HOW DO WE GET TO TOMORROW? THE PATH TO ONLINE LEARNING

Janet M. Duck
The Pennsylvania State University
jmd226@psu.edu

Diane H. Parente
The Pennsylvania State University
dhp3@psu.edu

ABSTRACT

It is evident that the advancements in technology are entering our educational environment at a rapid pace. What was once a brick and mortar classroom is now a virtual classroom that exists in living rooms, airports, and offices. What was once a traditional lecture hall is now a virtual discussion board that engages a world of students. Although online education is in its early stages, statistics clearly show support for increased enrollment in online courses. The number of students enrolled in distance programs is rapidly rising in colleges and universities throughout the United States. There is no doubt that life as we know it in the traditional classroom, is changing.
In response to the breakthrough of online learning, we must ask ourselves several critical questions. How do we prepare ourselves for the online classroom? How do we integrate and capitalize on technology? How do we engage students in an online environment? How do we overcome the obvious challenges that accompany this virtual environment? These questions are lingering, and we must find answers.

INTRODUCTION

It is evident that the advancements in technology are entering our educational environment at a rapid pace. What was once a brick and mortar classroom is now a virtual classroom that exists in living rooms, airports, and offices. What was once a traditional lecture hall is now a virtual discussion board that engages a world of students. Although online education is in its early stages, statistics clearly show support for increased enrollment in online courses. The number of students enrolled in distance programs is rapidly rising in colleges and universities throughout the United States. There is no doubt that life as we know it in the traditional classroom, is changing.

In response to the breakthrough of online learning, we must ask ourselves several critical questions. How do we prepare ourselves for the online classroom? How do we integrate and capitalize on technology? How do we engage students in an online environment? How do we overcome the obvious challenges that accompany this virtual environment? These questions are lingering, and we must find answers.

To better understand where we need to go to address the "unknown" of online education, we must first discuss where we have been. Within the context of our discussion we will define four components of online education, their place in history, their existence today and their place in the future of education. We offer that the four components most affected by the advancement in online education are the student, the instructor, the delivery mode and the classroom. We will discuss the evolution of these components in terms of the past, consider their placement in today's environment and project our thoughts on what these components on education will *look like* in the future. Most importantly, we must consider if we are prepared for the "e-storm"?

SESSION FORMAT

The following discussion will take place using the table noted below (Table 1) as the focal point of discussion. Audience participation will be solicited to offer perspective and guidance on the critical components of online education as outlined in the table. We hope to involve instructors who have online teaching experience, as well as instructors who have had no experience in online teaching in order to get a broad perspective on the topic. Audience members will be asked, to describe students, instructors, delivery methods, and the classroom of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Facilitators will engage audience members to provide their comments, questions and concerns. Our goal: to discuss how we can be better prepared for the "e-storm."

STUDENTS

A recent survey of higher education in the United States reported that there are more than 2.35 million students enrolled in online courses in fall 2004 (Allen and Seaman, 2005). It is obvious from these statistics, that the student of the future wants something different than the student of the past. In some cases these differences as they relate to the learning environment, are obvious:

- Students can "attend" a course at **anytime, from anywhere**
- Online learning enables **student-centered teaching** approaches
- Course material is **accessible 24 hours a day 7 days a week**
- Students can utilize their well-developed **technological skills**

Table 1.

	Yesterday	Today	Tomorrow
Students			
Instructor			
Delivery			
Classroom			

Facilitators will raise questions surrounding the differences in "the student" throughout the years and this impact on e-learning. Students tend to be in generations such as Gen X or Gen Y's or the Millenniums. Each of these groups have specific experiences in technology and culture that affects the way that they learn. Looking at the impact of various students on online learning is important. Further, we will speculate on the needs and characteristics of the students of the future. This evolution will be defined in terms of attitude, motivation, personality, learning styles, exposure and maturity.

INSTRUCTORS

Will online instructors be ready to meet the challenges brought by the projected increases in learner demands for online education? It is obvious by the change in technology that the skills of a successful *traditional classroom* instructor are not necessarily the skills needed to be a successful *e-learning* instructor. A recent study revealed that major concerns exist on the part of the instructor in terms of:

- monetary support
- technical support
- pedagogical and technical competency
- student engagement
- quality of education
- instructor evaluation

Facilitators will raise questions surrounding the differences in "the instructor" throughout the years and the role that the instructor will have in the e-learning classroom. More importantly, we will speculate on the needs and characteristics of the instructor of the future. How will instructors who have entered the profession during the last three decades respond differently in preparing for the future? This evolution will be defined in terms of technical skills, teaching style, lifestyle changes, affects on instructor evaluation and teaching strategies.

DELIVERY

The delivery mechanism has also changed over time. In fact, two dimensions on which the delivery has changed is time. The first is whether the material is delivered synchronously or asynchronously. The second is whether the course content is provided on paper or in a traditional book or whether it is online on a computer screen. In between, we have experienced CDs and video lessons. It is important to note that the change in the students has also prompted their comfort level with the delivery mechanism.

CLASSROOM

The classroom of yesterday, today, and tomorrow are also different. College classrooms that were reached by walking from a dorm room have changed to video studios or computer screens. Classrooms of tomorrow exist in cyberspace and may be populated by avatars.

ARE WE PREPARED FOR THE E-STORM?

Are we as instructors prepared for tomorrow? What do we need to do to prepare and embrace the inevitable change?

REFERENCES

E. I. Allen and J. Seaman, *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005* (Needham, Mass.: The Sloan Consortium, 2005).