How Well Does Your Online Learning Stack Up?

Online learning is education and training delivered and supported by technological networks such as the Internet. Students or learners are able to learn whenever they want and from anywhere they have access to the Internet. Online learning encompasses both distance learning and the provision of technology-enhanced learning within a traditional classroom.

The evolution of the Internet, increases in bandwidth capacities, and the popularity of personal computers have combined to see online learning growing at unbelievable rates. It is quickly becoming the learning method of choice for many, in particular, those who have had positive experiences with it at the outset. As long as organizations maintain quality and service, this growth phenomenon will continue for some time.

Discussion by participants in the Association Management Education program suggests many associations are delivering or planning soon to utilize online learning applications. A small group of associations launched online services back in 1997 and another larger group started in 2000. An even larger group is involved in development or expansion at this time. By 2005 I suspect it will be rare to find an association involved in some form of educational programming not providing online learning. Students in universities and colleges are slowly being exposed to online learning and in a few years they will expect their continuing professional development to be available in an online format.

Online learning is a fairly new initiative, and organizations that subscribe to continuous improvements are looking to evaluate their recent progress and practices to ensure their users are receiving an appropriate service level and value. Several associations have participated in self-evaluation activities, others have embarked on more formal benchmarking projects, some have brought in independent consultants to conduct the evaluation and benchmarking and yet some have engaged in minimal evaluation and make changes only upon receipt of one or more complaints. Associations that have been delivering online learning for several years are now asking themselves how well they are delivering their online educational programs. They are looking for tools, standards, guidelines and better practices to assist with self evaluation.

There are a number of publications, standards and guidelines available that are being used by organizations to assist with self evaluation and as reference material for consultants. User feedback and evaluation information will allow your organization to see how you stack up and will help determine the level and type of improvements necessary.

Since 1997 I have been involved in the development and delivery of over 35 online courses and modules for different organizations. Instructing and coaching over 100 course offerings has also provided me with insight into some of the trends and issues around development and delivery.

One thing I have noted is that, for some reason, those involved in online learning are treated more like customers than students.

Users want their basic requirements to be met and are not eager to jump into using complex courseware. They will move into the flash and splash features as they mature and develop their confidence with online learning. At all times they are more concerned with content and leaving the course with knowledge to help them be more successful in what they do. What that suggests is that we have to be careful not to let our online learning technology get too far ahead of our users.

Web cams might be a must for some courses in 2005, but their use in 2000 was simply not on for most students. Even now I only have one or two students take me up on the offer to look and talk. That may be because they tend to do their course discussion work late at night or early in the morning in casual wear, or because very few employers have web cams accessible to their staff.

Understanding online learning advantages and disadvantages helps identify potential areas for improvement as a self evaluation is completed. Organizations with an online learning strategy intent on retaining online learners know all to well the importance of confirming that what is developed and delivered meets user expectations.

Online Learning Advantages:

- No time spent commuting to class
- No travel costs
- Can lower costs for both learning providers and organizations that need training
- Often less costs for students than traditional programs
- Can be more effective for certain types of learners
- There are no geographical location constraints
- You can learn at your own pace
- Instruction can be more customized and flexible

Online Learning Disadvantages:

- Lack of face to face interaction
- Equity of access to learners of all backgrounds and parts of society
- Requires new skills and responsibilities from learners
- Educators need to learn to be effective online instructors
- Academic honesty of online students
- Types and effectiveness of assessments

- Hard for instructors to move traditional content online
- More time consuming for instructors to provide individualized feedback
- Equipment needs of students and learning providers
- Technical training and support of learners and instructors

User expectations have been surveyed and analyzed extensively in the last few years by providers of technology applications and others. Supportive solutions have identified and made. There are many organizations involved in this service and there is no shortage of applications available. Costs have gone down and service levels up.

Researchers, educators, providers, users and organizations have engaged in projects and established organizations to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of online learning continues.

It is only a matter of time before a collective of organizations will get together and will represent the innovation and excellence aspects of online learning. Included in this responsibility will include activities to develop guidelines and standards.

You don't have to wait for long to get some guidance and direction. There is assistance available now from a number of sources. Doing a web search will reveal significant sources and the need for a portal for this area.

One of the sources I use are the guidelines develop by Dr. K. Barker from British Columbia. Several years ago she worked with a number of organizations to develop guidelines. In fact her guidelines are recommended by key organizations. She is one of a number of Canadians on the leading edge in terms of online or e-learning. She has also developed a Consumer Guide to e-learning. This information is available on a number of sites. A good place to start is on Barker's site www.FuturEd.com.

The guidelines cover topics such as:

- Management of students
- Registration procedures
- Intake and placement procedures
- Management of student records
- Assistance with technologies being used
- Approaches to learning
- Instructional strategies
- Scheduling and timetabling
- Assessment of learning
- Appropriate technology
- Communications facilities, process and practices
- Intended learning outcomes
- Curriculum content
- Teaching/learning materials

- Technical design
- Marketing information
- Appropriate and necessary personnel
- Other learning resources
- Program plans and budgets
- Evaluation

Examples from the guidelines:

Technologies are appropriately used to:

- engage and support learners
- accommodate and promote individualization
- create opportunities for students to do meaningful work
- increase proficiency at accessing, evaluating and communicating information
- improve student abilities to solve complex problems
- nurture artistic expression
- enable active engagement in the construction of knowledge
- meet national and international standards for students with disabilities

Learning technologies are appropriate to:

- the field of study or subject matter content and skills
- the intended learning outcomes
- the relevant characteristics and circumstances of the learner
- cost and benefit for the learner
- provide multiple representations of content
- enable concept mapping within the learning environment
- make available real-world situations and simulations
- provide assistance, guidance and communications to the learner

These online learning standards are a good reference for self-evaluation at the present time. Documents like this will be refined and developed as technological and learning innovations occur. Perhaps now is the time to see how your organization's online learning activity stacks up.

This column features innovation and practical solutions applied to challenges, trends, issue and opportunities for the association community. Column editor Jim Pealow, MBA, CMA, CAE is a consultant and the Association Management Education Program Lead Instructor/Coach for CSAE. He can be reached at jim@amces.com.