Engaging the online learner: Perceptions of Public and Private sector Educators

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Engaging the online learner is a prominent issue that is certain to affect the future success of online learning. A critical step in progressing on this issue is to understand how public and private sector educators' adopt distinctive approaches to meet the diverse needs of their environments and their learners. The paper uses a thematic approach to gain an understanding of similarities and differences in public ad private sector educators' experiences and perceptions to effectively engage the online learner.

Key words: Online learning, Academic programs, Training

Increasing number of organizations use internet as a primary delivery medium for training and development. Corporate e-learning has become the fastest growing market in the education industry. ASTD's State of the Industry report (2001) has stated an average 117 percent increase in the use of learning technologies between the years 1999 and 2002. The report predicts a continued increase in the adoption of learning technologies. The tremendous growth in e-learning can be attributed to a combination of factors such as technological advances, globalization and changing demographics. The public sector comprising largely of universities is also preparing to invest considerably in e-learning, to meet the 'technological imperative' (Holt & Thompson, 1998) of the education industry.

With enrollments increasing by 33 percent every year, online learning continues to expand its presence in U.S. universities. Over 200 institutions now offer online graduate courses (Pethokoukis, 2002). Katz-Stone (2000) estimates the overall market at 2.3 million students with expectations for further increases in student enrollment. According to Lowe (2000), approximately 17,000 courses are offered online with more than 50 percent of the universities based in the Western hemisphere offering at least some form of online learning. Online learning market has therefore created the promise of a potentially large demographic and geographic market (Smith, 2001) for education providers in both public and private sectors.

Other reports from National Center for Education Statistics (1999), research studies: Lewis et al, 1999; Gallagher & Newman, 2002; Waits, Lewis & Greene, 2003 as cited in Huber & Lowry (2003) and websites (Geteducated.com, 2003) also indicate the dramatic rise in online programs in post secondary institutions. Yoon (2003) points out that the trends in online learning are unlikely to decrease as the potential benefits of learning such as saving traveling costs, increasing access to learners and enhancing instructional methods are significant.

Literature Review

Huber and Lowry (2003) state that institutions of higher education are expanding the availability of online graduate level programs. Over the last couple of years almost all universities have developed some characteristics of the e-university. The adoption of online learning facilitates and enhances some of the traditional distance education processes. Most of the courses now have some element of computer supported learning. Beyond the attempts made by universities to reach newer and different bases of students, many acknowledge that the future also lies in inter-institutional collaboration in order to develop online classes for employees' at large corporations. Huber and Lowry also refer to eight regional accrediting commissions that have developed a list of best practices and protocols for online degree and certificate programs. One of the reasons for the growth of online programs in the higher education sector has been its ability to attract a new and a different base of students (Mangan, 2001; Thomas, 2001). In their efforts to capture a share of the global market, universities have begun exploring online environments as a means to enrich students learning experiences.

The industry has not lagged behind in their efforts to develop a highly skilled workforce. Large corporations like Motorola, Coca Cola to name a few, for example have established corporate universities. The focus of industry to establish corporate universities reflects a perception that the organization itself needs to be centrally involved in enhancing the skills of its employees.

Wentling, Wiaght and Kanfer as cited in Huber & Lowry (2003) suggest that corporate learning have a strategic position in the context of managing business processes.

The public sector higher education institutions and private sector corporations are vigorously embracing technologies to meet the continual needs of the adult learners (Yoon, 2003). New learning technologies are constantly being developed and adopted in both sectors. However, there is very little research that currently supports adoption of new learning technologies in these sectors (Bates & Khasawneh, 2004). Efforts in implementing new learning technology are done often with little reference to learning principles or theories of behavior. An important challenge for online education providers is to manage the costs involved in delivery of online learning. Paid time for instructors, continuous technical support for maintenance of learning environments and need to upgrade learners' skills for using technology increase the real-time costs for learning. Everyone involved in some aspect of the online learning process have to be trained in online skills (Salmon, 2000). Other concerns include high attrition rates among e-learners and lack of standards that need to be addressed (Garrett & Vogt, 2003).

It is the belief of the researchers that the benefits of online learning will be available on a wide scale only if public and private sectors engage in collaborative efforts to improve the quality of e-learning. The public and private sector education providers could benefit immensely by sharing their approaches, experiences and failures in engaging the online learner. Research from the academia suggests different approaches to engage online learner. Some researchers have found that effectiveness of online learning equals or exceeds the classroom learning (Rice, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2001), although the quality of online programs is still being debated (Hongmei, 2002). It appears that public and private sector education providers need to formulate strategies in order to better serve and impart knowledge and skills for their consumers by integrating technology into the curriculum differently. Many issues of how best to support learning and enhance training are still unanswered.

Similarities and differences as perceived by educators in the public and private sector are examined to gain a better understanding for enhancing learner engagement in a virtual environment. For the purpose of this paper, the terms e-learning, online learning, online education have been used interchangeably. According to the authors, these terms imply a learning approach that is guided by a non-traditional environment for the *delivery of content via all electronic media* (Urdan & Weggen, 2000) and *opens unprecedented opportunities for educational interactivity* (Harasim,1989, p.42). The authors also acknowledge the common use of these terms in the two different adult settings of public and private sector.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Traditional approaches to teaching in the university are a contrast to those offered by traditional approaches to training in the private industry. And learner centered philosophy that underpins integration of technology to the curriculum is a sharp contrast to both these traditional approaches. It is the premise of the paper that beliefs that support traditional approaches in public and private sectors must undergo 'pedagogical re-engineering' (Collins, 1996) in order to ensure effectiveness engage the online learner.

The purpose of the study is to describe and understand experiences of educators using a descriptive qualitative approach. The study aims to gain an understanding of how public and private sector educators adopt distinctive approaches to meet the diverse needs of their environments and learners. The following research question guided the study. How do educators in the private sector develop and deliver online courses that are student / learner centered and how does that compare to what traditional educators do online?

Three areas comprised the focus of the inquiry: (1) educators impressions about 'good' online learning experiences, (2) the benefits and barriers of using online learning, and (3)critical factors that influence online learning.

Methodology

The authors adopted a qualitative methodology with the intent to interpret and understand. This method provides a way to more fully probe the thoughts and perceptions of educators. The goal was to inquire into their opinions, hear their stories and experiences and gain some insights. Four participants were selected. The participants were willing to describe their knowledge and experiences. The participants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique (Patton, 1990). All participants had terminal degrees in their field of expertise, background and experience in delivering online instruction to offer insights on online instruction. Two of the educators were graduate level class instructors in an institution of higher education. The other two were instructors were also with the same institution of higher education but provided online instruction for the private sector.

Interviews were conducted in person for an hour and a half, recorded and transcribed. Hand written notes for all interviews were also taken as backup and supplemental data. Design of questions reflected areas of interest defined by the purpose of study. Constant comparison method was used to responses to arrive at findings of the study.

Each interview was reviewed for clarity and coded for significant events or statements. The coding was then sorted into larger categories on each transcript. Patterns of responses began to emerge across the transcripts where the responses were once again sorted into larger categories. Responses in each category were labeled to identify the respondent. Comparisons were made between the responses to determine which responses corroborated or contradicted each other. Linkages and relationships were determined through patterns, the contextual consideration of the participant, and knowledge of existing research and literature.

Findings

While three areas comprised the focus of the inquiry, a number of themes emerged. Ultimately these were organized into four primary categories: (1) creating learning equities which deals with participants beliefs about online education, their views on the impact of technology and barriers and challenges to effective online learning, (2) Connecting Vs Reaching discusses issues concerning the importance of interactivity in making a connection with the individual learner. This theme delves into some of the distinctive approaches educators adopt for engaging the online learner. The third category (3) Content as a language for social dialogue corresponds with designing courses that creates a unique value for each learner by its very nature of instruction and also stimulate individual learning styles. The last category (4): Designing learning experiences online offers participants perspectives for ensuring successful online learning experiences.

Creating learning equities

Educators from both sectors view technology as a key driver in changing traditional training and teaching practice. They felt committed in creating an equitable learning environment for their learners.
As one of the public sector providers stated:

> "…higher educational institutions bring education to people. This is about continuous learning...continuous education, information gathering, but mainly it is about providing the accessibility and flexibility to students who couldn't come to the library or campus.

Another emerging point of similarity discusses how online learning ensured democratic access of course content to their learners. By bringing education to people, online learning has helped eliminate geographical barriers. One educator in the public sector felt that an online learning environment addressed those students with special needs far better than a traditional class room environment.

> "…You know how curious it is that disabilities disappear in an online setting…we just admitted another student who is deaf, she will give us a whole new perspective on what it is to work online and what it is to do face-to-face and what it is to do with special needs and go through sharing her own personal experiences on what we do for class, what works and does not work for her.

Another educator for the private sector provided an interesting observation that first timers in online learning were no less successful than others who had experienced online learning before. These insights from educators point out interesting possibilities for research to make online instruction more equitable.

Educators from both sectors shared common perceptions on the larger goals of online education: to facilitate development of knowledge, skills and abilities for the learners. According to one of the public sector educators:

> "…like the corporate sector…you are looking for the same things you are looking for traditionally in graduate level classes. You are a looking for people developing some information knowledge but you are really looking for developing for analysis, synthesis and evaluation skills, you are looking to develop robust flexible knowledge structures that they can apply to settings that are meaningful to them. You are looking for more than a passing familiarity with ideas in the field that are coming through the readings. You are looking for the same things you look for in the traditional setting.

Barriers and challenges

Participants varied in their notions of some barriers and challenges in dealing with online learning. However, they all agreed that over emphasis on technology as a means to replace instruction, and evaluation and assessment were some of the biggest challenges for effective learning. One educator from the private sector expressed her concerns on how certain assessment instruments allowed online learning 'to play the system' with the idea to win, to pass the

tests. The ambiguity of assessments in reflecting "real" learning was forcefully expressed by one of the participants. She stated:

> "I mean there are ways to use assessment to promote student reflection on their own learning, on their own thinking, interests. Unfortunately in the corporate world, because of objective type questions, tests are so easy…they help learners deal with multiple choice questions. Well is that really necessarily? I mean when they go back to their cubicle, are they going to choose a, b, c or d!! I mean what does this say about about education, the value of the particular information, about our concerns for learners, the messages are horrible. If you want people to apply things on the job you are going to have to be able to match assessment to what they are doing on the job.

Another participant viewed this differently:

> "What we typically do is develop a course that may be broken into modules that are tied to objectives. We have multiple choice end quizzes, these are not graded. They are learning and practicing important questions that one needs to have answers for. So it helps interactivity and also helps them on important points they need to learn.

One of the participant admitted that it was common in practice for some instructors to 'put a bunch of text' and call it e-learning. Another participant stated:

> "E-learning is a very efficient way that the corporate world has taken up to throw a bunch of information to people in a hurry. It is an ineffective way to learn though.

Connecting versus Reaching

One challenging issue addressed rather frequently by all educators involved their approaches on how instructors engage learners. The answers that emerged indicate a few similar and different sub-themes and were categorized under this theme. A strong focus on connecting with learners emerged here as one participant explicitly stated:

> "E-learning is a solution for a learning problem, for connecting people who need to be connected…I don't believe much in information to the masses, I mean yes, that's good, but am more interested in the capabilities that e-learning has, to connect people in the world who have an expertise that I don't have, breaking geographic barriers.

Treating learners as individuals

Part of how learner engagement could be enhanced was to lay emphasis on learners as individuals. Building on a notion of treating learners as individuals having a unique set of skills, abilities and knowledge versus treating them as a mass of students solely for the convenience of the instructor, these participants advocated developing online courses that were learner centered. As two of the participants providing courses for private sector stated:

> "Pre-assessment before class… it is showing respect to learners… We want to know where you (the learner) are at, what your experiences are, call on the experience and we don't assume we got it all, it sounds simple, but it is powerful when we put it in the course.
>
> "…you have to really take into account your target audience. You have to know what computer skills they have. If you have audience not comfortable using a computer, redesign the course, if for example the learners are blue collar workers.

Instructors for the public sector differed in their perspectives of providing pre-assessment for learners. One of the interviewees had a different perspective on taking care of the needs of her learners:

> "Because it is massive to design a graduate level class, you have to get the reading together online. So you can't wait to meet your individual students and see what their needs are. But you can get a lot of ideas of what students in that position generally need. For instance I know the range of students I will get from age 22 with no teaching experience just B.A which may or may not be in education, all the way to people in their 50's who are doing a massive career change. I have a number of different audiences that I recognize I will have and I think about those types of students when I design the course. So I think of all those different needs and build those into my classes.

Student Ownership

Student ownership in the learning process was considered essential according to all the participants. While participants advocated serving the unique needs of students, they felt it was student ownership in the learning process that promotes real learning. The following quotes emphasize these perspectives:

> "What you really want is for students to do work that is meaningful to them…that engages them fully and meaningfully in thinking of topics that they are learning. Anytime you establish a system whereby students are doing anything that's rote or routine, that they can do quickly without much thought, you are pretty much wasting their time. Student ownership is very important in that when students own what they are

> doing; then100% of their thinking is engaged. I think you can support that with projects, presentation of problems.
>
> "Everything they are doing is thoughtful which means every question they ask, everything they read, every piece of information they look for somehow has a meaning to them, as they have generated a need for it. And that ends up making the experience more meaningful. It enhances their motivation, learning and to pursue the topic further.
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> "There is student buy in, students recognize that this needs to be done, and students say I need to know this, this is tedious, this is a pain, but I need it. It's better to get to that point. I think problem based learning and other types of open ended, student centered learning approaches are more likely to get students to that point of saying that this is important information. When they do that, they learn twice as fast, it's twice as meaningful, twice as memorable. So I think everything is improved – learning, retention and transfer, all of it.

Managing learner frustration

Participants also brought to light some of their concerns on courses that focus too heavily on technology over all other things. The commitment to managing learner frustration was also held up as a worthy goal. Participants also felt that helping students deal with frustration while learning online as being an important skill set in the future:

> "3D can help learning, but throwing that in does not add much. But blended learning with video/audio conferencing can. I don't think videoconferencing in itself is so important, except that you can see your Professor; initially you want to know who the person is, connect with them personally. After you have got them fact to face, you don't need it. But adding to content, audio conferencing for the class also helps.
>
> "…having more multimedia interactions is not enough. That can be kind of cool but may not lead to learning at all.
>
> "The problem in dealing with asynchronous communication is that it can delay projects and decision making. If you are in a face to face setting, you will be able to come with decisions in a short period of time. To delay a decision or a failure to make a decision in a online class delays the decision for a couple of more days which can create problems in online classes. It can be frustrating for students in that it stretches things for them, it become unmanageable for them. However dealing with that is extremely important, developing strategies for how to make that work better, realizing what the limitations are and recognizing what we have to do in order to handle those limitations is important.

Content as a language for social dialogue

Instructors are primarily responsible for design and development of the content. Enhancing social interaction in the design of content is conducive for effective online learning. That content should primarily serve the learner was tied to the idea that it helps instructors achieve their course goals while also helping them engage the learners. The design of course content must ensure interactivity and collaboration among instructors and learners. The following quotes demonstrate this:

> "It is a means of socially constructing knowledge, a means of getting students to share their thinking, reflect what others are thinking, sort of create a friction between their ideas causing them to refine ideas if that is appropriate. Interactivity helps learners have some language around ideas, some ways of presenting them, so that they become more nuanced in their thinking.
>
> "So when learners read, they go ooh! I can learn something from the instructor, they have done something interesting. It develops that kind of rapport or trust. To me, material is flat unless a person imbibes it from life, the questions, stories and those kinds of things.
>
> "Chunking the content is very important; each piece of content is to be treated as a stand alone object. I believe this helps in building interaction, so there is interaction with instructor, interaction with environment, interaction with content. The other thing is the interface itself, making sure that the interface is user friendly.

Stimulate learning styles

Many views surfaced as participants discussed benefits of designing content that considered different learning styles. It was striking to note that all participants considered a self-directed learning style as an important one as represented in the following quotes:

> "Learning styles have a lot to do with e-learning. More tactile type of learners want to have more fun things to do, than to sit and read material, so you have to take that into account. We try to do that, depending on the client. However the clients dictate what they want, if they can afford it.

> "Learners need to be self-directed. I have to say, not all learners can be successful in online learning. That is not a limitation of the technology but of the learning style. This is not to say they are not successful learners but that they are not in an environment that stimulates them to learn in any way. I consider audiences have different learning styles.
>
> "I see a student who is having a lot of problems, does not want to participate in discussions, always posts thing late, then you see some values that are problematic to get work done on time. They don't want to really give any depth to their thinking, just want to put something down right, and check off the list. Then the online way is not for them, that they are not willing at this point in their lives to give what it takes to make an online class work. I question their ability to make any degree work, if they are not meeting deadlines and putting some thought to their work. It may be that in a different setting they are able to do that. They just have to decide what works for them.

Individualize instruction

Individualizing instruction to meet each learner's distinctive needs develops effective online learning. This sub theme was a central value for all participants who also argued that current practices in online learning in both sectors tended to place a lower priority on the unique skills, abilities and knowledge learners bring to table, which would greatly enhance their learning:

> "There are more opportunities in online learning, if done correctly to meet everyone's needs. That is the challenge of group needs, of learning. The cool thing about e-learning is that you can individualize instruction.

Some of the participants offered examples of how they individualized content to suit the learners' needs. As participants wholeheartedly stated:

> "We thought, wouldn't it be neat to do a self assessment, when they (learners) come in and assess their individual levels of competence. Then maybe we could individualize the structure of the course, to learn in what areas the learner was already an expert. By being able to demonstrate quickly a level of competency, learners did not have to dwell in that level for long. Instead they could dwell in areas that they are low in competence. So that was kind of new. The learners have control over the content, in what they want to learn, so they would decide the order, the time they want to spend learning, that's how instructors could assess their success in class. So that was the idea for using a self-assessment in the beginning and at the end of the course; to measure their perception on how much they learnt. On top of that, what was powerful was we used behaviorally anchored benchmarks, and we said that if some one self-rated at level 4, they should be able to do this, some one said 2, and they should be able to do this. From this we said, look at the product they sent us and we as expert authenticators looked at the measurement.
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> "In the semiconductor industry, you can't see what's going on inside the machines. Through animation, you can show it. Learners really liked that concept. For adults working full-time, we design courses for shorter time periods, an hour to a maximum of 8 hours. We break 8 hours to smaller modules like 16 modules and it is easier for them to take it."
>
> "Design a class, so that if it is fun, it is relevant, its something that's more individualized to each person, their work setting, and hopefully those factors will make them stay motivated. I feel in general, projects can be designed to meet a whole variety of needs and ability levels. Everybody can technically be doing the same project, but they are getting their own needs met.

Designing learning experiences online

All the participants shared their best experiences in developing online learning experiences. All the participants were in agreement that online learning could replicate really good face-to-face experiences of traditional education. The following are some representative sample:

> "The ones that would interest me are those that connect people to people. I intended it to be a blended learning approach with ten instructors who were geographically dispersed. We tried to draw the learners and the trainers into the program… asked instructors to submit a scenario or problem that we posted online and all the participants had to respond to the website in a narrative response. They couldn't see other people's response until they had responded. Then the instructors were notified that the participant had responded to their scenario, so they would give a response to the participant. At that point the participants could see the response of other participants, the instructors' response, so this was a growing narrative. It was simple, comfortable technology, not a distraction, and a best mix of technology.
>
> "…the instructional design is important. You have to develop a better job at developing the design, if the instructional design is there, the learning experience is there. I think you can design experiences for

> students that are meaningful to them in a variety of ways. And students may access it in a similar way but what they are going to focus on, what they are paying attention to is going to be uniquely valuable to them.
> "I have developed software for the middle school and as research shows, middle school is a place where motivation drops off. Students become less and less motivated as they go from fourth to ninth grade. This software employs problem based learning and students are incredibly intrinsically motivated in it. Now I would say 98-99% of students are motivated the entire time. It's a three week program and they stay active and participative the entire time. There is no such a thing as off task behavior or whining. Because they like it, they own it, they have embraced it. I really believe that those kind of educational opportunities are not that difficult to provide.

Discussion

Faculty members and instructors in the private sector can use the findings in limited and expanded capacities (Lindner, Dooley & Murphy, 2001) to create valuable educational experiences for adult learners. These findings additionally provide information to stakeholders in both sectors to make decisions about online instructional design processes. The findings in this study contribute to the growing body of literature related to identifying similarities and differences in designing approaches that support learner engagement. This study provides baseline data for making such changes.

Context forms a central element in learning (Johnson & Aragon, 2002). Through shared examples from experiences of educators, the authors have found an appropriate way to place learning in context. By their willingness to share experiences, the educators have expanded the opportunity for learning for everyone. Some common themes emerged on what makes for successful online instructors and learners. For example, educators shared the need for instructors to be able to provide real-life examples and bring in a wealth of experiences to the classroom on how to apply concepts in the real world. Flexible and understanding instructors help learners in online environments to make the most of conflicting priorities and difficult situations. Because face-to-face contact does not exist, and the pace of interaction can be intense and demanding, instructors need to be able to clearly communicate well in writing

Some similarities in what makes for successful online students and how to learn effectively are as follows: Students need to be aware of the minimum program requirements and have access to the use of hardware and software that are required for the course. For example, students who were comfortable with the course hardware and software seem able to do better in the course. Like the instructors, students also need to be strong in communication skills in order to ensure a certain quality of interaction and collaboration with other learners in class. Most importantly, learners' success in online programs depends on their level of motivation and self-discipline to be willing to spend sufficient time for completing coursework. Learners need to be aware of the time commitment involved with online learning.

Public and private sectors are redefining their "markets' in global terms. The redefinition of the markets is also blurring boundaries of where their target audiences lie. The possibilities of both sectors reaching for a more common global market of adult learners may become a norm. As the process of learning continually evolves, how does an institution that wants to gain a share in the global market ensure success of its online learning programs? Questions of how people learn, issues relating to motivation, abilities to apply knowledge to real world contexts and to make meaningful contributions to society also remain. It will be interesting to see if the current developments and trends in demography, technology and globalization can get stakeholders in the education "industry" any closer to issues that are at the heart of learning, teaching, training and development.

Implications

The researchers have a stronger working concept of some key characteristics and perceptions of educators from both sectors. This will inform structuring of learning experiences and may help educators from both sectors as they plan and develop more online education courses.

This investigation shows how online learning delivered in different settings enrich educational experiences and foster meaningful learning. Research on student learning in online setting is relatively new and it is important to benchmark some of the best practices in order to gain understanding of how students learn to acquire higher order thinking skills. It is clear that role of the instructor is an important one for determining the status for benchmarking online learning practices.

Businesses in the private sector and universities in the public sector are seeking to gain control over the knowledge economy by developing and expanding existing capacities to impart necessary skills for the global market. The stakes are high and so is the urgency for building people's capacities to learn newer skills.

HRD professionals with the knowledge and competence to bridge education and business interests are well positioned to enhance organizations' competitive advantage. Training in industry is undergoing remarkable changes. There are new opportunities for HRD professionals to design and develop innovative methods to motivate, train and retain a skilled workforce. Whether working with the private or public sector, HRD professionals must move beyond traditional training roles and consider online learning strategies for generating a skilled and motivated workforce.

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