

TOPICS FOR DEBATE - 1.

Quality Assurance in Distance Learning: some micro, macro and mega issues.

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Introduction to the Series.

This article is the first of a planned series of “topics for debate” that will be a regular column within the pages of Educational Technology. The objective is to focus on issues within the general field covered by the magazine that either are highly topical and already being hotly debated, or else are largely being ignored but maybe should be generating debate. My role, and that of my occasional collaborators (I have one today), will be to “stir it up”, by addressing the issue in as provocative a manner as is deemed “politically correct” (by the magazine’s editors). Your role, as reader, will be to respond to the challenge, adding your insights and comments to the debate in an online forum that will be set up for the purpose. At the end of this article, you will find details on how to join the debate if you so wish. For now, let’s plunge into this issue’s topic.....

Promoting Quality in Distance, Flexible and ICT-based Education.

This rather lengthy title is the theme of the next ICDE World Conference on Distance Education, to be held September 3-6, 2006 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It is significant that this theme and its sub-themes, as explained on the conference site (www.icde22.org.br), were generated in debate between representatives of over a dozen distance education institutions from nearly so many countries. Obviously, a large number of practitioners of distance education consider the issue of quality assurance to be worthy of debate. Therefore, it seems a good choice for our first column.

To start the ball rolling, let’s analyze how the ICDE conference planners view the topic. First of all, it is significant that they felt the need to use a somewhat lengthy title for the main theme – one that highlights the relatively new ideas of flexible learning (anytime, anywhere, etc.) and e-learning (ICT-based) in addition to the basic idea of learning at a distance. This raises the question, in my mind, of the extent that the “new”, ICT-based approaches have changed or raised new quality-related issues, as compared to the “old” methods of distance education, or indeed of education in general. Are we facing new challenges, or the same old ones that we have never adequately addressed? Second, it is interesting to see how the planners have subdivided the overall theme into sub-themes, to reveal the complexity of the topic and its systemic structure. This structure will help us to organize our own thinking and discussion with respect to the many issues involved. In the following sentences, I will follow the example of the ICDE22 website and shorten the full version of the conference theme to the acronym “DFICTE”.

One sub-theme is described as the “Value of DFICTE in relation to national development needs, educational capacity building, lifelong and workplace learning and international collaboration”. This sub-theme addresses DFICTE from a national/international perspective, focusing on the **political** and **philosophical** aspects. Note that I have highlighted two words, used by Tom Gilbert way back in the 1970’s in his classic work on “Human Competence”, as two of the six different **vantage points** that may usefully be adopted in the analysis, or the debate, of almost any complex issue.

A second sub-theme is defined as “Institutional quality issues regarding developing quality standards, developing methods for promoting quality, accreditation issues, etc”. This addresses DFICTE from a **management** vantage point, focusing on client-system preparation (change management), implementation (project management) and sustainability (process management).

The third main sub-theme is described as “Promoting educational quality regarding faculty, pedagogy, student learning outcomes assessment, technology and delivery, cultural and linguistic diversity, etc”. By adopting the three remaining vantage points suggested by Gilbert - **strategic, tactical and logistical** - we may view this lengthy list of design, development and delivery-related issues in a more organized manner.

This short column will allow me to mention only a few of the factors that may be impeding the march towards quality in distance learning. I will select one issue perceived from each of the vantage points mentioned above, and I hope that other related issues will emerge in later discussion. Let’s start from the logistical vantage point and work up to broader issues of institutional philosophy and global politics.

The logistical vantage point: putting the ”E in E-learning” into perspective.

Much recent literature on factors that lead to success of E-learning projects focuses on the role of ICT’s: state-of-the-art Learning Management Systems; issues of networking, bandwidth, access speed and memory; use of interactive multimedia and hypermedia; interoperability standards and learning object reusability. But the literature also presents case examples of E-learning projects using the latest technologies that are suffering (learning) quality problems, and other projects that are achieving high levels of learning effectiveness whilst using technologies that are far from state-of-the-art. It would seem that ”high quality of learning” may not necessarily correlate closely with ”high tech” - that excessive emphasis on technology aspects of the solution – on ”the E in E-learning” – may often be a part of the problem.

For example, current E-learning system standards, such as SCORM, focus on issues of course interoperability across platforms and reusability of previously developed learning objects, but they offer us little in terms of learning quality assurance. Indeed, the reuse of learning objects facilitated by such standards may promote the easy replication of past instructional design blunders and may contribute to a general lowering of quality. I have seen many so-called learning objects, SCORM-compatible of course, that from an ID standpoint should be banished to obscurity, rather than reused in other contexts. So, what steps do we take to ensure ”quality before reusability”?

The tactical vantage point: can teachers handle the E-learning workload?

One often hears arguments that the quality of learning is enhanced in online environments through the increased possibilities for collaborative small group learning, higher levels of human-to-human interactivity, and methodologies that promote the construction of knowledge. In principle, I agree with these arguments and their theoretical foundations. However, such methodologies tend to require higher levels of teacher involvement, as well as higher levels of expertise and skill on the part of the teachers, and very much more time. Studies suggest that teachers often spend twice as much time teaching online as they do in an equivalent face-to-face course.

This raises the question of how many students an online instructor can handle. In collaborative classroom activities, teachers can comfortably handle from 20 to 30 students, depending on the nature of the content and the teacher's skills. In a web-based course that is highly individualized and uses collaborative small-group learning intensively, student numbers may have to be deliberately limited to somewhere in the range of 12 to 15 students in order to allow teachers to handle the workload. But such levels of staffing are not economically sustainable. Some writers on this topic suggest that distance learning has to exceed staff/student ratios of 200/1 in order to be economically sustainable over the long term – this is a whole order of magnitude beyond the typical face-to-face ratios. Distance learning systems have often achieved and sustained such ratios in the tele-course and correspondence modalities. But these are, from a pedagogical standpoint, rightly criticized for not providing the opportunities for individualized small-group collaborative learning that E-learning can provide.

So, we seem to have a paradoxical quality-sustainability trade-off situation. What can we do to make teaching online less labour-intensive than teaching face-to-face, and at the same time ensure that the quality of learning is enhanced? One possible approach is to provide teachers with productivity and performance support tools. This seems a promising use of technology in support of learning quality. But is technology-based teacher support achievable at an affordable cost? When will AI deliver on its promises?

The strategic vantage point: so what's new about blended learning?

Another current bandwagon is blended learning. This was originally defined as a combination of traditional instruction conducted in groups under a teacher's supervision and E-learning or web-based training, where participants study individually or in virtual groups. However, a glance at recent literature reveals that blended learning now means different things to different people: combining different modes of web-based technology (e.g. synchronous and asynchronous modes), various pedagogical approaches (behaviorist, humanist, constructivist), any form of instructional technology with face-to-face instructor-led training, and even formal classroom instruction with on-the-job training. The term has become "hype" – so popular and so misused as to be in danger of becoming valueless. But when we get "beyond the hype", did it ever have any value in terms of instructional innovation or quality assurance? I think it did not. Let me illustrate my point by reference once more to the literature base.

A review of almost any bunch of articles on blended learning identifies five most often quoted reasons for its use. Four of these are driven by practicality and expediency factors: cost, convenience and the limited availability of time and human resources. Only one of the five may have something to do with the quality of the learning experience: "matching delivery method to content and instructional need". Beautiful words – but how do we actually do this matching? The literature reviewed presents many examples of courses that use different delivery methods for different components, and also some models for the planning of blended learning systems. But, the examples do not throw any light on why specific modules were delivered by specific methods and the planning models are restricted to describing the procedural steps that should be followed, saying little about exactly how to decide what delivery method to select for what content or instructional need.

Let us reflect on what is really to be decided – nothing else than the systematic selection of media – which was the “hype of the day” in the 1960’s and 1970’s, with dozens of decision models being proposed. This particular bandwagon slowed down, if not halted completely, in the 1980’s when Richard Clark in his now famous (some say infamous) research review relegated instructional media to the category of “mere vehicles” for the intended instructional design. So, is the current hype-of-the-day bringing something new and improved to our instructional decision-making toolbox? Can we expect the blended learning bandwagon to lead us to higher levels of learning quality, as opposed to merely overcoming practical operational constraints? I am yet to be convinced.

The institutional management vantage point: quality vs. cost – no free lunch.

Traditional approaches to institution-based education are highly labor-intensive and therefore have high operating costs. The “traditional” methods of distance education, such as the correspondence and tele-course models, are capital-intensive, but permit low per-capita operating costs, and therefore have proved to be lower-cost alternatives for large student populations. But, E-learning involves varying patterns of financial investment – the costs involved in developing and delivering a three credit hours Internet course have been estimated as varying from US\$6,000 to \$1,000,000, depending on the technologies and approaches used. So, the potential of higher quality of E-learning systems as compared to earlier distance learning modalities, is confounded by a very variable and sometimes not fully understood cost structure.

Let’s look at the case of South Africa, a country that now graduates around half of all its higher education students through distance-learning courses. The South African Ministry of Education has for years provided funding to higher education institutions on the basis of a fixed annual amount per full-time-equivalent student enrolled, but distance students were valued at half the annual budget allowance of campus-based students. This may have been a reasonable policy when most universities were conventional single-mode campus-based institutions and the one large single-mode distance-learning institution – UNISA – operated on a low-cost correspondence course model. Today however, most of the other universities have moved from a single-mode to an ICT-based dual-mode operational model. The cost-quality structure of the higher education scenario has changed dramatically. Recently, the Ministry of Education had to undertake a major study to review the per-capita funding for distance students. Most sensibly, this was performed as part of a broader review of quality assurance and other regulatory issues. The report of this study reflects the complexity, both technical and political, of trying to balance the often-opposed forces of cost and effectiveness. But are tertiary institutions, in the USA and elsewhere, mastering these new acrobatic skills?

The political / philosophical vantage points: distance education and globalization.

In this section I would like to introduce the first of my occasional collaborators – John Tiffin, Professor Emeritus, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, well known for his writings on the concept of a “Global Virtual University”. In a recent article in the UK’s Guardian newspaper, John Tiffin points out that in 1950 there were 6.5 million enrolments in tertiary education worldwide and over three quarters of them were from the developed world, but today there are approximately 100 million and half of these are from the developing world.

This demand is being met by building new universities, expanding old ones and also, by rapidly increasing use of distance learning. However, students in developing countries, who cannot find places in their own universities, spill over into the universities of the developed world, who gladly accept them as 'full fee paying' students. This growing global trade in tertiary teaching between the developed and developing worlds is, as in so many things, one-way. At the present time, few students from developed countries go to the universities of the developing world. John observes: "Adam Smith the founder of the idea of free trade argued that if a person has learned their lesson very well, 'surely it can be of little importance where or from whom they learned it' ... Will we, then, one day see the pages of The Guardian Weekly filled with advertisements offering degrees on the Internet from the universities of the third world? Or will we find that Adam Smith was wrong? That it is not what is learned that matters but the brand name on it?"

However, the brand name of higher education is often established more on the basis of excellence in research rather than teaching. Could one maybe reverse this trend and in the process modify this one-way trade in higher education? If excellence in teaching were to be accepted as the prime criterion of institutional quality, and if such excellence were to be clearly defined as a set of globally accepted standards, then maybe, globally accessible virtual universities, based in the developing world where operating costs are lower, will become the leading world providers of quality higher education.

This is indeed an intriguing line of argument. If we explore it further, could we not argue that, at some point in the not-too-distant future, international E-learning initiatives will become the benchmarks for educational quality? We may soon see the day when distance education will take the lead and force conventional education out of its complacency and self-satisfaction with the abysmally low quality standards of teaching and learning that have for centuries been accepted as normal and immutable.

Conclusion: "all things are intertwined".

I borrow this phrase from the writings of Theodore Nelson, the "guru of hypertext" and protagonist of the idea of global interlinking of all world literature repositories into a universally accessible and useful global library. But I use it here in order to emphasize that the various "snapshot views" presented in this column, each one from a different systemic vantage point, but each one relevant to the promotion and assurance of quality in distance learning, must be considered as a whole. They are interlinked local perspectives on a broader "hyperpicture" of what requires attention in order to achieve real improvements in quality, not only of distance education, but of all education. There are many more such snapshot views that should be added and interlinked in order to form a complete vision of the road to the future. I hold out the challenge to debate not only the future of distance learning, but the future of teaching and learning in general, and to consider the motion that future distance education developments, if properly planned and managed, might lead to the revolution in provision of quality education that both the developed and developing nations are (or should be) waiting for.

In order to post any comments on the views expressed in this article, or to add any further snapshots from your own particular vantage points, join me at the following URL: <http://www.tts-global.com/blog/> . I look forward to continuing the debate.