

Why e-learning?

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There are several questions one might ask – are online courses for academic purposes as qualitative as the face-to-face ones? Do they meet the same objectives? Do students learn as effectively? The answer to these questions is a firm yes! The content of an online course depends only on the trainer and/or the institution using e-courses, so it can easily meet its standards and objectives. At the same time it is much easier to control how much the students read and prepare throughout the course than in a face-to-face class. When I asked my students for feedback many of them said that they have read much more than for other classes just because they had all the materials a click away. The following article would discuss the advantages of e-education or e-learning from the point of view of the students and the institution providing it. The discussion is based on an article called “Ten Ways Online Education Matches, or Surpasses, Face-to-Face Learning” by Mark Kassop. Here are the advantages he lists:

- Student-centred learning;
- Writing intensity;
- Highly interactive discussions;
- Geared to lifelong learning;
- Enriched course materials;
- On-demand interaction and support services;
- Immediate feedback;
- Flexibility;
- An intimate community of learners;
- Faculty development and rejuvenation.

To start with the first advantage, it has been stressed for many years how important a student-centred environment is, however, whatever the strategies a teacher applies she/he is still the one who stays in the focus.

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When it comes to online courses the teacher is more of a facilitator, who provides the content. After that it is the students who indulge into a discussion, develop it, decide on the direction it takes. To give an example, in an e-course on the European Union my colleague and I raised the question what the place of national identity in the Union is, and what aspects it involves. For about a week we got about 70 discussions started, each of which had at least two responses in a group of 54 students. It takes basic maths to see that there were students who started more than one discussions expressing by and large their views. Such an activity could hardly take place in a traditional face-to-face classroom as usually we have to comply with the time limit. The example provided above leads to the second advantage of online education – the writing intensity. All of us know how difficult it is to make students write, how long it takes them to improve this skill. With online courses it is a matter of several weeks. The only way of communication is through writing – putting one’s views in a discussion forum, preparing a summary over the readings provided, asking for clarification, engaging in an informal peer-to-peer discussion, preparing a presentation or a short essay, etc. Knowing that one’s work would be read and discussed by and large from

the other participants, it is more likely that the author would think twice over the content and the form. Also there cannot be a passive student in an online course. In the face-to-face classes it is easier to sit quietly in the corner while on-line it is impossible not to take part. Moreover, people who are usually quiet and shy find e-learning as a way out. The anonymity, the lack of physical presence makes it much easier for them to present their views and opinions. However, it should be highlighted that not everything in an online course is about writing. A trainer could easily develop reading and listening skills, and with a bit of technical equipment speaking as well. The next advantage mentioned are the highly interactive discussions. In a traditional face-to-face class the teacher asks a question and then several students answer it, while the rest sits back in comfortable silence because they do not have enough background to form an opinion or they are too shy to say something. Online discussions are different – the students have the chance to prepare by reading some material provided by the instructor or on their own, to think over their post and then to argue their views with their peers.

One might ask what about the spontaneity of the discussions? E-learning platforms do not end on discussion forums. There is a possibility to organize chats as well.

The fourth advantage mentioned by Mark Kassop is that e-learning is geared to lifelong learning. Apart from studying a particular subject, the students acquire a number of skills that would be useful in their everyday life, e.g. finding reliable information on the Internet; using computer programmes such as Power Point, Open Office, Acrobat Reader; participating in and using chats, discussion forums; etc.

The next advantage concerns the richness of the course materials- from creating our own sets of exercises, quizzes or texts through using different Internet sources to adjusting the course to a paper-based textbook. An important issue to keep in mind are the author's rights.

Another plus of the online education could be inviting guests to the course. It is more feasible to organize an hour-long chat or a forum than inviting such a person to visit the institution we teach in.

The sixth advantage is mainly about asking for help, and/or clarification, which are also

not restricted to office hours. It is easy to post a request and it is a matter of several hours before one receives a reply.

The same applies to the immediate feedback. It is very important that the trainer enters the course at least three or four times during the week to check, generally speaking, what is going on. There are always questions to answer, e-mails to write, discussions to heat or just written works to check. Moreover, such frequent presence is crucial in order to create the feeling that the participants are not left alone to struggle with this new environment. Such behavior creates the so-called online-presence, quite important for keeping participants' interest and not letting them drop out just because they feel lonely.

It is true that this makes an online course much more time consuming than a face-to-face one. However, personally, this is not a drawback that can put the trainer off.

Flexibility is one of the biggest advantages concerning online courses. It makes them appropriate for working students, or students with families, or just students who live away from the institution itself. Apart from that e-learning gives the opportunity to learn at any time and place convenient for the participant. It is perfectly suitable for night owls or larks. One of the most important processes at the beginning of each e-course is creating and supporting a community of learners.

At the same time, it should be mentioned that the feeling of anonymity makes the border between trainer and trainees almost non-existent. The good side could be freely challenging the trainer in a certain topic, asking for and / or arguing with his / her opinion.

The last advantage that Kassop mentions – faculty development and rejuvenation, focuses on the trainers. E-learning is an opportunity to get out of the traditional classroom and explore new ways of presenting information. It gives us the possibility to revise our teaching styles and to look for new horizons in our professional development.

Bibliography:

Kassop, M. *Ten Ways Online Education Matches, or Surpasses, Face-to-Face Learning*. The Technology Source, May/June 2003.