

# Virtual Learning: A Strategic Tool for Exploration and Discovery Beyond Just Course Completion

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**Abstract**—As more educational institutions move from the traditional classroom setting to a more high-tech learning environment with a use of a Learning Management Software (LMS), changes need to be realized in the different changes in the learning needs of adult learners, as well as the overall educational goals. While many adult learners have a variety of learning needs and wants, the educational system in many countries has been slow in changing. However, with the onset of virtual (online) learning, many educational institutions have realized that educational needs for students, business, industry, as well as cultural factors have changed. In today's learning environment, learners have an immediate need for education, but they also need to plan for their educational goals beyond the completion of the course or program of study. Thus, this paper will address the changes in the learning environment, changes for the adult learner and industry, and changes in overall educational goals and those involved in the educational process.

*Keywords*-virtual learning, strategic teaching tool, lifelong learning, adult learning, online learning

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education has been evolving since the days of Socrates, but some educators have continued to cling on the Socratic method of teaching with no open mind for changes or enhancements. What does this say to our system of education and our future minds if there are not changes, updates or even minor modifications? This paper will help to explore how education has been changing as a result of the technological evolution brought about by the use of personal computers, as well as the innovative and creative approaches and strategies that forward thinkers in the field of virtual (online) learning have presented to the academic community. For the purposes of this paper virtual learning and online learning will be used interchangeably, meaning the same line of thinking but offering a difference of terms used in the industry in various educational institutions which incorporates the use of learning management systems (LMS) in order to provide such virtual learning.

While one can ponder the history of education and how it has slowly progressed due to the "control" of certain authorities in government, education, and society, the key aim of this paper will be to provide a quick update on brief historical changes as the paper moves towards discussing today's actual teaching practices. In fact, the foundation of this paper will be focused on virtual learning and its impact on

education and the adult learner. Specifically, key segments of this paper will help to build up an argument to demonstrate how current best practices in virtual learning can be applied not only in the virtual learning environment, but also in the Face-to-Face (F2F) physical learning environment (since some people still want to be in a physical classroom for instruction). The next section will provide a brief overview of what is online learning and its role and function in today's education of adult learners.

## II. THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE LEARNING

In the following section, online learning will be viewed in the context of what it can help to provide to the adult learner in terms of immediate and future needs. This section will address this area briefly as more development of this topic will help provide an enriched background for the reader to understand how virtual learning has been changing the field of education. Thus, more summarization of this topic will be provided towards the end of the paper.

A new type of student population has emerged in today's academic environment, one that has more drive, commitment, and focus on his or her educational pursuits. The student is older, with more work and life experiences, and wants to gain more value for their educational pursuits. In juxtaposition, the traditional student image of higher learning has varied from country to country, we are seeing changes in the typical student as a result of the impact of Internet. The traditional "student body" image has changed quite a bit with the use of online communities in the online learning environment. In particular with the fields of business and management, academicians and professional staff have noticed the demographical changes of this student population. Specifically, online students are not the same as traditional students seen in classrooms in previous years, but rather they reflect a vast array of cultural differences and needs that require educational institutions to build "new learning paths" towards the creation of online learning communities.

The number of students taking at least one online course continues to expand at a rate far in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments. The most recent estimate, for fall 2007, places this number at 3.94 million online students, an increase of 12.9 percent over fall 2006. The number of online students has more than doubled in the five years since the first Sloan survey on online learning. The growth from 1.6 million students taking at least one online course in fall 2002 to the 3.94 million for fall 2007 represents

a compound annual growth rate of 19.7 percent. The overall higher education student body has grown at an annual rate of around 1.6 percent during this same period (from 16.6 million in Fall 2002 to 18.0 million for Fall 2007 - Projections of Education Statistics to 2017, National Center for Education Statistics). As the following table illustrates, over one-fifth of all higher education students are now taking at least one online course. [1]

Both online and traditional instructors have been affected by the impact of economic crises at home and abroad. Students have been moving away from traveling to far away educational institutions, and rather opting for online courses. Thus, more educational institutions have seen an increase in their student populations, as well as a growing dilemma of lack of physical classroom space. This means that there is now even a greater need for additional online offerings than ever before. What this has resulted in is a growing online student population, need for additional online (trained) instructors, and additional technology (which needs to be updated regularly – not when budgets dictate). As the need grows for more courses, more teachers are realizing that online learning is not just for the students, as much as it is another way for them to use their teaching skills and be paid for their content knowledge and experience.

As more students enroll with online course, academics, curriculum designers, and professional staff have to consider what is the next step after taking online learning -- the world of work. Now is the time for academics and members of the business community to come together to start a dialogue to find out what each of them need to do to best serve today's students and tomorrow's workforce. Since the academic learning environment does different from its corporate counterpart, both industry and education need to start forming partnerships to share information and learn what each other is doing or can do. Even though online learning has been the focal point in the academic setting, there are many companies and organizations interesting in learning more about this new type of learning and how it can benefit them and their employees. Along this same line of thinking, companies are focusing towards more employee development and retaining more the knowledge gained daily by their employees in the form of knowledge management.

Thus, many companies are now focus on learning and knowledge management in terms of helping to develop themselves as learning organizations. As a result, educational institutions need to realize this trend and perhaps adapt their various curricula to help meet the needs of these organizations and their employees, but also as a way to market and perhaps attract more adult learners. Thompson (1995) stated that "organizational learning involves the acquisition of new information and the ability to analyze that information creatively, learn from it, and apply that learning in useful ways." [2] Thus, more companies are waking up to the fact that they need to "capture" and "utilize" this type of learning.

### III. IMPACT OF ONLINE LEARNING FOR FUTURE CAREER DEVELOPMENT

This paper has overviewed the impact of online learning in both the academic and business settings, but the key thrust of the paper will focus now on the student and future career

development. As noted earlier, there is a growing trends now for companies in becoming learning organizations and develop better recordkeeping in terms of events, lessons learned, and best practices in the creation of their own knowledge management systems.

Sokolowska (2006) noted that "if we look at learning organizations we can see two types of trends . . . such organizations are understood in dynamic organizational categories that are oriented at their development, searches for new chances on the market and continually increases their effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility. The second group of learning organizations consists of such entities that choose growth through development of their employees." [3] Further, as companies and education consider the impact of online learning and learning organizations, the key area for concern and evaluation will be are of core competencies, as well as being innovative. InCaS (2010) stated that "Market-oriented innovation, transparent structures as well as a strategic development of core competencies are therefore essential preconditions for sustainable growth and future competitiveness. Intellectual Capital (IC) forms the basis for high quality products and services as well as for organizational innovations. So far, conventional management instruments and balance sheets do not cover the systematic management of IC." [4] As more people look at their core competences, they might take a closer look at the learning needs of their employees and how they need to change their training approaches. Finally, Sokolowska (2006) commented that if we look at learning organizations we can see two types of trends. She stated that "such organizations are understood in dynamic organizational categories that are oriented at their development, searches for new chances on the market and continually increases their effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility. The second group of learning organizations consists of such entities that choose growth through development of their employees." [5] As they consider the possibility of online learning, they are notice that the numbers in this industry are changing. In some cases, they become so interested in where this particular segment of industry is going, they even develop their own corporate university.

Greer (2010) noted that "Online college education is expanding—rapidly. More than 4.6 million college students were taking at least one online course at the start of the 2008-2009 school year. That's more than 1 in 4 college students, and it's a 17 percent increase from 2007." [6] In 2006, 38 states in the United States have established state-led online learning programs, policies regulating online learning, or both. Also, 25 states have state-led online learning programs, and 18 states are home to a total of 147 virtual charter schools serving over 65,000 students. [7] In 2001, 56% of traditional learning institutions offered distance learning programs. An additional 12% of schools stated they planned on adding distance learning programs to their curriculum within the next three years. [8] Consequently, more universities are investing heavily into more online teacher training and technology in order to compete with others entering into this field. While this happening quite fast for many people and organizations, there are other factors, such as economics, cultures, and learning in general that are being affected by changing technology and needs for change in education and business

overall.

#### IV. ECONOMIES, CULTURES, AND LEARNING CHANGES

As students take online courses, they are becoming more aware of changes in overall global communities and economies throughout the world. No longer is a student limited to taking courses only in their own local area, they can enroll in courses being offered in other countries, time zones, and different political systems. As a result, many businesses are starting to investigate and invest in this new type of technology, and there appears to be a growing need for more training and education.

Further, many organizations are starting to use online learning as a bridge to fill in the gap between traditional training in order to meet different work hours, business commitments, as well as other external factors which may hinder the traditional approach to training. Thus, as more organizations are starting to rely on the training and transfer of expatriates to overseas locations, but there is a growing need for better training applications to help in the creation and implementation of such training opportunities. Neal and Miller (2006) defined distance education as “education that takes place independent of location, in contrast to education delivered solely in the classroom, and that may be independent of time as well. [9]. The American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), an education/training & development professional organization, noted that “distance education can be characterized as an educational situation in which the instructor and students are separated by time, location, or both. Education or training courses can be delivered to remote locations via synchronous or asynchronous means of instruction. [10]. As many of these companies enter into this area, they are starting to “brand” their approach and new way of marketing their products and services. If we look at the world of business, when “a brand expands its reach around the globe, it achieves favored perceptions that are greater than the sum of its national parts.”[11] This branding, known as global branding, relies on the input of the various stakeholders and how their cultural differences can enhance the quality and acceptance of such a brand. Thus, this has also served as a pivot for more adult learners to return back to school to seek additional education. In consideration of this change in the learning and training process, many companies are also looking at the areas of best practices, as well as focusing on what is positively happening in the workplace and its impact on business in general. In particular, this approach to look at the positive happenings in an organization and how it can impact both the organization and employees is gaining momentum in the business and academic communities.

#### V. OPENING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITH APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

What is Appreciative Inquiry (AI)? It is a lens in which academics and business people can view how they, along with their students (or employees), should approach a situation in terms of observing, analyzing, and evaluating the positive outcomes that may be as a result of the positive actions. Basically, Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is based on a “set of beliefs about human nature and human organizing:

- People individually and collectively have unique gifts, skills and contributions to bring to life.
- Organizations are human social systems, sources of unlimited relational capacity, created and lived in language.
- The images we hold of the future are socially created and, once articulated, serve to guide individual and collective actions.”[12]

Thus, this leads us to the next part of this paper as to how AI can help a student to focus on their key works or skills and create a certain job tasking or interact with others in certain situations based on the positive reinforcement of their actions or the actions of the others. One way that it can be used in the creation of an electronic portfolio, in which the online employee or student can work on and continue forward as part of their lifelong learning process. While many projects in the workplace and assignments in the academic setting may be time sensitive and limited in scope and time, the creation of one electronic portfolio can be an ongoing project that will encourage students to continue onward even when they change jobs or finish their education. This is one strategic tool that online educators can start the process by introducing the use of an electronic portfolio tool in the context of AI, but also stress upon the individual that it is an “individual” project that can either be nurtured over the years or remain in a vacuum. If presented in the right light, this can be an effective strategic tool that can engage not only the learner, but others that may be presented with it and its merits. The portfolio is

#### VI. USING ONLINE LEARNING AS A STRATEGIC TOOL FOR E-PORTFOLIO CREATION

With the introduction of more technology and various academic programs, more colleges and universities are starting to use portfolios, we are seeing a new generation of portfolios, but in a technological sense. Electronic Portfolios (e-Portfolios) have been defined in many different ways in terms of how they are designed and developed, as well as implemented and evaluated. According to the University of Berkeley:

“An e-Portfolio functions like a file cabinet with file drawers and file folders. Students store personal, educational, career, skill assessment, non-academic/work experience, certification, and rewards information in their portfolios. The information placed in an ePortfolio is referred to as an artifact.” [13] Some schools are quite to use “packaged” portfolio programs, but others are focusing on developing their own and observing how students do in terms of their own e-portfolio creation with a simpler portfolio design – rather than a completed systematic approach. Goldsby and Fazal noted that student-created portfolios are commonly “used in teacher preparation programs to demonstrate teaching skills and expertise. This practice was introduced as test scores alone lack the comprehensive scope needed for effective assessment and evaluation, portfolios can be implemented to interpret/make decisions regarding learning of teaching competences”[14] In addition, eportconsortium, noted that the role and function of an E-Portfolio was:[to] facilitate[e] and captur[e] the evolution of concepts and ideas through revisions of work and interactions with instructors, mentors, classmates and friends, electronic portfolios can be much more than a

Web site that simply organizes and presents final projects. They can foster learning spaces where the author can gain insights and a better understanding of him/herself as a learner.” [15]

Therefore, members of both the academic and business communities should expect that there may be many different needs to be considered here in terms of determine how an e-Portfolio system/project can be designed and development. However, the final true test will be how this strategic tool is evaluated.

#### VII. CREATING VIRTUAL STRATEGIES FOR DISCOVERY

Thus, this leads us to the key questions as to why should one use e-Portfolios in the online environment? They can serve as a showcase of a collection of selected “created” academic achievements to demonstrate a student’s writing and researching skills. Also, this strategic tool can be used as part of a process by which the instructor to motivate, guide, facilitate, mentor, and evaluate the student’s ability to critically think, write, and research. With movement of transforming today’s classrooms from a teacher-centered approach to one of a learner-centered approach – the instructors helps to facilitate and guide the student through the e-portfolio process. Ultimately, it is the student that ultimately selects their best work and begins his or her journal to develop his or her own e-portfolio. Thus, e-portfolios serve not only in the academic achievement process, but they are also used as interview portfolios for students to share with potential employers.

Greenberg stated that “the e-portfolio is not simply a personal home page with links to examples of work . . . it is a network application that provides the author with administrative functions for managing and organizing work (files) created with different applications for controlling who can see the work and who can discuss the work (access) . . .”.[16] This particular application of e-portfolios in the academic environment has been increasing over the decades. In particular, with the onset of the technological evolution, the use of computers in the learning environment has enabled many instructors, administrators, and staff members to create and implement a variety of educational applications. Rather than focusing on only one single final course project, the e-portfolio serves as a replacement for the final course project, as well as enhancement of the learning experience.

It should be observed and noted that while each instructor or course designer prepares courses, they have to decide upon which type of portfolio is necessary to meet the course objectives. According to Greenberg, there are three types of portfolios:

- Showcase e-portfolio – organization occurs after the work has been created.
- Structured e-portfolio – a predefined organization exists for work that is yet to be created.
- Learning e-portfolio – organization of the work evolves as the work is created.[17]

Finally, if we examine the use of e-Portfolios in terms of school accreditation, many educational institutions focus on the “showcase e-portfolio” approach. Nonetheless, more and more colleges and universities are starting to incorporate e-

portfolios into their courses and programs, they are learning more towards structured e-portfolios.

#### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

While many adult learners are returning back for further education, due to a variety of personal and professional reasons, education should be an ongoing event. In fact, it should be a lifelong task for all learners. However, with the onset of more technological changes in the field of education, online learning has become quite popular over the past 2 decades. In fact, many companies are seeing the value of this new education/technological tool. As a result of this attention, now is the perfect time for educators to take education to another plateau and equip learners with more strategic tools for lifelong learning. One specific tool that is being used in the online environment is the use of e-portfolios in which the student controls and owns the end product and can continue to add to it in terms of nurturing it along the way as the develop in their own career endeavors. Nonetheless, while some educational institutions and businesses have only roughly invested in technology to use in the development of such e-portfolios, some organizations and universities have been successful in develop their own ‘crude’ version of such e-portfolios and have enabled many of the learners with a new strategic tool to use through their working career.

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