Cultural Change for the E-World.

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In the transition to e-learning, many institutions provide some face to face delivery alongside their e-learning delivery. The spectrum ranges from the traditional face to face delivery, with lecturing through to full e-learning, and it is anticipated for the next 5 years, at least, that the majority of delivery will be in the middle of the spectrum and provide a mixed mode of delivery. Nevertheless, there will be some programmes, which can be delivered purely in e-learning mode, and some e-learners who want to study purely by this method. It is this end of the e-learning mode, and some e-learners who want to study purely by this method. It is this end of the spectrum with which the design factors of e-learning need to be considered.

In order to think through all the elements of e-learning delivery, one has to consider what McKey (2000) describes as the “total student experience”. McKey lists 4 key factor for consideration. The first factor to ensuring the e-learners experience is a positive one, is ensuring the administration is geared to support the e-learners through all aspects of their on-line experience. Administration, in this context, takes on board the traditional roles of enrolment and monitoring an e-learner performance, plus the link with the tutor but in the e-learning context administrators also have a key role in communicating with: quality assurance departments; the marketing department; the learning resource centre; the technology provider. Last but certainly not least, administrators need to ensure there is a good communication link to the e-learners themselves who will expect, an almost immediate feedback on the queries or concerns they may have.

The second factor of McKey’s model is that of the education provision. The provision of e-learning programmes to e-learners can be thought of in 2 stages:

1. Designing the materials

In looking at the design of the materials, it is clear that the e-learners will study, in different ways to that of a traditionally taught student. To appropriately design materials, which will stimulate and encourage the e-learners to study, the designer must park most of their traditional ways of portraying information and reconsider what e-learners expectations and ways of studying will be.

2. Support from the academic

In order to achieve what Pollard and Hillage (2001) described as cost effective advantage of e-learning delivery, the support from the academic or e-moderator must be both effective and appropriate, but limited. In order to ensure that this is the case, administrative and technical support is provided for the majority of e-learner enquiries. Nevertheless, the e-moderators involvement in supporting the e-learner is vital but again different to that involved in the traditional delivery.

Salmons Five Step Model

Salmon (2000) has described the support from the academic, as a model for e-moderators involving with five steps. Ironically, the first steps start even prior to the e-learners enrolling and are a clear example of why the Marketing and Finance Departments need to be fully aware of the impact of the e-learning within the institutions.

The first step of Salmon’s model is access and motivation. This stage has been found to be crucial, in order to allay the e-learners fears of the e-learning experience, therefore what is needed at this stage is a high level of rapid, timely and empathetic support which facilitates engagement and access to the new learning environment. Evidence shows from Salmon’s work, that if this first stage is achieved, the retention of e-learners through out the programme is much higher than if this stage is ignored.

The second step is on-line socialisation. E-learning does not have verbal and visual clues, which is the norm in traditional delivery. It is always been the norm that in traditional delivery, the e-learner will learn as much from fellow e-learners and independent study as they do from the tutor. Without the on-line socialisation taking place this learning cannot be achieved in an e-learning environment.

The next step Salmon’s model is information exchange. At this step, the e-learners are encouraged to look at a variety of resources where information can be provided, and are reminded not to rely purely on the information, which is provided in the programme. The moderators role at this stage is therefore to ensure that the e-learners concentration is on discovering and exploring issues.

The fourth step is knowledge construction. The e-learner should now have acquired the norms of interaction and be coming independent of the e-moderator. Dialogue will occur with other e-learners with whom they have found empathy and mutual understanding. The e-moderators role therefore is to ensure that the e-learners are grasping the concepts and theory. But overall the locus of power is moving to the e-learner and it is necessary to explain that this will be the case to them.
By step 5, the development stage, the participants are responsible for their own learning. This stage is for further exploration, synthesis and conceptualisation purposes. Learning at this stage will take place not only with regard to the topic, but also about the fellow e-learners’ experiences. At this stage little or no additional support is required. If we now reconsider the McKey model and the third factor which is functionality, we see that this relates very much to the quality assurance and methods that are necessary to ensure that the materials and the methods of delivery are consistent and of a high standard.

The final factor of McKey’s model is that of presentation. This not only relates to the professional presentation, nor merely to the support given from various departments interacting with the e-learner. The presentation internationally of the institutions provision must be appropriate, and this is where the Marketing Department’s analysis of what e-learners are requiring and promote e-learning at the Institution, is paramount.

Conclusion

The cultural change, which is necessary within our higher education institutions in order to support the new E-World, is apparent throughout this paper. Such is a pace of change that no one higher education institution can hope to achieve the benefits of this move in isolation. We need to learn from each other in partnership relationships, not only between the higher education institutions but also partnership with industry, commerce, public sectors and local communities. The provision of what was once described by Davies et al (1998), of a virtual University cannot be achieved in isolation.


