

## **Tracking Progress in Online Learning**

A report on the 9<sup>th</sup> Sloan-C Conference Leadership Roundtable, held in Orlando Florida,  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

The relief from dependence on a physically-present teacher, in-person communication, and “touchable” learning resources that people active in today’s learning environments enjoy as they use computers and the Internet’s array of resources, reflects transformative changes within higher education. These changes and their import for higher education were the focus of a lively discussion led by a panel of senior leaders in distance and online learning at the 9<sup>th</sup> Sloan-C Asynchronous Learning Networks (ALN) conference in Orlando. The discussion centered on three particular issues: appropriate nomenclature, pedagogy as an enabler of access, and the imperative for administrative and policy interventions. Here are highlights of the discussion.

## **WHAT’S IN A NAME? REVISITING THE ISSUE OF NOMENCLATURE**

The original question asked was “is it time to change our name – from distance education to something more descriptive of what we have become?” However, what was really debated was, “what’s in a name”? And, going by the discussion, the simple answer is “a lot”. I prune this down to three distinct areas of influence. First, for the field of distance learning in particular, terms serve as an evolutionary compass of the field. Second, through their descriptive power they are also instrumental in influencing how the field is defined and how readily it is accepted. Third, terms have transformative power through which they influence and reshape the mainstream learning environment. I expand on these three dimensions below.

### ***Evolutionary compass***

As an array of labels, the different terms for describing distance learning map out the evolutionary trajectory of the field, helping to trace its history and origin. For example, the term ‘distance education’ emphasizes the field’s original focus on enhancing geographical access at a time when distance was perceived to be the main barrier. ‘Distributed learning’, in its turn, captures concerns addressed later, such as flexibility, convenience, and pedagogical quality. Thus, these terms have kept in view concerns, trends, and issues that have been or are being encountered within the field. Pondering trends and issues enables us to distinguish between different forms of education, for example, education based on mass distribution of materials, or on networked, collaborative, and community-centered learning, and of course, the more familiar classroom-based, instructor-led type of education.

### ***Descriptive power***

Terms such as ‘online learning’ and ‘asynchronous learning’ are necessary tools for describing the learning environment and defining component elements of specific programs and courses. However, certain descriptive words carry more weight than others and have more influence on the evolution of the field. The term ‘distance education’ illustrates this point well as its continued use seems to have an influence on the perceived status of the field. Even though technology and distance learning strategies are regularly being integrated into face-to-face classes, this development has not been enough to completely shake off the negative perceptions associated with learning at a distance,

under which is subsumed the more favored online learning format. Apparently still associated with its predecessor, ‘correspondence education’, ‘distance education’ retains the image of the isolated learner and the stigma of a marginal and inferior “new” learning format.

### ***Transformative power***

The third dimension to the terms in use relates to their transformative power. Terms such as “online learning” and “e-learning” are frequently used to describe campus-based universities’ efforts at innovation, often demonstrated in flexible curricula and extensive use of technology to support students as they follow those curricula. These innovative developments have become important components of quality education, in which distance education strategies are integrated into teaching and learning to harness existing information and enhance critical inquiry.

Transformation in higher education is also evident in the increasing number of distance learning formats and can be captured through purposeful use of specific terms. For example, choosing the term “distributed learning” rather than “online learning” expands the concept of distance learning to include the dimension of networked classrooms and the harnessing of collaborative efforts. In similar manner, ‘e-learning’ captures another aspect of transformation. Originally standing simply for “electronic”, the ‘e’ more recently has been extended to include “engagement”, i.e., engagement through instruction. The term “e-learning” thus is an emerging term for the pedagogical strategy of integrating entertainment into the presentation of instructional content.

So...perhaps the overall message here is that the present multiplicity of terms offers freedom to choose from a glossary as occasion and need demand, based on an understanding of embedded meanings and nuances.

## **BEYOND ACCESS: IS THERE A NEW PEDAGOGY?**

The discussion provided a welcome respite from the usual comparison--and defense of -- distance education with traditional education (“Is distance learning as good as face-to-face learning?”). Interest lay more in exploring the impact of technology-based strategies on established pedagogy. Discussed in particular were the concepts of blended learning, collaborative learning, and e-learning in general.

### ***Blended Learning: Blending external and internal sources of knowledge and content***

When we talk about blended learning, we often are referring to the practice of blending classroom-based instruction with distance learning strategies. The discussion however, broadened to include the option of blending different sources of knowledge, as a way of broadening instructional content. One option suggested in answer to the question, “If we stop automatically seeing classroom-based learning as the default option, what other options can be explored?” was to reduce current emphasis on faculty-provided content in order to blend in dynamic, experiential content from leaders outside the university. The point of course is that a great deal of knowledge and sound pedagogy resides outside the control of universities and their faculty from which the university should aim to benefit. Via technology and distance learning strategies, outside expertise

can combine with university faculty and other resources to blend context-based learning with classroom (or even Web-based) learning, and facilitate transformative pedagogy.

### ***Collaborative Learning: New applications of technology***

Collaborative learning has become a familiar concept and, especially for those engaged in online learning, is often centered on the use of technology to create communities of learners, who interact and collaborate together. We can conceptualize technology as a tool for mass teaching and communication, by which we (to quote from the discussion) enable “students to organize their mental models in more complex, encompassing, and critical ways.” Achieving these goals however, calls for changes to faculty perspectives so that they re-envision their work and comply with the new social imperative to use technology to meet pedagogical needs. Available now are commercially distributed computer software and systems that promote the creation of communities of interest and sharing of experiences, for the benefit of both instructors and their institutions, helping them to meet their specific needs; similar products developed within higher education tend to be proprietary with limited or restricted applicability.

### ***E-Learning: Novel perspectives***

Usually linked to stereo-typical notions about distance education is the idea that distance learning is suitable only for certain types of learning or disciplines. There usually is no contention about its suitability for teaching case studies or when sustained reflection on a topic or personal experience is the targeted outcome; unlike classroom-based instruction, online asynchronous teaching can “stretch” available time for reflecting on a problem or situation. But what about the traditionally restricted discipline areas such as the sciences, nursing, and early childhood instruction? And what about faculty members’ concern that the online environment lacks the “personal” aspect of face-to-face instruction necessary for laboratory work? There were no easy answers here, but an interesting approach suggested was for online course developers to focus on distinguishing between conceptual understanding and the application of knowledge so that they can more successfully design appropriate instruction for each aspect, regardless of discipline.

Taken together, do the above signal the emergence of a new pedagogy? From the discussion, it appears that this is still a contested issue, with both nay and yea advocates. Nay advocates insist that the fundamentals of existing pedagogy have not changed; they have merely been improved. Whereas they were formerly reserved for a special and limited population within the exclusive domain of individual schools, these improvements are now available to students throughout the university. Yea advocates however, maintain that they do imply the emergence of new pedagogies. Using animation and streamed video to illustrate their point, they claim that the use of this kind of visual data in online teaching represents a special method not available in more traditional text- and lecture-based environments that has a profound impact on instructional strategies and students' engagement with the learning content.

## ADMINISTRATIVE AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS

The discussion about institutional administrative and policy interventions centered on sustaining growth of online learning through appropriate changes in four critical areas: educational quality, scale, costs, and marketing.

### *Quality in online learning*

To a large extent, institutional interventions to promote online educational quality have to focus on faculty support. Online teaching has brought into focus universities' formerly unmet responsibility for good teaching, with universities intervening to provide training for faculty who teach online. Many faculty members report that the training and actual online teaching have improved their face-to-face teaching. However, there are multiple issues involved in faculty support and they often raise different issues in different institutions. For example, in research institutions the primary issue may relate to compensating full-time faculty's online workload. The challenge here is how to balance this with support for faculty in their efforts to pursue their research agendas. On the other hand, institutions that deal primarily with part-time faculty and pay just for the teaching component, eliminate scholarship as a component of faculty assessment. Current focus on pedagogy has been instrumental in improving pedagogy and raising interest in the scholarship of teaching. Thus these institutions have the challenge of incorporating reward for scholarship into faculty assessment.

Student support services have traditionally been recognized as another dimension of online educational quality; however, universities have not typically recognized their business-related implications. These include the need for universities to see themselves as *business* enterprises that provide the services students want. Since online learning allows students to migrate with greater ease to other institutions that offer their preferred range of services, universities can no longer count on students' loyalty when planning for student retention. High on students' "want" lists is financial aid; in order to provide this service, institutions will probably need to review and revise their policies, processes and administrative systems to ensure that they and their students meet financial agencies' eligibility criteria. Non-availability of financial aid for online courses often deters students from taking those courses and can lead to unfavorable comparison with similar residential offerings whether they are from the same, or a different, university. Other highly ranked "want" items are transferable credits, robust and diverse curricula from which to choose appropriate courses and/or programs, and, more generally, comparable educational experiences for both online and resident students.

One indicator of comparable educational experiences for students is the extent to which each group has access to university library services. Institutional intervention is needed to obtain relevant licenses to electronic databases and the librarian has an increased role in helping both groups of students improve their existing skills of inquiry and/or develop new ones.

### *Scale in online learning*

It is an open secret that expanding the scale of online courses can be tricky; it is often a question of balancing attention to quality in teaching with other institutional

priorities (typically faculty compensation and appropriate pricing, further discussed below). However, as was noted during the discussion, this challenge is not peculiar to the online environment and raises additional germane questions. For example, how does teaching in large classes, whether online or face-to-face, affect or change our notion of what it means to learn? What implications are there, if any, for faculty job descriptions and would these be different for faculty teaching classroom-based courses?

### ***Costs in online learning***

Nevertheless, scale in online learning is a critical factor in establishing online learning within the mainstream and so we need to be mindful of the connection between costs and university practices, especially institution-wide allocation of resources. A cogent point raised here was that in order for the issues being discussed to have university-wide impact, participation in online learning would need to expand beyond the present level, anecdotally assessed at about 10% of individual institutions' populations. Scalability is also affected by institutional policies on in- and out-of-state tuition; instead of out-of-state tuition rates, universities could think of instituting 'e-rates' which could help in creating a more level playing field. Furthermore, universities' abilities to off-set capital spent on capacity-building infrastructure puts additional pressure on them to increase the scale of their courses and, ultimately, to increase access.

### ***Marketing of online learning***

The main point stressed in the area of marketing and pricing, is the need for institutions to clearly identify their audiences. There are of course several ways the market can be segmented: for example, institutions can treat as separate categories matriculating students, non-matriculating students, and alumni. Institutions may also want to focus on marketing a medley of courses, wholly online degree and certificate programs, as well as hybrid degree and certificate programs.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The roundtable ended with a call for data in two areas considered important for tracking progress in distance learning: the first relates to the impact of blended learning on higher education. The second has to do with identifying the "tipping" point of an institution's commitment to online or hybrid learning, that is, the level of participation in online learning that indicates a university's full commitment. I anticipate that the tenth Sloan-C conference will provide a forum for investigating these areas, and obtaining data with which to continue tracking developments in pedagogical, institutional, or other areas of online education.