Dissertation Chapter - Literature Review

CHAPTER 2

LITEARTURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter outlines selected literature related to online education in higher education. The first section discusses the current trends in online learning at higher educational institutions which influence institutional, faculty, and student choices and perceptions of online learning. Included in this section is a discussion of the benefits of online education to demonstrate that online learning is a prevalent, viable, and important option in higher education. Challenges presented by online learning environments are also discussed to show the need for investigations of online quality. The second section defines online learning and the unique components which comprise online learning environments in order to distinguish online learning from the broader designation of distance education. A clear definition of online learning offers a context in which quality can be assessed.

The third section discusses the issue of quality in online learning. Six research based dimensions are identified, defined, and described as contributors to quality online learning experiences. Included in this description are the associated learning theories and the elements which exemplify each quality dimension. This section provides the foundation for understanding the design features of quality online courses. The fourth section discusses the research on disciplinary differences in online courses. Emerging research suggests that 'one size does not fit all' when creating online courses. The literature reports unique challenges associated with online education relating to discipline. In addition, certain online design elements may be better suited in certain content areas than in others. An understanding of these issues is important because they impact design choices.

The fifth section discusses online education and related aspects that determine its efficacy in application at the higher education level. Particularly it will examine human computer interaction, distance learning and its evolution, as well as organizational change. Besides, factors affecting faculties of higher learning institutions adoption of online education and instructional technology will be intrinsically evaluated.

The sixth section discusses the rationale for and value of using student perceptions to paint a portrait of quality online learning. The quality dimensions which inform online quality and the quality elements which instantiate the dimensions have been developed from research on graduate students' perspectives of online learning experiences. Research on the use of graduate student perceptions is also presented to demonstrate the validity of using student views to assess online quality. Finally, influences on faculty adoption of distance education, assessments, and influence on faculty adoption of online education, best practices of online instruction even the criticism and bloom's taxonomy will be analyzed.

Online Education in Higher Education Trends

Online education is not only becoming mainstream in higher education, but the growth rate for online education taken as a whole exceeds the growth of the overall higher education student population (Allen & Seaman, 2008). More than 3.9 million higher education students enrolled in online courses during 2007, it increased by 12.9% from the previous year while the overall population of higher education students experienced only a 1.2% increase in growth (Allen & Seaman, 2008). In addition to increased online education enrollments, the number of online degrees and course offerings is increasing. Online courses are offered across all disciplines at the higher education level including education, psychology, engineering, social sciences and history, information and computer science, health professions and related sciences, liberal arts and sciences, general studies, humanities and business. According to Allen and Seaman (2008), online representation is roughly equal across these disciplines with the exception of engineering. This demonstrates that online learning is not discipline specific and that all content areas are finding ways to include online learning as an integral part of degree programs. Benefits A number of perceived benefits are associated with online learning at the institutional level, faculty level, and student level. Higher education institutes that participate in online learning efforts report benefits related to both access and quality perspectives (Schiffman, Vignare, & Geith, 2007). In terms of access, institutions view online learning as a means to

improve student access and to increase growth in 29 continuing and professional education (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Online courses increase enrollment for universities by meeting the " needs of both distance students who live more than 50 miles away and students who live closer and want more flexibility" (Tallent- Runnels et al, 2007). Adult learners are the fastest growing population in higher education as lifelong learning has become a competitive necessity (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003) due to changes in the economy and the rapidly changing job market (Bishop & Spake, 2003). Online learning provides universities the opportunity to capture these students through online continuing and professional education extension efforts. From a quality perspective, institutions believe online learning has the potential to enhance the reputation of the institution, increase the rate of degree completion, improve student retention, and to provide pedagogic improvements (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Universities perceive investments in technology infrastructure and the development of online programs as indicators to the outside world that they are modern, state-of-the-art, and technology competent (Bishop & Spake, 2003; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2007). The use of online technology in higher education is "both a medium and a message of educational innovation" (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2007, p. 571). The realization of these outcomes has yet to occur as indicated in the literature. While no national statistic exists on online retention rates, anecdotal information from community colleges and four- year institutions reveal that student retention rates in online courses are lower than in the traditional face to face counterparts (Carr, 2000; Doherty, 2006). As for pedagogical improvements, educators, employers, and the general public view online learning as inferior to traditional face to face courses (Daymont & Blau, 2008) despite the extensive research that online students learn as much or better as those students in traditional face to face classes (Fillion, Limayem, Laferriere, & Mantha, 2008). For instructional faculty, online education offers opportunities for innovation and flexibility. With online education, faculty can invent new ways to promote meaningful learning experiences. According to the

Society for College and University Planning (2007), online learning can be viewed as "one of the few relatively unrestricted avenues for innovation in teaching and learning" (p. 7). Because online education distributes class activities across time and place as well as providing access to various media, faculty have the advantage of flexible scheduling, working from other geographical locations, and a vast choice of online resources and media to support their online teaching. Online education also lends itself to more interaction between faculty and students (Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2000). Students choose online options for convenience, flexibility, affordability, and the possibility of accelerating degree completion. The literature reports that convenience is the primary advantage of online courses for students (Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 2002; Bocchi, Eastman & Swift, 2004; Young & Norgard, 2006).

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