

R.G. Damary

(Институт бизнеса и управления «INSAM»
Женева, Швейцария)

Н.К. Прядилина

(ФГБОУ ВПО «Уральский государственный
лесотехнический университет»)

THE ROLE OF ON-LINE EDUCATION: A PRACTICAL VIEW

В статье рассмотрен практический опыт он-лайн-преподавания, который с успехом может быть использован в дополнение к традиционному академическому образованию.

Background

Distance education, the very idea that studies could be conducted mainly from home, was pioneered by the UK's Open University, which opened its doors in 1971. That was long before the Internet and e-mails. Everything was done by lectures over the television, personal tutors and exchange of letters. «Distance education» became «on-line education» only in the late 1990s when Internet access became widely available (Open University, 2014).

Since then on-line education has become a phenomenon throughout the world, with over 1,000 educational institutes offering programmes, and the number of students taking at least one course on line around 7 million (Babson College, 2012).

This paper reflects the experience of an on-line instructor who helped design and implement on-line business studies at Robert Kennedy College, a Swiss business school founded in 1999 and delivering postgraduate programme validated by British universities. The annual intake of students is well in excess of 1,000 per year. Programmes are taught on-line, but always include a week's residency (Robert Kennedy College, 2013).

On-line learning obviously requires self-discipline and motivation for the students to benefit from it. That requires a degree of maturity more likely to be found in adults, which makes on-line education better suited for post-graduate courses and senior undergraduate. They are particularly adapted to the needs of working professionals because of the flexibility with which the student can adapt the pace and timing of learning.

Student Engagement

A common criticism of on-line education is the absence of direct interaction between instructor and student. But is there much interaction

when lectures are delivered ex-cathedra and the students are left largely to their own devices? In some of the older UK universities the long-established «tutorial» system closed the gap, but it is too expensive and difficult to administer with a large student body (Elearning-Companion, 2013).

There is a curious way in which on-line education actually increases student/instructor contact – not face to face, admittedly – but by continual on-line interaction. In some cases this might be by e-mail exchange. However, a major alternative (and this is the route with which the author is experienced) is to work with a group of students in a «forum», made up of 20 to 40 participants.

In common with traditional courses, a syllabus with background reading is established, but the paradigm of the instructor imparting his/her knowledge to passive students is nearly totally abandoned. This author likes to draw an analogy to the Knights of the Round Table. Just as King Arthur was first among equals, so it is in a forum. It is sometimes difficult to persuade students not to address their posts solely to the instructor/moderator, but, in time, they understand that everyone has knowledge to bring and everyone has something to learn.

For this approach really to work, the instructor must be ever present on-line at the forum, making his own posts but also commenting on most of the student posts, gently encouraging them and pushing them not only to cover the material of the course, but also to bring in new material from their own research and experience.

Of course, there are «skivers» (slang for those who let others do the work) and cheats, who seek and download papers they present as their own at assessment time (yes, assessments and grades are still an important part of on-line education). Fortunately, for the English language at least, there is a system called «Turnitin» which quickly spots plagiarism, now a plague for all types of educational institution. There is correlation between active forum participation and assessment results.

The mention of the English language merits further consideration. English has now become the dominant world language in academia. Whether English is a student's native language or a good second language, his/her choices for on-line education are boundless.

Writing Quality Papers

This instructor has to spend a lot of time in coaching and correcting student papers. Written papers are an important part of on-line education as they demonstrate that the student really has learned and oblige him/her

to develop and express that learning. Papers range from literature review, through case analyses to essays.

The challenge in all of them, but especially for literature reviews, is to convince the students that they use their own words. How tempting it is for them to find suitable texts on the Internet and simply copy/paste. Doing that without acknowledgement is plagiarism, but even with proper citations, copy/pasted work is inherently boring and shows little about what understanding a student may have (iParadigms, LLC, 2013).

This problem can be greatly reduced by discouraging direct quotes, unless they are short and pithy. Demand that students express the ideas behind the quote in their own words. Even paraphrasing is better than copy/pasting, as it ensures understanding.

Basic writing skills seem to be in short supply today. This instructor spends a lot of time correcting English errors, such as «it's» versus «its», but many shortcomings have nothing to do with the language of the paper. They are about structure and sentences. Whether writing a literature review or an essay, the first operation should be to structure logically to take an argument forward, building on what has gone before. Headings help.

The next issue is paragraphing. How many students today mix themes in paragraphs, making them far too long? The old rules of one theme of concept per paragraph and the opening sentence mentioning the theme still apply.

Then sentencing. Many students simply join together in one what are clearly separate sentences, using «and». Too many subordinate clauses also reduce readability. Better to err towards making sentences too short than too long.

In French there is a delightful word, «remplissage» (filling) which is used to describe phrases which bring nothing in style or content to a paper. Examples include «I firmly believe that», «it is important to note», «it is worthwhile considering». A simple rule: eliminate them!

Finally, but most importantly, there arises the issue of citations. In recent years, the «Harvard» system of citations has imposed itself as the standard all academic papers must follow. The bibliography must give full details, but the citation in the text should consist of only the author's surname and year (plus the page number for direct quotes).

The problem with the Harvard system, as contrasted with footnotes, (which are still the norm for books) is that they break up the flow and therefore the readability of the text. The solution lies in limiting citations to one or two per paragraph and to put them at the end of the paragraph. This may

not be practical all the time, but the more this practice can be followed, the smoother the flow of the text and its logic.

Numeracy

Along with writing skills, numeracy seems also to have declined in recent year. This concerns not just mathematics in general, but simple, everyday arithmetic.

Take for example percentages. They are widely used in everyday life and in most fields of study. Yet a great majority of the students encountered by this instructor have no idea of how to manipulate them. Give students an elementary test like «a price grows by 10% but then falls by 10%, what is the net change of price?», and results will be very disturbing.

The inability to handle percentages epitomises the growing weakness of the knowledge of elementary arithmetic. Again a few elementary lessons on arithmetic may be required before getting down to real course content.

Integrating On-line education

Most of this paper is devote to the delivery of on-line courses. If an academic institute was established specifically for on-line education, it has many advantages, such as low overheads, accepting students for all over the world and instructors able to teach from their home bases. Such applies to this instructor's «home base», Robert Kennedy College.

For established universities, in contrast, there are high fixed costs, teaching staff used to traditional lectures and classrooms, and the presence of a given student body. One approach for them is to establish on-line education as a stand-alone operation with a distinct and wide-spread student body. The existing bricks and mortar structures can add value by requiring one or more «residencies», whereby students attend traditional classes as a complement to their on-line learning (so called «blended learning»).

Yet such an approach only begs the question of how on-line learning can enhance the quality of established universities. Perhaps blended learning can show the way for the use of on-line education as a support for traditional university courses. It certainly can, but only provided brings added value, and does not simply replace lectures. Such additional value can be found in the paradox that on-line learning can encourage more individual interaction between instructor and student than traditional lectures. Students on-line are free to express themselves and interact with each other and the instructor in a way that in situ teaching can scarcely match. Remember King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table!