

Brick and Mortar University on the Way to Virtual University

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Abstract: Nowadays existence of every university is based on internet. In educational settings it is used for storing results and students' data, communication inside an organization, between an organization and students, teachers and students, between peers. Even brick and mortar universities are indeed semi- virtual organizations. It is no longer a question of using internet or not, it is a question of what it is used for. It is a profound dilemma especially for universities that have a reputation and long tradition of higher education. Internet lowers the costs of educational practices but how to preserve high outcomes of learning? What are the barriers that are needed to be overcome? How does it effect the academic level of students, faculty members and the institution by itself? Could all of the fields of study be offered as an online course? Presented is a sample of Art Education.

Key words: virtual university, blended learning, entrepreneurship in learning communities

Introduction

The Internet has transformed learning into a different level and has changed the character of a typical student, faculty and factors of universities. Gradually brick and mortar institutions offering higher education have implemented online collection of students' results. In 2000 to 2003 it was still rather a rare practice. Next step was offering online courses that soon has become very popular. "The number of students taking at least one online course has expanded at a rate in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments" (Storey and Tebes 2008, p. 3) Paule Chau (2004) wrote in „*Online higher education commodity*" that "E- learning has developed and impacted all different fields of studying: business, criminal justice, health administration, psychology, accounting, information technology, pedagogy, art and design etc." Ongoing digitization of education is unquestionable in all levels: associates, bachelors, masters, doctorate degrees. All types of institutions of higher educations: profit and non profit, public and private, traditional brick and mortar are dependent on the internet. Universities have evolved from using internet to store data to offering online courses finally into Virtual Organization as itself. Internet lowers the costs of educational practices but how to preserve high outcomes of learning? It is the main question for brick and mortar universities today. But there are others: What are the barriers that are needed to be overcome? How does it affect the academic level of students, faculty members and the institution by itself? Could all of the fields of study be offered as an online course? It could be presented on example of Art Education. Answers to these questions will allow the command of the main thesis of the article contained in the question: Is a Virtual University able to educate students on the same level as a brick and mortar University?

Blended learning

How do online courses affect universities? To examine the financial effect we will look closely at the University of Phoenix that is the biggest private university in America with a peak enrollment of almost 600,000 students in 2010. Although the numbers have drastically changed since then, mainly due to change in the economical environment, it is still an interesting case to analyze. University of Phoenix has targeted working adults as big potential market. Carnevale and Olsen (2003) claim that there are an "estimated 70 million working adults [who] have never earned a college degree" (as cited in DeFleur and Adams 2004, p. 151 in „*Online higher education commodity*", Paule Chau 2004)

With such a big number of people that are not able to attend regular university lectures, the University of Phoenix developed online courses. Which are much more accessible and cheaper for university. It is worth to look at numbers. In the year 2006 net earning of Phoenix University was 2 millions \$ and in the following 3 years has increased almost one million up to 2.9 millions \$, what has noticed by Paule Chau. This financial success in figures was mainly caused by offering online courses for adult students. The present financial crisis that the University struggles with has not changed that it is still the biggest private for-profit Institution that offers higher diplomas. After closing 115 brick-and-mortar locations they have still a nationwide network of 112 locations in 36 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and total enrollment of 328 0000 students. According to *New York Times* (2012,p.A22): "Enrollments at the University of Phoenix and in the for-profit sector over all have been declining in the last two years, partly because of growing competition from other online providers, including nonprofit and public universities, steady drum roll of negative publicity about the sector's recruiting abuses, low graduation rates and high default rates." To conclude three – quarters of their students were studying online and they were offered to move to nearby sites to continue their education in different

institutions. This study shows that e-learning is still growing but wrong procedures of recruitment might be a threat for a bad publicity what effects monetary success of the institution.

What are the admission requirements to enter the University of Phoenix ? The University has targeted students that are working adults. Most of them finished their high school years earlier. All of their scores gained in the past might not be representing their ability to perform now and succeed as university students. More adequate is their current working experience as a criteria to enter the University. What has made the boom in number of enrollments of the University of Phoenix. On the other hand it was a threat for the level of academic achievements of graduate students. This easy admission made the room for abuse and further failure in substantive education of University of Phoenix. However it is not a risk for the growth of online courses. They are still a very attractive alternative to the traditional face to face learning but it is a threat for their academic level of achievements. Now every institution that offers higher education needs to incorporate online learning.

“Based on a report by the Sloan Consortium, a consortium made up of institutions and organizations with the mission of integrating online education with mainstream higher education, in 2007 there were approximately 3.94 million online students, which marks a 12.9% increase from 2006 (Allen and Seaman 2008, p. 5)

Entrepreneurship in learning communities

Nowadays existence of every institution is based on the internet. In educational settings it is used for storing results and other students' data, communication inside an organization, between an organization - students, teachers - students, between peers. Even brick and mortar universities are indeed semi- virtual organizations. It is no longer a question of using the internet or not, it is a question of what it is used for. It is a profound dilemma especially for universities that have reputation and long tradition of higher education. Among an abundance that give on -line courses it is a threat that substantive level might drop as shown on example of mentioned before the University of Phoenix.

To give frame for this discussion we will focus on particular elements of functions of organizations that provide higher education. We will skip issues of protection and safety of storing data and the communication within educational settings. Internet lowers the costs of educational practices but how to preserve high outcomes of learning?

S.Hrastinski and J.Jaldemark after analyzing researches that had been conducted before (e.g., Fredericksen et al. 2000; Hiltz et al. 2000; Rovai 2007; Woo and Reeves 2007). are emphasizing that computer based communication between peers and teachers in educational realm has a positive effect. Face to face interaction is no more necessary to stimulate an intellectual growth of students. The easiness of access to information has changed the role of teachers from a person that stores knowledge in their head and has a monopoly on specialist's books to a guide that shows students reliable resources. Although the computer based communication has desired impact on studious growth of students it “is automatically and in most cases unintentionally built into mental functioning” (S.Hrastinski, J.Jaldemark , 2011)

How does it affect students psychology and their performance. What are the factors that decide whether the studies will be completed? Do students gain an overall understanding of their realm of study or do they gather unrelated to each other pieces of information. We will investigate this issue further on.

To examine challenges that occur in front of universities offering online courses We need to compare profile of an traditional and an online student. Face to face education offered a physical venue where learning was taking place. Students were gathered together where they could exchanged their ideas get an advice and mental support. Studying was a major task in their life and they could dedicate to it almost completely. They had common goal what made them feel as part of a community. All of these elements create environment for learning in brick and mortar universities. Thus people taking online courses are usually mature in their age. Apart from working often they have families to take care of. Their time is much more limited and they are isolated from other peers. “In fact, it has been argued that individual success or failure can depend on whether students feel like insiders rather than outsiders” (S.Hrastinski, J.Jaldemark, 2011) Therefore success of online seminars offered by semi or fully virtual universities lays significantly in creating and sustaining communities, where students could be able to get an advice, ask content related questions and receive emotional support. The feel of companionship would support their motivation to complete the studies. Crucial role of success of virtual or semi virtual universities is to create learning communities. Collaborative projects done through electronic media promote social communications that support learning outcome. Stefan Hrastinski and Jimmy Jaldemark (2011) have analyzed how online students interact on project group forums in relation to three aspects: social support, information

exchange, task management. It varies according to the internet tool being used and size of the team working together. To make it most effective and meaningful here are some suggestions to follow :

„Encourage information exchange by establishing requirements and by giving students reasons to participate”.

Asking questions to prove their critical thinking skills.

„Encourage shared task management among students.” To avoid particular students to dominant the whole flow of discussion.

„Encourage social support by organizing social events and by enabling private means of communication. Some students need more private means” to feel related to a group therefore more engaged in the project. Effectiveness of communication is also related to the comfort of knowing partners of discussion.

Further examining aspects of collaborative work : already Ling and Ku in 2006 found “that whether group members had similar or different backgrounds did not seem to have an impact on the degree of learning in an on - line course.” Chou, Pao-Nan (2012)

Group projects support individual learning advanced concepts, moreover being exposed to comments of people from different backgrounds deepen the understanding of subject and possibilities of implementation the knowledge. Presence of a mentor on such online group assignment may intimidate some participants but it is a guarantee that substantive outcome will be placed. Chou, Pao-Nan (2012) wrote: “Spatariu et al. (2007) reported that a discussion leader's intervention would improve the quality of argumentation in online discussions.”

Online tools of communications are mostly text related in order to create a complex learning there is a great need of planned live human interactions through internet during the course of study. Otherwise there is a threat that text might be misunderstood and wrongly interpreted. Another obstacle for online studying is the need of a social community of peers than for sure enhances learning. Chou and Pao -Nan (2012) have analyzed use of 5 different online tools that give variety of different stimulus in order to create motivated and effective learning environment.

They've examined cost effective (for free) online tools for seminars:

Blogging that encourages students to reflect on the subject, it could also storage description and requirements of course.

Skype conferences that help to avoid misunderstanding of text. Planned verbal life interactions might stimulate participants and minimize gaps in knowledge about the subject.

Podcasting the course instructor would need to prepare audio or video supporting aids to implement streaming of information.

Facebook in order to facilitate social support and create a learning community.

Wiki platform for the project so the course's mentor may observe and stimulate discussions.

All of the above online tools need to be launched by a university and operated by the course's instructors. It requires time to change teaching aids into online materials. So knowledge previously storage in instructor's head needs to be transformed into a online text or audio or video materials. Lack of face to face sessions creates a need of involvement in internet social medias in order to build a sense of community which increases workload for the course's instructor. It involves different process of learning. Rohan Jowallah (2012) wrote: view this change as the “demonopolisation of teaching” which is the shifting from the ‘teacher focus approach’ to the ‘student centered learning approach’. Therefore, it will be imperative for universities to consider how they will use new technologies to enhance online pedagogy to improve support for research students.”

Creating an online course of study requires entrepreneurship and innovations. It is far different from just giving a lecture. The instructor needs to organize from the scratch the whole process of participant's learning. Though there were made different researches on online group projects, dynamic of every group is different and unexpected issues will appear also related to specific for the realm of subject. The course's instructor needs to be not only a lecturer as in the traditional brick and mortar universities but mentor and coordinator. Technology based group projects facilitate a bigger flow of content related exchange of information. It means that the instructor needs to be highly qualified in the field as well as proactive. While the duration of the project instructor's role is to supervise work being done and check if it leads in the right direction. It might need redesigning the the whole project and task management. The coordinator needs to have manager's skills of dealing with people and the whole group. “ These proficiencies will require online tutors to be creative teachers who are supportive of the learner, skilled in monitoring the learning environment, able to motivate and stimulate the learner, and able to create critical learning interaction between themselves and their students” (R.Jowallah

2012) Along with the strong learning community there needs to be provided diversity in ways of delivering knowledge by greatly flexible and critically thinking instructors.

And further “ highlights this importance by stating that the humanized classroom leads to improved learning experiences, student accomplishment, and student retention. “ (R. Jowallah 2012)

Online courses on example of Art Education

Art education is the field that needs practice of craftsmanship in variety of techniques. To master these techniques there needs to be time to explore media. It can not be studied just by reading someones experience it requires to be done physically. It is hard to be an expert in ceramics when you have never touched the clay and used the kiln. However it doesn't mean that ceramics can not be offered as an online course. It would required a visit in ceramic art studios to experiment with the real medium. Students from all over the world before entering the course of study would need to researched if they would have access to an equipped art studios like: metal engraving, jewelry making, ceramic studio, photo studio, video studio, tailor studios, etc.. Technicians would be involved in the process of learning. Final result would be sent by post or just shown through video or sent by internet. Reflections done on internet, could be a proof of authentic and authorship of the projects. Part of the whole assignment could be gathering information of specifics of the medium as itself. It would require a variety general frames of the learning procedure but would give freedom of choosing field of study. So the learning would rely much more on participant's than the university. The University and instructor's role would on designing procedures and requirements to be fulfill, as well of method of assessing the project. Many universities that provide art education organize outdoor trips for painting. It could be an opportunity to build life community. All the knowledge based courses like Art History might be enriched by the access to locally find artifacts. Students from Greece might be encourage to study and prepare video about art of ancient Greece. That would be shared with students from different parts of the world. It would make the study very meaningful and involving in their own cultural heritage. Methodology of teaching might be taught by showing video examples of successfully conducted lessons. Online courses of specific subjects that requires physical activities can be possibly successfully conducted. However the experience and knowledge gathered though the studies is far more specific so it is more recommended for higher then bachelor diploma. To be an expert of the field university students need to first gain general knowledge.

Conclusion

A Virtual University is an institution that offers higher diplomas however the profile of their students is far different. Success of virtual universities lays significantly in creating and sustaining supportive learning environment. It requires creating a community where students can get emotional support, and opportunity for peer learning. The feel of companionship that will motivate them to complete the studies. Presence of a supervisor for the online projects is a guarantee that substantive outcome will be placed. What means that course's instructor will need to be much more involved in students' process of learning. His role will change from a lecturer to manager . However face to face interaction is no more necessary to stimulate an intellectual growth of students. Online tools of communications are mostly text related in order to create a complex learning there is a great need of planned life human interactions through internet during the course of study. Otherwise there is a threat that text might be misunderstood and wrongly interpreted. Along with the strong learning community diversity in ways of delivering knowledge and many content base interaction and greatly flexible critically thinking instructors the outcome of studies is highly possible to be highly successful.

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