Innovation in e-Learning through Sponsored Project Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

Enriching learning and its effectiveness by providing enhanced learning experience for students have remained a common concern for any e-Learning initiative. With the web 2.0 Internet technologies interesting possibilities are emerging. However, implementing the latest technologies alone may not guarantee success. In this regard a sound learning model is evolving in a logical progression. Library and information support, collaboration and faculty support, interactive design, creating communities of practices and computer supported distributed collaboration are the logical evolution of the model. Extending the collaboration to provide field experience and on-the-job application through ‘sponsored project based learning’ (SPBL) is another innovative approach that can be adopted for the purpose of adding the component of authentic learning experience for the students. In this paper we will first briefly discuss the e-Learning approaches and its advantages. Thereafter we will explore the learning opportunities that could be offered, for example, in the JIU’s learning model design. We will present the innovative SPBL model to service learning from the practitioners’ perspective in a fully online learning environment. This approach allowed the students pursuing education through fully online mode to connect with people in their communities and linked theory to practice enriching learning greatly.

Keywords

E-Learning design, pedagogy, Cognitive apprenticeship, Community of practice, Sponsored Project Based Learning (SPBL).

1) INTRODUCTION

Thomas Edition predicted that “the motion picture is destined to revolutionize” the educational system and will largely supplement the textbooks. Later, radio was hailed with the promise to “bring the world to the classroom”. Similarly, the educational television was hyped as a way to create “continental classroom” (Cuban, 1986). How much of these have been met till today? These are the examples from the past indicating the rush to implement cutting edge technologies.

With the advent of Internet and now web 2.0 technologies interesting possibilities are emerging. However, implementing these latest technologies alone may not guarantee success of any e-Learning initiative. This paper will describe an innovative approach called “sponsored project based learning” (SPBL) adopted at Jones International University (JIU). JIU is the first accredited fully online University, named one of the Top ten Online Universities in the World (DiUlus, 2008). Before elaborating SPBL, the basics of e-Learning design are presented briefly.

2) E-LEARNING AND ITS ADVANTAGES

With the advent of technologies for learning and teaching, several terminologies emerged. Starting from CBT (computer based training) to e-Learning and now to m-learning represents a continuum of the search for a better model to describe what we want to do – to promote and support learning utilizing technology. Initially technology was stand alone computers (for CBT), then networked computers (for e-Learning), and now what is suggested is always connected portable computer facility (for m-learning). However, all these are mainly for providing universal access to learning,
any-time any-where. Therefore, we will use the term e-Learning for the lack of better accepted alternative because computers are evolving into mobile, always-connected, portable ubiquitous devices in any way.

There are several factors that contribute to a success of e-Learning and considered as viable options for engaging learners in the academics and also in the workplace. These are:

- **Just-in-time access** - An e-Learning approach with just-in-time access to knowledge and training can provide competitive edge to a learner or a company.
- **Efficient** - An e-Learning solution can provide training to employees more rapidly, more effectively, and more efficiently - especially when the goal is to reach an international audience. Similarly, e-Learning is effective for adult learners who are keen to pursue learning while engaged in a profession. For academic institutions, e-Learning seem to be the best viable option to extend the reach of teaching expertise, meeting the problem of faculty shortages.
- **Time and place independent** - Learning/Training can occur at any place and any time, which provides flexibility and convenience for the learner.
- **Cost savings** - Over time, e-Learning can provide substantial travel and time cost savings as well as cost of enrollment to obtain a degree or certification.
- **Standardization** – This is one of the major advantages of e-Learning. Learning opportunity for the students can be made to remain essentially similar across courses while supporting creativity.

E-Learning is technology facilitated delivery of instruction, knowledge and learning facility that can be accessed by anybody, any-time, any-where. In our view, the prefix ‘e’ is only in the connotation of the delivery model because learning a subject is an independent function of the mode through which it is learned. However, effective e-Learning strategy must be more than the technology itself or the content it carries (Rosenberg, 2001). Rosenberg discussed these in great detail in his book.

The current trend in rapid adoption of e-Learning in academics and in industry is attributed to innovations in learning design. In this regard a sound learning model is evolving in a logical progression. Library and information support, collaboration and faculty support, and extending the collaboration to provide field experience and on-the-job application through ‘project based learning’ are the logical evolution of the model. In a traditional University all the support components are available within the campus. Most Online Universities are also offering all these facilities through electronic means. These have been proved and tested over the years in the JIU’s model of learning design which provides all the learning support components including something more and value added. For example, access to digital library and access to an international body of faculties and students. In the subsequent sections of this paper we will describe the innovations in e-Learning design using JIU’s design as a case example.

3) **JIU’s E-LEARNING MODEL**

Knowledge accumulated by an expert in a particular subject domain gets distilled and documented in the form of textbooks. Monographs and edited books document the latest techniques or experiences. Scholarly journals disseminate the current practices and research trends. Thus all the knowledge in the world is documented in printed form. Technology now provides another method of making this knowledge easily accessible at lesser cost. Thus there are some tendencies to create an online system through which the knowledge and information are made available in digital form and call it e-Learning. Another closely related approach is making available the video recordings of lectures. However, it will be appreciated that as a knowledge resource the digital productions available through the Internet and a library have similar attributes. It is particularly wrong to assume that putting all the information on the Internet
will make learning to happen. Internet is useful, but it does not guarantee learning any more than a good library ensures creating knowledgeable persons. Thus, digitally available library and information resources are important support components for e-Learning but these are not the end in itself.

For creating effective learning experience, a holistic model of e-Learning is required. JIU’s learning model provides this through four interlinked components as shown in Figure 1. Interactivity and collaboration is the key to the model. This allows the learners to become directly involved with the information material, make active choices, navigating their own path and participate in active learning understanding the building blocks of their studies.

![Figure 1: Holistic e-Learning infrastructure](image)

Collaboration is the key to the model shown in Figure 1. It encourages the social aspect of learning by creating online communities through the course forum where the students (and faculty) share information and participate in discourse, complete collaborative work and projects. The social presence thus created for each course, permeates across courses through cohorts.

Teaching presence is created through two-tier approach. The courses are first authored by experts contacted from various institutions. The world class curriculum thus created is taught by other contracted teaching faculties who are specially trained to facilitate students’ learning in a totally online learning environment. This is a new kind of skill that has been mastered by the JIU team. JIU Professors are assigned courses in their specialty and students have easy access to professors and peers’ contact to promote learning community aiding completion of the project.

Cognitive presence enables the learners to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discussions in an environment of critical community of learning. This is supported by forum discussions and though targeted assignments. The course instructional designs are structured to facilitate the process for the learners as per their individual need.

E-learning design also includes effective integration of administration, content, delivery and media. This is provided by the JESS®, Jones e-education Software Standard®. It has been our experience that for the purpose learning, pedagogical methods determine the educational success. Here, technology only compliments the design.

4) PROJECT BASED LEARNING

Assessment of student learning outcomes is a natural requirement. For this purpose JIU continues to utilize and expand a variety of comprehensive approaches to measuring student learning success. It is guided by best practices in student learning assessment principles and strategies and designed to meet the expectations of external agencies and professional organizations. Comprehensive and ongoing assessment of student learning includes measures that evaluate professional knowledge and performance, demonstrate candidates’ ability to apply competencies and skills in an educational setting, and generate information and data used to inform curriculum design and program improvement.

In order to implement this evaluation approach it was realized that conventional tests will not serve the required purpose. Further, the traditional exam-based evaluations tend to promote rote learning. Therefore, project-based curriculum guided by professional competencies has been adopted. Foundation for
this approach is based on the principle of situated learning. Knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used (Brown and Duguid, 1989). Students are required to develop professional synthesizing projects in every course. These are designed to demonstrate student learning of program and course learning objectives, as evaluated by faculty using assessment instruments built to determine the level of a student’s acquisition of professional knowledge and skills.

The project-based learning model is extended further to create sponsored project-based learning (SPBL). This promotes Cognitive apprenticeship where the students are engaged into authentic practices through activity and social interaction. This supports learning in a domain by enabling students to acquire, develop, and use cognitive tools in authentic domain activity.

The goal of sponsored learning is to be of service to the sponsor. The students provide a service to the sponsor. At the beginning of a course, the student’s sponsor is asked to review the course learning outcomes, as well as the student’s proposal. Toward the end of the course, the sponsor reviews the completed professional project. Students complete professional synthesizing projects under the guidance of supervising professors and field-based sponsors in learning communities around the globe. Sponsors are the thought leaders in the field and act as bridge to academic environment. They provide guidance for the student’s professional synthesizing project and ensure that the project has a real-world application while the project is firmly based on the topic of the course. The broad picture of JIU’s innovative e-Learning model is shown in Figure 2.
5) BENEFITS

In completing the sponsored project the student act as project manager, managing his/her own project for success. The objective of SPBL model is to empower learning in ways that are personally and professionally meaningful to the student while they explore theory and its application to the solutions of important education challenges. Each course requires students to work closely with a sponsor to complete a project that addresses a relevant, authentic problem. Thus Student Learning Outcomes are:

- High quality professional synthesizing projects,
- Students connect to leaders in their fields,
- Professionally meaningful work that changes their worlds for the better,
- Students open avenues for their personal career development and become professionals, and
- Enhance the Social Networking Competence of the students.

The SPBL model allowed the university learning to be grounded in authentic practice, enlarging the cognitive presence and social presence beyond e-Learning environment provided by the University (Figure 1). Students are prepared to be active members of networks of practicing professionals. Influential professional must know how to build relationships with others, political leaders, business leaders and other professional practitioners. This skill is inculcated through the sponsored learning practices.

Through multiple measures, the program has documented student achievement of course and program learning objectives, including:

- Student satisfaction ratings with their learning,
- In-course and course-to-course retention,
- Graduation rates,
- Placement into the workforce,
- Employer appraisal of graduates’ performance.

6) CONCLUSION

From a technocratic perspective, there is a tendency to assume that installing computers and networks will solve every conceivable problem. However, the value and benefits of technology will come only through leveraging it for dynamic and strategic purposes that place the focus first on the learning and performing and second on the technology (Banerji, & Scales 2005).

The key lessons from the past indicate that attempts to create information and learning systems using a technology-centered approach generally failed. It is important to consider technological solutions principally to support teaching and learning. For this purpose we need to consider the benefits of a user-centered approach from the standpoint of design. A well designed holistic approach towards learning and training development is needed to support the e-Learning needs of the current generation and for this purpose Figure 1 provides the broad framework.

REFERENCES


JIU: Jones International University Ltd., www.jiu.edu