

Editorial

Educational Issues—Cyber-Learning: A Primer to Get You Started

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Is going back to school in your plans? Perhaps, you have considered pursuing a bachelors or masters degree in nursing or completing a mandatory continuing education offering? Maybe you already are enrolled in school and are required to take an on-line course? Or, have been asked to develop an educational program for patients having a particular diagnosis who seek care in the health care facility in which you work? Internet classes are here to stay, and increasingly these will target consumers and health professionals alike. This column will present a brief overview of some of the concepts and ‘lingo’ associated with web-based educational offerings.

Traditionally, learning occurred among a group of learners with a teacher, meeting a face-to-face within a classroom. Computers and network technologies, however, are modifying *where* learning occurs as well as *how* students learn. In fact, most educational programs are using the internet to offer entire courses on-line, and/or enhance existing courses.

Metaphorically, an internet-course can be described as a place (context) without physical boundaries (i.e., cyberspace), having a wealth of information (content) waiting to be actively sought by the teacher and the learner(s) as partners. In turn, from an environment filled with experts waiting to be accessed—the learners create in-depth and meaningful knowledge.

Along with the potential for greater student diversity, a potential benefit of on-line courses is that it can reduce or even eliminate commuting time and to teach and/or attend classes. Conversely, enrolling in an on-line course may require a greater degree of self-direction and

motivation on the part of the learner while the teacher may feel less in control of the learning environment.

Along with technology are some unfamiliar terms. For example, distributive learning is a rather recently coined term used in lieu of the more traditional descriptor >outreach or distance education. Of the two, distributive education has a broader connotation in respect to the time when a class is offered (schedule) and the site(s) to which it is delivered. Compared to the traditional classroom confined within a >bricks-and mortar structure, community of learners assumes a broader dimension in reference to a virtual classroom that is located in cyberspace. A course can be fully web-based (offered entirely on-line) or web-enhanced (supplementary materials offered on-line to augment classroom content); both of which may decrease actual student seat-time in the traditional classroom. Logging on refers to the action of accessing the course on the Internet via a computer. In the virtual classroom discussions can be synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (one can log onto the Internet-based classroom at any time within a 24 hour time frame). Posting is the action of responding (in writing) to an online assignment or to a peers comment; subsequently, the posted comments become apparent in the browser window (screen/page).

Types of technology and software that is used with web-based courses varies from one institution to another; and from one student to another. At this point in time, the lack of standardization seems to present the greatest challenge to both the instructor and students. For example, it is not usual for a student, or as the case might be, a patient to use a computer with Windows 95, or in some cases even DOS operating systems while the University or Hospital uses a state of the art operating system that does not support older versions. In other words, the two computer systems “do not communicate” or even ‘miscommunicate” with each other;

usually, resulting in the student becoming extremely frustrated and many times dropping or even failing the course. Before enrolling find out what hardware and software the university's computer department recommends for students who take web courses.

A few words about the software that is used to deliver a web courses such as WebCT or Blackboard. These are tools used to transition an educational offering from a 'traditional classroom' to an 'on-line format'. Usually, the program includes lesson plans (learning modules) with specific assignments, links to sites for student discussions and email communication; sometimes there is on-line testing and chat room capabilities, too. In other words, the software is comparable to the architectural structure of a school building and provides the environment for students to meet with the teacher. Teaching-learning strategies must, however, be modified to make the best use of ever changing technology.

Internet security is of utmost concern and everyone should have current and reliable anti-virus protection on their computer! Become knowledgeable about the virus protection provided by the university for its information system. Know how to install and update antivirus software and scanning files in your own computer. Privacy and confidentiality are two other important considerations in an online course. If such an environment is not present, participants will not establish rapport with each other. In a web course, class discussions usually are restricted to enrolled students and the instructor, and, on occasion, a guest speaker. When the audience is not comfortable about respect for privacy, the quality and quantity of individuals participation will also suffer.

In brief, technology is here to stay! Technology can make education more available and accessible to health professionals and consumers especially in more remote rural settings. Most who enroll in these courses rate them quite favorably and usually take another such offering. To

be successful, though, the individual must become “computer literate” and able to complete the course without feeling frustrated and completely overwhelmed. As with most new things, such as playing a musical instrument or using a new piece of equipment in the hospital, there is a learning curve, that is, one must first learn the language, then organize the necessary equipment, and finally, practice to become proficient in its use.

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