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Designing Successful Online Courses: Know and Respond to your Learners' Needs

Issue at-hand

Just as it is important to make conventional face-to-face teaching and learning processes engaging and learner-centered, online learning requires also a great level of care in its design to make it attractive, fun and ultimately effective. There seems to be a common agreement that online learners are more demanding and focused than their classroom counterparts. Most of them are very busy people with very tight and demanding schedules. They are either professionals trying to acquire specific skills to advance their careers or at-home parents raising their children while preparing for re-entry into the job market once they are finished. Others are entrepreneurs looking to acquire new competencies and knowledge in a specific area of business they are engaged in or interested in pursuing. But even that is changing. Researchers are now discovering that due to globalization, the scope of the online learner population has shifted from "*a homogeneous profile of mostly adult, mostly employed, place-bound, goal-oriented, and intrinsically motivated to one that is heterogeneous, younger, dynamic, and responsive to rapid technological innovations*" (Dabbagh, 2007). Another thing that has changed as well is the notion of the independent distance learner in her or his corner studying in isolation from others. The trend now is towards socially mediated online learning activities whereby a learner is a member of a network of learners or a community of practice (CoP) in which social interaction and collaboration are the norms.

This diversity of learner characteristics and shifts in paradigms have pedagogical implications for curriculum developers and lecturers/instructors dispensing online courses. It is thus

important for institutions and their faculty to determine the characteristics and educational needs of learners as this could help them (a) understand the profile of the learners enrolling in online courses (b) identify the factors behind the motivation of the learners and (c) anticipate potential challenges that could prevent some of the learners to successfully complete the courses. It is assumed that once equipped with this knowledge, administrators, lecturers and instructional material designers could provide the most engaging, fun and adapted learning experiences to their learners.

Policy Recommendations: (i) identifying the learners' profiles by putting in place an Online Learning Management and Information Systems (OLMIS) and (ii) enhance online learning and maintain engagement

Identifying learners' profiles

An Education Management Information System (EMIS) is in general a very good resource in many ways. It makes institutions more intelligent as it systematizes data collection and analysis in order to make administrative planning and decision-making much easier and effective. With the advent of ODeL, it is now about time to introduce the notion of Online Learning Management and Information Systems (OLMIS) as an important tool for guiding institutions, online instructional material designers and lecturers to custom tailor their courses and learning materials to the characteristics and needs of specific groups of students. This implies that in addition to the other quantitative statistics that are collected, more qualitative data is needed to effectively provide information on the motivation, aptitudes, learning styles and preferences of learners, etc. Therefore, it is recommended that specific tools for data collection on online learning and learners be developed. Traditional instruments such as surveys, research, focus group and individual interviews should be revisited and adapted to that effect.

Pappas (2014) recommends **5 ways of assessing needs and wants of learners**: (i) **surveying the core eLearning Course audience to determine prior knowledge**. This he says will allow an instructor to become aware of the learners' prior knowledge and their educational status; (ii) **gaining a clear understanding of expectations through eLearning Course audience feedback**. Knowing the expectations of learners beforehand helps the design of courses that are relevant and meet the goals set out by the learners or in other words their motivation for joining the course; (iii) **measuring current skills vs. desired Skills**. This is achieved through a survey or a test or an exam to gauge the learners' knowledge and skills set before taking the course; (iv) **determining the audience's interest in the topics being explored.** This is essential as it will give an idea of how interested learners are in the course provided and how engage they will be with it. This can be achieved through a short module introducing the elements of the course and the types of skills and competencies they will acquire. A feedback on the importance of the course

is then elicited through a quiz or a discussion with the learners; (v) **determine the real world applications of your eLearning Course.** eLearning courses have a better chance of being popular if they offer competencies and skills that are relevant to the societal needs and demands of labor markets. It is recommended that assessing the relevance of eLearning courses should be achieved through surveys, observations and company analysis (for companies that promote online learning for its employees).

Enhance online learning and maintain engagement

With regard to enhancing online learning and maintaining learners' engagement, it is important to use a dynamic design instead of a static one. This is done by giving an eLearning course character and personality. Pappas (2014) states that "*If your learners are met with an abundance of text boxes and poorly created graphics when they access your eLearning course, boredom will probably prevent them from becoming active participants. On the other hand, if you create emotionally-centered stories, gripping images, background audio, and relatable characters, you've achieved a whole new level of eLearning course design*". He goes on to say that giving "*a face, a cohesive theme, and a personality that elicits emotion within one's learners to an online course*" is key to making an online learning engaging and effective. Among other tips for enhancing online learning provided by Pappas are the following: (i) adding in a healthy dose of unpredictability by including presentations that have touches of humor or graphics that are thought provoking and (ii) connecting with learners by reaching out to them and getting useful feedback that could be used to revise the curriculum.

As indicated above, the notion of the isolated online learner is giving way to virtual communities of learners that are connected through social media. Therefore, it is important to integrate social media tools (Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, etc.) to facilitate connection/interaction between learners.

Recommendations

The recommendations go to the leadership of institutions and eLearning course designers.

At the level of institutions:

- It is essential to provide resources to set up OLMIS and train curriculum developers and instructors in dynamic course design.

- Showcase results on the evolution of enrolments in the eLearning courses and publish the feedback received from learners

For the eLearning course designers:

- **Enhance Student learning** through browser-based technologies such as Google apps and Google+communities. These are powerful tools for enabling staff and students to collaborate with one another. They provide a seamless learning environment that extends education beyond the classroom, allowing tutors to share information and feedback at all times.

- **Engage staff and students by using** alongside Google apps and other platforms Smore,VideoScribe, Piktocart and Popplet are great ways to communicate with people across the college's community – from creating an online wall for posting feedback during an event to sending out promotional flyers.

- **Using social media** : Google apps and Google+ communities, as well as social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram also provide an effective way of sharing college news and delivering messages.

The references below will provide more tips on dynamic course design and ways of engaging learners.

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Beyond Technological, Language and Cultural Barriers
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