

# A Technological Revolution: Social Implications of E-Learning

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**Abstract:** There is currently a technological revolution in higher education: E-learning is its name. The growth of e-learning is explosive, it's unprecedented, it's exciting, it's disruptive, it's . . . . We must understand the complexities of e-learning—advantages, disadvantages, examples, and promises—in order to identify and address the many social implications.

Quality education for students. This is not a new idea, this is not something someone just dreamed up. This is a reality, and it's becoming more complex by the day. There is currently a technological revolution in higher education: E-learning is its name. The growth of e-learning is explosive, it's unprecedented, it's exciting, it's disruptive, it's . . . . We must understand the complexities of e-learning—advantages, disadvantages, examples, and promises—in order to identify and address the many social implications.

The strategic direction of our institutions of higher education is being influenced by a range of conditions, one of which is the advent (read that as "demand") of online learning (read that as "e-learning"). Flexibility is a huge selling feature. Availability is a huge selling feature. Competition is a huge selling feature. Accessibility is a huge selling feature. And the list goes on. As more institutions are offering online courses, they are finding themselves having to address factors such as teaching strategies, technology demands, and social implications associated with e-learning.

We must understand e-learning as a whole, including social implications, to be best prepared to meet the needs of our institution, our faculty, and our students. For an interesting read, *E-Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Garrison and Anderson provides some very thoughtful, useful information. In addition, articles are available which address these social implications and cautions. This presentation will summarize some of the points found in the literature,

advantages and disadvantages of social implications of e-learning, some examples of successful and not-so-successful e-learning experiences, and some projections for the future; the intent of the presentation is to promote discussion of these social issues.

### Advantages of E-Learning

There are a number of advantages of e-learning. First, we are using state-of-the-art technology and instructional strategies; or at least we should be. Cultures can be shared through e-learning, if participants wish to share cultures. Disabilities can be accommodated, with or without the knowledge of other participants. Gender may not be an issue, because in many situations, gender is unknown—or it can be. Because of global access, the classroom may be the world. So many more advantages, so little time to discuss them all, but we should. E-learning gives us the opportunity to use state-of-the-art instructional strategies. It can also be an “equalizer,” whether we are talking about cultures, gender, geography, etc.

### Disadvantages of E-Learning

Just as a glass may be half full, it may also be half empty. Which means, there are also disadvantages to e-learning. Class members with disabilities may be functioning at a disadvantage for a number of reasons. Some participants may be technologically challenged and are hesitant to participate in full. Online discussions may inhibit class members, or they may encourage banter. One of the common disadvantages to e-learning is that some students, especially those for whom English is not their native language, have difficulty communicating and being understood. Another group of students may experience computer or technology anxiety, which may in turn may impact their learning and their final grades.

### Strategic Issues of E-Learning

The advent of e-learning has been a shocker to some people. Some people have asked, “Who would have ever thought?” and have fought the e-learning wave crashing into the educational arena.

Flexibility is a huge issue. The administration may have courses taught face-to-face, online, or hybrid—to meet the needs of the institution, the department, the faculty, and/or the students (not necessarily in that order). For the faculty, online courses permit them to multitask and be “in two places at

one time," so to speak. And for the students, they may take classes simultaneously at institutions anywhere in the world.

Availability is a key element in course selections—at least to some students. There are some students, for whatever reasons, opt for online courses. They may have an option of taking a course section based on whether they want to register for an online course; in other instances, the students have absolutely no choice—the course is online with no face-to-face option available.

Competition is steep for online courses, especially when many institutions offer the same course and the transferability from one program or institution to another is fairly uncomplicated. One bit of advice to students—they should meet with their advisor to determine whether the course taken at XYZ Institution is transferable to their home institution. This pre-approval process can certainly save disappointment, waste of financial resources, and loss of time in the event a particular course from a particular institution will not be accepted.

Teaching strategies for online courses do not necessarily parallel those strategies used in a face-to-face class. It is paramount that instructors receive adequate training in using the technology as well as knowing (and using) strategies which are most appropriate for online learning. Not only should instructors be trained to use a course management system, but also it would be beneficial if students received some type of official training in how to participate in an online course; this "introduction" could be in the form of a required course or perhaps even a tutorial which must be completed satisfactorily prior to registration for an online course.

The technology demands of an online course can create chaos for faculty and students alike. The institution has an obligation to provide appropriate technology (CMS) for the online course. The students, in turn, have an obligation to meet the minimum technology standards established by the institution. Of course, a dial-up system of interconnect can be a challenge, and faculty need to determine options that can be readily received by these users.

### Social Implications of E-Learning

The social implications of e-learning may be categorized into the following types of issues: cultural, gender, lifestyle, geographical, religious/spiritual, literacy, disabilities, and digital divide.

Within the cultural issues category are content, multimedia, writing styles, writing structures, Web design, and participant roles. Some content, although crucial to the course, may be either unacceptable or unfavorable with certain

members of the class. If faculty are aware of a sensitive component of the discussion or material covered, how can that faculty member lead the class to include or exclude the materials? Even writing styles can impact the process of holding an online course. The students and instructor need to know the “rules of the road” of written assignments. And, what participant roles are expected and/or tolerated; and, if the expectations are not met, who is responsible for keeping discussions and homework on track?

Gender issues continue to be a part of class, even though people are separated by miles and even continents. Possibly it is the instructor’s responsibility to monitor facilitation and rotate leadership roles in groups to assure gender neutralization. Any behavior issues must be addressed and corrected immediately.

Lifestyle differences take on any number of forms, and the instructor will need to be on guard to assure equal treatment of class members, regardless of their respective lifestyles and preferences. In some situations the students themselves will take on this monitoring role, while in other situations the instructor must step in. The “different strokes for different folks” adage must be maintained—preferably with a minimum of disruption to the entire class.

Geographical issues and differences make be very apparent, especially when we are looking at a global perspective. For example, if a chat room activity is to take place, all impacted time zones need to be accommodated. Within this category would also fall the insensitive locale jokes. And even the technology issue of Internet access needs to be considered. In some communities, dial-up access is the only possible means of interconnect; there are no alternatives.

Religious and spiritual considerations must be addressed and honored. Perhaps it would be unwise for an instructor to require work be done on a Saturday or a Sunday, given that these days may be religious days for some religions; suggest, perhaps, a block of time when activities might be assigned. A sensitivity to religions is critical.

Literacy should be a “given” for an online course, but it cannot be overlooked. Regardless of the level of the course, there will very possibly be people who lack certain skills (or at least could use improvement): reading, writing, information, and keying (typing) are skills which are necessary but may need improving.

Disabilities must not be overlooked. We have ADA accommodation issues with which we need to comply, whether it be for the instructor or the students.

Text alternatives and other formats may be necessary. Who is available on the campus to assist with these accommodations?

The Digital Divide is the last category within these social implications to be discussed in this presentation and paper. Regardless of how the term “digital divide” is defined, it means there is a gap, whether this difference be between whites and minority groups, men and women, persons with disabilities and the remainder of the population, young and older members of the class. It comes down to differences—those without something (whatever this something happens to be) and those without it. Accessibility to technology and the training to use this technology will help reduce the digital divide, the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

### Conclusion

The social implications of online learning center around one primary tenet: students all need to feel a part of the class, regardless of where they are located physically or geographically. The “missing of connection” to the other students in the class and with the institution can impact the success of an online student. By addressing some of the social implications mentioned above, students can be made to feel connected with others in the class.

### Suggested Readings

Conrad, Rita-Marie, and Donaldson, J. Ana. (2004). *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Wiley Imprint.

Garrison, G. Randy, and Anderson, Terry. (2003). *E-Learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Framework for Research and Practice*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Palloff, Rena M., and Pratt, Keith. (2003). *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Wiley Imprint.

Simonson, Michael; Smaldino, Sharon; Albright, Michael; and Zvacek, Susan. (2000). *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, an imprint of Prentice Hall.

