

TEACHING EXCELLENCE WITH HI-TECH RESOURCES: WHAT DOES IT TAKE (LESSONS LEARNT)

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Summary: The educational industry (especially as far as further education is concerned) is characterized by explosive growth, giving host to a high number of entrants, both from the public and private sectors. This is especially due to the availability of technology, facilitating a movement towards an e-learning environment (e-education). The result is hyper competition and convergence with an unavoidable exit of some providers - as the industry moves towards consolidation and a higher degree of regulation.

It is against this background that providers should reconsider their strategic positioning in the industry. The guiding principle should be an appropriate and sustainable typology, incorporating a high degree of value innovation by taking cognizance of the experiences of various new entrants into the e-learning environment.

Introduction

The last years of the twentieth century have been marked by an unprecedented rise in the number of institutions embarking on programs delivered via e-learning platforms. In some instances it would appear as if some were enticed to go this route by the lure of countering declining student enrolments; others perhaps by the envisaged monetary gains (potentially it is a very lucrative market); and, possibly, others by the ease with which their demographic student profile can be put right.

In addition, it would appear that some have boarded the technology roller coaster and view technology as the alchemy of education.

In an industry which is characterized by hyper growth and convergence, many e-learning endeavors are threatened by an unexpected early demise, reducing it to just another 'flavor of the month'- something to put to rest in a cemetery where it will join other concepts which have been tried and discarded - as one of the dinosaurs of the postmodern era, the traditional education sector, continues on its merry way to unavoidable extinction.

It is against this background that current training and development endeavors should be reflected on and lessons learnt which could assist with the articulation of an appropriate e-education typology - a typology which could, in systemic fashion, facilitate transformation into an entity which is not only distinctly different, but also distinctly better to what it was before.

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2. Going back to zero (Lesson 1)

The famous futurologist Joel Barker, coined the phrase 'going back to zero'. In essence it means that if a paradigm shifts, everybody goes back to zero. It is immaterial how good institutions were at the old ways of doing things - it is simply no longer relevant.

This principle is directly applicable to the training and development sector. A simple force field analysis clearly indicates that:

- Readily available and quality substitutes for traditional training and development programs, abound
- The divide between public and private sector suppliers of training and development, has been bridged
- Technology is rendering concepts such as distance and time, irrelevant
- Despite authorities' futile attempts to stem the tide, training and development has become a global industry.

These realities have brought the traditional T&D sector to the brink, to the point where the risk is run of being put back to zero by the emergence of a new paradigm.

This new paradigm requires traditional T&D institutions to also provide for technologically mediated T&D. The lesson to be learnt is that it is no longer a case of residential or technologically mediated T&D, rather residential and technologically T&D as core elements of a new integrated paradigm. Technologically mediated T&D can therefore not be treated as a convenient 'add-on', something to become involved in if the particular institution happens to have excess capacity, or if a few eccentric academics who are always engaged in one or other quest to search for and find the academic world's holy grail, are enthusiastic about technologically mediated T&D.

3. E-education is not technologically mediated residential learning (Lesson 2)

Inconvenient but true.

Although the content of residential and e-education programs may be similar, the underlying instructional design and teaching strategies differ fundamentally.

In the extreme, if an institution's approach is based on 'talk 'n chalk', it poses an almost insurmountable barrier to e-education. Surviving on one's wits as a lecturer and 'freewheeling' from contact session to contact session are simply impossible in the e-education domain.

Embarking on e-education is thus an inherently risky affair. E-education is doomed if it is perceived and implemented as residential education which is technologically mediated. A fundamental rethink of how programs should be taught is therefore required. However, if institutions wait until such a fundamental paradigm shift is internalized as part of their 'being' before they embark on e-education programs, they may find that the opportunity window has closed -other, more adventurous (sometimes maybe less scrupulous?) institutions may have decided to run the risk and successfully establish themselves in the traditional feeder markets of less adventurous ones. The lesson therefore is that institutions cannot wait until all the facets of the new paradigm have been mastered; it is a case of 'learning by doing' (experiential learning).

At the same time institutions should guard against becoming so enthralled by technology that sight is lost of the fact that technology must be easily accessible and affordable to the various target audiences. This is a crucial consideration, especially in the context of South Africa where the socio-economic circumstances of the majority of the population are such that inappropriate technology can exclude them from e-education.

4. Embrace contextualism (Lesson 3)

An e-education student is not merely a residential student separated by distance from the institution. They should therefore not be treated as such.

E-education students can differ vastly from their residential counterparts in terms of dispositional and situational dimensions.

Although it will be a gross oversimplification to talk about a generic disposition of the e-education student it can, with a fair margin of safety, be speculated that such students should-

- Have an internal locus of control, enabling them to, to a large extent, take charge of their own learning experience
- Be highly motivated in order to be able to persevere and to succeed in the face of many barriers
- Possess an acceptable degree of both domain-general and domain-specific prior knowledge so as to be able to contextualize learning.

The lesson to be learnt is that the aforementioned dispositional attributes cannot be accepted as common to so-called first time students - giving rise to a host of questions as to whether and how e-education programs, especially those of a traditional residential institutions, should primarily be aimed at young, first time students.

Cognizance should however also be taken of e-education students' situational realities:

- The need to balance the requirements of study with the need to take care of family and career responsibilities
- The need to determine the pace of learning
- A need for intermittent synchronous learning
- Cost and time constraints, which have a bearing on their perceptions of the value of particular distance education programs.

The aforementioned situational realities necessitate that institutions should take them into account when delivering e-education programs. In the delivery of these programs the trap of a high incidence of synchronous learning interventions - especially if it requires that students should frequently travel to central points where such synchronous learning can be enabled, should be avoided. Such an approach is not aligned with the situational realities of the e-education student.

E-education programs should therefore be designed in such a manner that cognizance is taken of the contextual dispositional and situational realities of the distance education student.

5. Avoid institutional red tape (Lesson 4)

Residential students are very often exasperated with the amount of administrative red tape they encounter at institutions. When it comes to e-education students, a general rule of thumb is that more or less seventy percent of the student's interaction with the institution will be on administrative issues. For obvious reasons it is therefore vitally important that all administrative issues should be dealt with swiftly and efficiently. Each administrative interaction with an e-education student represents a crucial moment in the budding relationship between the student and the institution. Given the possibility for reinforcing the e-education student's total learning interaction with the institution, such interactions should

be optimized. This stresses the importance of a one-stop service portal into the institution through which all administrative interactions to and from the e-education student can be channeled and where the efficiency and speed with which the institution reacts, can be monitored and managed.

6. Leave content providers to their own devices (Lesson 5)

Definitely not.

A fragmented island style approach to e-education is undesirable for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the lack of uniform e-education practices.

In a highly competitive industry protection of the institution's quality image becomes a vital factor. Therefore, although academic ownership of eeducation programs should always remain with content providers, care should be taken that stringent and uniform design and delivery standards are met. A central vetting and clearing of e-education programs can therefore be considered to be a prerequisite for success.

Secondly, the high unit costs of an island approach.

This is especially the case with computer assisted learning where program design can be an extremely costly affair. In an island approach, funds are channeled to a number of islands where each island takes on the costly and time-intensive task of designing and packaging programs. The result:

- High capitalization cost per individual program
- So many islands, so many standards
- Lack of internalizing core competencies re computer assisted instruction
- Lack of institution wide learning.

For these obvious reasons, content providers cannot be left to their own devices (there are others as well, such as the sobering realization that the technology literacy levels of academic staff seems to be at a generally very low level - fear of technology may therefore be to the detriment of e-education programs).

7. Use subcontracting as a convenient escape mechanism (Lesson 6)

There are many facets of e-education which are foreign to the being of a traditional residential T&D institution. These facets include aspects such as marketing to and administration of e-education students. A joint venture with a private provider of e-education, especially one where the private supplier takes care of marketing and administration, seems an easy way out of this dilemma.

There are however a number of potential dangers in this arrangement-

- The possibility that the private supplier may be primarily fee-driven, good on marketing and selling but perhaps not so focused in maintaining the integrity of the value chain for the totality of the e-education student's learning experience
(The possible result could be low pass rates)
- The institution presenting the program be blamed for the mistakes/lapses of the private sector partner, which renders the institution strategically vulnerable
- The authorities perceiving the institution as abdicating its academic responsibility to a private sector partner.

The lesson therefore is that a T&D institution cannot abdicate academic responsibility and accountability to a private sector partner; furthermore that it does not make strategic sense to, via such arrangements with private sector partners, put the institution in such a strategically vulnerable position. (This is not to say that joint ventures with private sector partners are perceived to be undesirable, it depends on a synergistic division of functions and strategic control of the total distance education process to be vested in the T&D institution).

8. Position the institution as a full range supplier of e-education programs (Lesson 7)

It is to do with gaining and maintaining a position of sustainable competitive advantage. How does one differentiate the institution from the competitors? Probably not by becoming a full range supplier.

Can a traditional T&D institution really afford to become a 'pure' e education provider? Strategic logic dictates a niche approach as a means to sustainable strategic positioning, according to which specific target audiences are carefully selected and e-education programs, delivered via appropriate technology, offered to such audiences.

The implicit lesson is that e-education at traditional residential institutions should not be a numbers game - residential institutions' institutional capacities are simply not designed for servicing vast numbers of e-education students.

9. The value chain and value innovation (Lesson 8)

The value chain enables an institution to, in systemic manner, map both the primary and secondary value adding activities in the eeducation chain. As such it is an extremely valuable tool to reduce the complexity of eeducation to manageable simplicity; provide indicators for vital links between value adding activities; and, points to activities that are likely candidates for being outsourced to external suppliers.

The value chain also provides the platform for the application of another valuable tool, namely the concept of value innovation.

In applying value innovation to their e-education endeavors, institutions have to consider a number of key questions:

- Which e-education activities are, in terms of conventional strategic outlooks, considered as important but can possibly be done away with (e.g. a fixation on technology per se)
- Which activities/ perceptions/approaches can be de-emphasized (e.g. the perception that the institution has to be a full range supplier of e-education programs)
- Which activities should the institution be extremely good at (e.g. quality content, sound instructional design and packaging of material, appropriate delivery modes, efficient administration)
- Which activities should be added to the value chain in order to enhance effectiveness (e.g., the notion of a one-stop service portal)

The aforementioned tools are key instruments to facilitate both optimal strategic positioning and efficient operation of e-education programs.

The lesson to be learnt is that e-education is a complex system. The appropriate approach to reduce this inherent complexity to manageable simplicity is to apply proven instruments such as the concepts of the value chain and value innovation.

10. Glocalization of e-education (Lesson 9)

Given that it is totally unrealistic to expect institution-wide enthusiasm for e-education, it can be expected that pockets of e-education will begin to emerge in the institution. The inherent dangers of this dynamic are a fragmented approach to e-education with varying standards, which could seriously jeopardize the image of the institution as a whole.

Glocalization, a combination of the terms global and local, has, in terms of e-education, both an external and internal dimension.

Externally it refers to the need to source globally as far as content and technology is concerned; and, to have a global perspective both in terms of sources of competition and potential target audiences for e-education programs.

Internally it refers to the necessity to establish a central enabling entity which, in a global sense, works with the institution as a whole (informing, motivating and facilitating), whilst allowing faculties to locally, with the direct support of the central entity, develop need-driven e-education programs meeting global uniform design, packaging, marketing, delivery and service standards.

The lesson to be learnt is that a fragmented lone ranger approach with an evolving (by means of a trail and error approach) e-education typology is potentially detrimental to the institution as a whole and should therefore be avoided.

11. The unequivocal support of content providers (Lesson 10)

Reality is quite different.

There is very little direct correlation between academic content for which there is a proven high demand and eagerness on the part of the relevant content providers to embark on e-education.

Some of the academic departments at residential tertiary education institutions are flooded with students (a ratio of 1:600 is common in modules of some programmes). The academic content of such modules are in obvious high demand, but the overwhelming workload of the academic staff is such that they steer away from the initial additional workload of designing, packaging, presenting and servicing new e-education programmes. The inherent lesson is that special extrinsic and intrinsic incentives have to be established to build enthusiasm for e-education programmes. Furthermore, that the practical manifestation of incentives should be such that it should result in more people sharing the workload.

"Success breed success' and it is only when academic departments see and experience the positive practical manifestations of success that enthusiasm for e-education will be cultivated.

12. E-education only manifests off-campus (Lesson 11)

Some institutions treat e-education as something that you only find off-campus. They fail to see the unstoppable convergence of distance and residential education into a new open learning paradigm whereby both residential and distance education students will, in fluid arrangements, move between what is traditionally known as respectively residential and distance education. As this new paradigm evolves, ever increasing numbers of residential students will, whilst physically present on the campus, elect (insist?) to complete whole or parts of modules via e-education modes. Thus, any institution treating distance education and residential learning as two separate concepts ('something that does not affect us') may find themselves in positions where they do not serve the needs of their students.

13. Conclusion

In this paper it was endeavored to, from a systemic perspective, reflect on a particular institution's experiences with its e-education initiatives. A number of lessons learnt - both from a macro and micro perspective - were put into perspective. These lessons should be internalized and be considered in the articulation of an appropriate e-education typology for the institution.

In this context, decisions on information technology, as they apply to eeducation, are crucial. Technology has to be aligned with the eeducation typology of the student; be accessible and affordable from both an institutional and student perspective; should not be perceived as an alternative for sound instructional design and appropriate packaging of material; should receive careful attention as a likely candidate for outsourcing (at least some parts of it); and a balance should be struck between cutting-edge technology and the readily availability of a sturdy platform for e-education programs.

Finally, eeducation should not be seen as a quick cure for endemic problems facing institutions. For e-education to succeed a delicate balance has to be achieved and maintained between the situational and disposition realities of the e-education student and the institutional capabilities of the specific institution.

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