What is Online Learning?

There are a number of definitions for online learning found within the literature. One of the earliest, Khan (1997) defined online learning as the delivery of instruction to a remote audience using the Web as an intermediary. Carliner (1999) defined online learning as educational material that is presented via a computer. Notice that both definitions focus on the instruction and the method of delivery. As the practice has grown in scope, the definition seems to get less precise. Oblinger and Oblinger (2005) avoid the issue by simply describing online learning as “wholly online learning”. Some prefer to focus on tying direct connections between distance education practices prior to the implementation of the web and specific technologies now available. In essence, they focus on how technology has changed the delivery of the instruction rather than the how technology might change the instruction itself. (Rekkedal, et al. 2003; Volery and Lord, 2000). As online learning has become more pervasive, the learning theories around it have evolved. Most authors (Benson, 2002; Carliner, 2004; Conrad, 2002, Ally, 2004) define online learning in terms of the access to learning experiences but also on the potential for flexibility and participant interaction.

For us, what is online learning? Is it fundamentally different from traditional learning or is it just a change in the method of delivery? That is a debate that is still occurring but there are points that are now considered established.

- **Focus has shifted from Teaching to Learning** – This is a fundamental change in perspective and has a dramatic impact on the relationship between teachers and learners. The learner’s activities are now the focus of the course. Online pedagogy mainly focuses on the activities of the learner and sees teaching primarily as a means of support.

- **Online Learning is Student Centered** – The learning process model has changed from a ‘black box’ model in which inputs consist of presented knowledge and the metrics of the output focus on what is known to a model that deals with the construction of cognition and competencies.

- **Online Learning is Dependent Upon the Development of Learning Environments - Online** learning, with its focus on the learner, is moving from the traditional instruction centered focus towards the support of learning. The role of the instructor is moving towards being the constructor of the learning environment and as an advisor to the learner.

- **Online Learning is Active** – The learner is challenged to own, manage and schedule their learning. This can be a difficult task for some learners who, for the first time, may be experiencing the ability to control what was typically controlled by the instructor.

- **Online learning should be Interactive and Collaborative** – Media enabled learners are empowered to interact with the content of the course, with the instructor of the course and with the other learners in the course.
So how does the role of the faculty member change in an Online Environment? The faculty member’s activities can be broken down into six categories:

- **Organization and Structure** – Definition of Objectives, both at the course and module level, are a key contribution of the faculty member. What competencies or knowledge will the learner develop and why are they important?
- **Creation and Selection** – The faculty member is responsible for creating or procuring the educational activities that support the learning environment and assuring that they support the objectives that were defined.
- **Assessment** – Definition and development of the methods by which the learner will tell how well he/she has met the objectives of the course or module.
- **Moderation and Facilitation** – Acting as the advisor, facilitating interaction, providing individualized support; the instructor in the traditional classroom has these same requirements as the online instructor. The real difference is in the mode and availability of the activity.
- **Supporting Learning Strategies** – Online learning strives to provide mass customization; in which the learner can develop the core competencies using learning strategies that are best for that user but expand beyond that where the learner has great interest.
- **Orientation of Collaborative Learning** – Online learning can and should be a collaborative effort. Certain types of learners require collaborative feedback as validation. Online faculty are charged with supporting and encouraging collaboration among students and between faculty and student.

So how can this be organized? Some of the faculty member’s activities occur as the course is designed; others fit better when the course is deployed (aka taught). To that end, we will approach the first three activities, **Organization and Structure, Creation and Selection** and **Assessment** as primarily the responsibility of Course Design. The other three, **Moderation and Facilitation, Supporting Learning Strategies** and **Orientation of Collaborative Learning** are primarily the responsibility of Course Deployment.
References

Athabasca University


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