, our university is well positioned to move forward and embrace the demands and expectations of a new educational world. Being small can be an advantage. First, our smallness may support educational change and facilitate integration of emerging technologies with learning more quickly and more efficiently than might otherwise occur in larger institutions. Second, intimacy and engagement are values that the university holds above many others. This understanding of learning as a social and emotional experience holds promise, we suggest, for educational experiences rooted in connectedness and inclusion, regardless of physical distance, time zones, busy lives, and increasingly sophisticated technologies. The future is bright at our university for thinking about and "doing" online education in ways that are meaningful and effective.

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