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The Competitive Model: Should We Really all be Aspiring to be Distance Educators?

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ABSTRACT

The current competitive model for tertiary education plus the recent raising of EFTS funding for Distance Students coupled with the increasing capability of Internet has raised some interesting questions for tertiary institutions re delivery of education to students at a distance. While we may try to re-create the collaborative learning environment that occurs in a conventional classroom, (via computer technology and telecommunication) in a virtual class, the quality of the outcome depends on the participants interactive communication experiences and the enabling media richness of the technology used. This paper discusses issues that an educator would have to address if they wished to provide for electronic learning at a distance. However, a warning is given that any institution wishing to get into this new form of distance education should be aware of the true costs involved, and that they should also be aware of early 1900's distance educators experiences. Will the experiences of early 2000's distance educators on the Internet be any different?

Keywords
Distance Education, Internet, Electronic Learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Falling rolls, reduced income, the equalisation of payments for distance EFTS and the advent of the Internet has kindled interest by non-traditional providers of tertiary distance education, albeit in an electronic rather than a paper-based form. While we may try to re-create the collaborative learning environment that occurs in a in a conventional classroom, in a virtual class (via computer technology and telecommunication), the quality of the outcome depends on the participants' communication interaction and the enabling media richness of the technology used. Any manager or educator in an existing conventional tertiary education institute, who wishes to encourage the use of, or use an electronic learning environment, does so within the context of existing management structures within their organisation. Before an educator can operate a 'virtual class' (which requires computer technology and telecommunications to enable electronic collaborative learning to take place) in conventional tertiary institutions, some questions may need to be addressed such as:

- Will the conventional tertiary education institution need to implement or enhance its electronic infrastructures to enable the operation of a virtual class? If so, how should this be managed?
- What is required of an educator to manage the operations of a virtual class?

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- Is a student's electronic learning experience going to be assessed?

2. INFRASTRUCTURE

The implementation of an appropriate electronic infrastructure within a conventional tertiary education institution is a non-trivial exercise.

2.1 Management of the Infrastructure.

Uys (1999) suggests that such an institution could be viewed as a system that includes the five factors identified in the Management in the 90's (MIT90's) Schema, (Scott Morton 1991) namely strategy, structure, roles and skills, and technology which all impinge on the management processes.

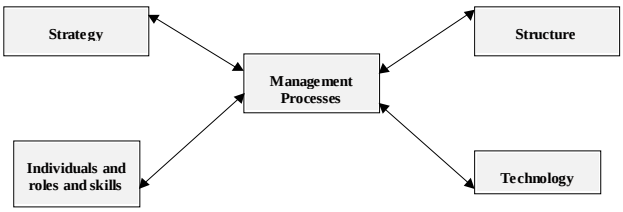

Figure 1 Further adaptation from Uys's(1999) MIT90's Schema - Implementation of an Institutional Infrastructure for a Virtual Class

At a different fractal level, these same issues also could apply to an educators management of electronic learning experiences. ie The educator:

- Strategy - has to have effective strategies in place for setting the assessment, monitoring the communication, and evaluating the assessment.
- Structure - requires their Institution to have the required structures in place for them to facilitate electronic collaborative learning.
- Technology -has to understand electronic collaborative learning's impact on the four critical factors of education eg. learner, teacher, problem, and knowledge as outlined by Tiffin & Rajasingham's (1995)
- Individuals roles and skills - requires appropriate skills for their role in an electronic collaborative learning environment.
- Management processes - needs to have appropriate structures in place to manage the electronic collaborative learning environment.

2.2 Management of a Virtual Class

While the adapted MIT90's schema (Figure 1) may be appropriate for addressing question a) above, figure 2 outlines further modifications to address question "What is required of an educator to manage the operations of a virtual class?".

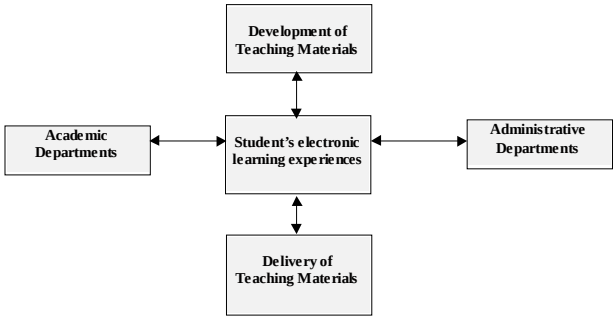

Figure 2 Modified MIT90's Schema -(Uys 1999) Learning in a Virtual Class

2.3 Electronic Learning: For credit or not for credit

A learners' electronic learning experience may, or may not, be formally assessed. If electronic learning is to accompanied by assessment, then particular attention needs to be paid at the time that assessments are designed to take into consideration how the assessments are to be administered and managed. This becomes even more important if there is to be group assessment. In this case, careful consideration has to be given at the time of the development of the teaching materials as to how the group assessment is to be structured. Comins' et al (1999) paper, The Development of a Peer Marking System for Group Assignments, outlines an interesting peer marking system for group assignments. They point out that " A problem facing educators who use group assignments is how to allocate marks so that they fairly represent the contribution that each student has made to the group solution." (Comins, 1999 p23). This issue certainly needs to be addressed by an educator if they are

contemplating assessment of a students electronic learning experience.

3. SELECTED ISSUES FOR EDUCATOR'S USING ELECTRONIC LEARNING

For most educators, absence of the necessary institutional infrastructures would mean that implementation of electronic learning would not possible. Thus this paper has assumed that the required infrastructures are in place within the tertiary educational institution, and will consider issues associated with a learners Electronic Learning experiences.

Issue 1. Initial Socialisation

- Significant difficulties may occur if a disparate group of people are forced into electronic learning.
- A strategy to aid electronic learning may be to form a group and socialise the members with team building activities prior to participating on-line.
- This may not be possible when the group is widely physically dispersed.

Issue 2. - Educators Expectations

- Has what educators expect from electronic learners been made clear? Comins (1999) suggests that communication can be difficult in a face-to-face situation, and far more difficult in an electronic environment.

Issue 3. - Motivation of Learners

- Never let the learner feel disconnected from other learners.
- Educators should make contact with learners who are not contributing, be prepared to praise contributions, and give timely, relevant feedback.
- Emphasise the importance of the task within the real world and the benefits to the learner of completing the task.
- Ensure tasks apply to the real world.
- Ensure learners have the necessary technology skills.

Issue 4 - Functioning as a Team

- Emphasise the necessity for team skills in industry.
- Provide information for all learners on how to contribute to a team.
- Include initial "practice" team building skills.

Issue 5 - Encouraging Learners to Accept Responsibility

- Share leadership of group among all team members.
- Allow for learners to suggest agenda for the task.
- Use "group" contracts.
- Use "Peer" assessment.

Issue 6 - Learners Requirement of Educator

- Praise in public, and a sensitivity if giving feedback to the group as a whole.
- An awareness of the individuality of each learner.
- An awareness of the differing learner needs in given learning situations.
- An awareness that a learner has a potentially difficult "gap" in their learning.
- An assurance that assumptions have not been made about the learner, that are incorrect.
- An opportunity to communicate learner expectations to the educator.
- An understanding of what learners want/need from each other.

4. INTERNET ENABLED DISTANCE EDUCATORS

In a recent article entitled "The Correspondence Course Goes Online: Comeback of an Education Racket", David Noble (2000) asks the question as to in what way is this new drive to deliver courses on-line, through the Internet, any different from the craze in the 1910' and 1920's for Educational Instutions to follow the lead of commercial enterprises to offer for-profit Distance Education.

"By 1919, when Columbia University launched its home-study programme, there were already 73 colleges and universities offering instruction by correspondence. ... Correspondence education was seen as more than just an extension of traditional education. It was an enhancement - a means of instruction less costly [more profitable] and of higher quality - that signalled a revolution in higher education (Noble, 2000 p 3).

4.1 Correspondence Courses Criticised

However, by the end of the 1920's, one of America's most distinguished and influential commentators on higher education was chastigating American Universities "for their commercial preoccupations (with correspondence education, and) for having compromised their independence and integrity" (Noble, 2000, p3). The widespread media attention accorded Flexner's critique of correspondence education sent shockwaves through academia. At Columbia, the blow was eventually fatal to the correspondence programme.

4.2 A Warning for Today's Aspiring Internet Educators

Noble (2000, p3) carries on to warn:

"Like their forebears, today's proponents of distance education (via the Internet) believe they are leading a revolution that will transform the educational landscape. Fixated on technology and the future, they are unencumbered by the sober lessons of this cautionary tale. If anything, the commercial element in distance education is this time even stronger. For now, instead of trying to distance themselves from their commercial rivals, the universities are eagily joining forces with them, lending their brand names to profit-making enterprises in exchange for a piece of the action (Noble, 2000 p4).

"There are differences between the current rage for online distance education and the earlier debacle of correspondence distance education. First, although they began to take hold in extension divisions, commercial online initiatives have already begun to penetrate deep into the heart of the university. Second, if the overheads for correspondence courses were high, the infrastructural expenses of online courses are higher still (Noble, 2000, p5).

4.3 Can Internet be the Saviour of Educational Institutions?

It is apparent that many educational institutions see the Internet as a potential revenue generator, given its global nature. However, there are extremely high up-front infrastructural costs, and as yet, no generally accepted model for delivery on the Internet. Thus it is suggested that very, very, careful thought would have to be given about costs and capabilities required, before a New Zealand Polytechnic or Institute of Technology wholeheartedly embraced the Internet as a mechanisim for the delivery of their courses.

5. CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper I have suggested that the recent increase in government funding for distance education has prompted a re-evaluation by some tertiary educational instutions of the viability of establishing virtual classes on the Internet. I considered Phillip Uys concepts of conventional tertiary institutes as a system. In general we agree with Uys and think that his analysis of management of the implementation of infrastructures and management of operations of a virtual class is a strong one. A number of issues are identified that an educator would have to address should they wish to adopt electronic learning as a teaching technique. However, I also suggest that given the high costs involved, and the earlier well documented problems with distance education in America, that Polytechnics or Institutes of Technology would be well advised to consider carefully all aspects, before embarking on any new Internet based form of distance education.

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