

A Critical Review of Online Education

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Abstract

Online education makes education more accessible, encourage lifelong learning, and encourage technology literacy to cope with the current technological society. Even though online education has its advantages, but many critics are against online education because “students feel isolated and uninvolved in the learning process”, online courses and programs have high dropout rate, the inability to develop certain skills through online learning, students lack learning styles or skills that needed to perform well in online courses, and lecturers lack the teaching style or necessary skills required for online courses. In reality, research points that these criticisms are not true or not longer true.

Furthermore, there are research conducted on the quality of online education; hence, it is not as bad as people portray it to be. In addition, it was revealed that perceptions of students and employers towards online education are very important.

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Therefore, this article ends with a brief guideline on providing online education.

บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาผ่าน Internet ทำให้คนสามารถเข้าถึงการศึกษาได้มากขึ้น สนับสนุนการเรียนรู้ตลอดชีพ และสนับสนุนความสามารถทางเทคโนโลยีใน สังคมเทคโนโลยีปัจจุบัน ถึงแม้ว่าการศึกษาผ่าน Internet จะมีข้อดีแต่ก็มี นักวิจารณ์หลายคนไม่เห็นด้วยกับการศึกษาผ่าน Internet เพราะนักเรียนจะ รู้สึกโดดเดี่ยวและไม่มีส่วนร่วมกับการบวนการเรียนรู้ วิชาและหลักสูตร ออนไลน์มีนักเรียนเล็กเรียนกลางคันเป็นจำนวนมาก การเรียนรู้ออนไลน์ไม่สามารถ พัฒนาทักษะบางอย่างได้ นักเรียนไม่มีสไตล์การเรียนรู้หรือทักษะการเรียนรู้ที่ เหมาะสมกับวิชาออนไลน์ และอาจารย์ไม่มีสไตล์การสอนและทักษะการสอน สำหรับวิชาออนไลน์ ในความเป็นจริงงานวิจัยกลับชี้ว่าข้อวิพากษ์วิจารณ์เหล่านี้ ไม่เป็นความจริง หรือไม่จริงอีกต่อไปแล้ว คุณภาพการศึกษาผ่าน Internet ไม่ได้แย่อย่างที่คิดเพราะมีการค้นคว้าเกี่ยวกับคุณภาพการศึกษาผ่าน Internet และมุมมองของนักเรียนและผู้จ้างงานต่อการศึกษาผ่าน Internet สำคัญมาก ดังนั้นบทความนี้จึงจบด้วยข้อเสนอแนะสำหรับการจัดการการศึกษาผ่าน Internet

Introduction

Many educators believe that education must be accessible to all (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012). Furthermore, they also encourage the idea of lifelong learning and technology

literacy to cope with the current society. These three points can be made possible through online learning. But online learning had received both support and criticisms. Hence, this article will try to make a case to support online education by talking about the advantages, criticisms, quality, perceptions, and providing successful online education.

Online learning address the goal of education accessibility (Drago, Peltier, Hay, & Kodgkinson, 2005) and flexibility (Lauver, Drum, Windsor, & Miller, 2013) since learning can occur in areas without schools and/or universities given that the area has Internet access, access to computer, and required computer software. Hence, students don't have to travel long distances for education. Therefore, they don't have to spend a lot of time traveling. Instead, they can use travel time to study or work on something else.

Online learning address the goal of lifelong learning since learning occurs at the pace of the learner, unlike traditional classroom learning where the duration of the class and the pace of the students in the class determines the learning pace, which may not be suitable for all the students in the class. Furthermore, due to the flexibility of online learning, which usually occurs at a time convenient for the student, people who work can learn during their free time. Hence, there is a chance that there will be more people furthering their education through online learning.

Online learning address the goal of technology literacy

since students who engage in online learning must be equipped with the ability to use technology in order to succeed in online learning.

In this paper, online learning is learning that occurs online, which includes online courses and online programs. Here, online course shall be defined as a course or subject that is offered online and online programs are full Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral programs that are offered online.

Searching for online programs on the Internet would result in many hits. This shows that there is a growing popularity in online learning and since the supply grows according to demands, then there must be a growing demand for online learning. Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012); Drago, Peltier, Hay, & Hodgkinson, (2005); and Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montanez (2008) support that online education is a growing market. It grows at such a fast rate that the demand for online programs exceeds the supply of online programs available.

Criticisms of Online Education

Some of the disadvantages of online education are “students feel isolated and uninvolved in the learning process”, online courses and programs have high dropout rate, the inability to develop certain skills through online learning, students lack learning styles or skills that needed to perform well in online courses, and

lecturers lack the teaching style or necessary skills required for online courses (Drago, Peltier, Hay, & Hodgkinson, 2005). Each disadvantages of online education will be discussed individually below.

The first criticism is “students feel isolated and uninvolved in the learning process.” In online learning, students don’t get the chance to meet with their lecturers and classmates face-to-face. Sometimes, this makes them feel isolated and craving for human interactions. Furthermore, the delays in feedback from lecturers are likely to make this problem worst. On the other hand, this criticism is only true for online learning in its pioneer years. Presently, technology is more advanced than what it used to be; hence, students are able to have group discussions online. This means that students get to interact more with lecturers and classmates, but it is usually harder since some students could live on the other end of the globe; hence, the time zone difference could delay feedbacks (Drago, Peltier, Hay, & Hodgkinson, 2005; Lauver, Drum, Windsor, Miller, 2013). Furthermore, feedback from lecturers varies in type. They come in the form of corrected assignments and examinations (simplest cognitive feedback), comments on assignments and examinations (diagnostic feedback), suggestions to improve assignment (prescriptive feedback), emails, online grade book, and “synchronous and asynchronous commentary (Eom,

Wen, & Ashill, 2006).

The second criticism is online courses and programs have high dropout rate. Shea & Boser (2001) claims that online programs could have drop out rates as high as 60%. They believed that it's because students' needs were not satisfied; hence, they decided to drop out of the program. Drago et al. (2005) disagrees by saying that drop out rates for online programs are declining and some programs may not have any dropouts. Furthermore, they said that the online program that they studied had drop out rates similar to traditional face-to-face programs.

The third criticism is students' "inability to develop certain skills through online learning." Students who study online are unable to develop skills; such as: public speaking skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, creative thinking skills, and analytical skills. On the other hand, Drago et al. (2005) disagrees. They claimed that students in online programs get to develop their public speaking skills and communication skills. Furthermore, they are able to work on their discipline, writing, ability to work independently, comfortable using technology (Caudron, 2001), and motivation (Lauver, Drum, Windsor, & Miller, 2013; Caudron, 2001).

The fourth criticism is students lack learning styles or skills that needed to perform well in online courses. Cano-Garcia & Hughes (2000) claims that online programs are not for everyone since different people have different learning styles, skills, and

preferences. Hence, online programs are not for people who lack motivation, lack discipline (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006), and struggle with technology. Again Drago et al (2005) disagrees. They claimed that online programs could be designed so students will have the opportunity to choose. For example, online programs can let students choose whether they want to work alone or in groups.

The last criticism is lecturers lack the teaching style or necessary skills required for online courses. Just like students have preferences in their learning, lecturers also have preferred teaching styles (Grasha & Yangarber-Hicks, 2000). Teachers who struggle with technology would not do well in online courses. Furthermore, Eom, Wen, & Ashill (2006) stated that in online learning, the lecturers' role is that of a facilitator who guides, stimulates, challenges, and empowers their students. Drago et al. (2005) agrees that not all lecturers are suited for online learning, but it's not impossible. The institution could provide appropriate reward systems and technological support to help teachers in areas that they feel uncomfortable.

Quality of Online Education

Shelton (2010) worked on quality indicators for online education. The results of the study revealed nine categories of indicators, which are: institutional support, technology support, faculty support, course structure, course development and instructional design, teaching and learning, student support, social

and student engagement, and evaluation and assessment. Hence, it is not true that online education does not have any quality since there are quality indicators.

Perceptions of Online Education

Even though online courses have quality guidelines, but if students do not perceived that online education has quality, then they would not enroll in online programs. Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montanez (2008) see the importance of how students perceived quality of online learning, so they conducted a research on the topic. They found that for students who had experience with online learning, “comfort with technology and motivation to learn technology skills were related to satisfaction with online courses, which was related to perceived quality” (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montanez, 2008). Hence, if students were comfortable with using technology and were motivated to acquire technological skills, then they would be satisfied with online courses, which make them perceived that the course was of quality. Furthermore, this could also mean that the actual quality of the course does not affect the students’ enrollment as long as they perceived that the course was of quality.

Online education increases the number of students enrolled in institutions of higher education. Hence, more money was made due to the increase in enrollment rate. Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012) found that when online programs

were offered, the number of students enrollment increased, the number of students enrolled in online programs were higher than the number of students enrolled in traditional programs, and income from online programs were higher than income from traditional programs. Furthermore, they also believed that the income from online programs would help pay a total of 12 teachers' salary, while traditional programs could only pay for one teacher's salary, but this is only true for the university where this study was conducted. In universities where the number of students enrollment in online programs are not as high as the university in this study, the income from online programs might not be able to pay for 12 teachers' salary. Furthermore, income from online programs can fund further development work in education. In addition, it also improves teachers working conditions since there is a sufficient fund to fund the operation of the program.

Employers' perception of online education is also important since employers are also stakeholders (Linardopoulos, 2012). Linardopoulos (2012) found that employers pick candidates with degrees from traditional face-to-face programs over candidates with degree from online programs; 96% of employers would hire candidates with degrees from traditional face-to-face programs. Employers perceived that online programs are inferior because it lacks interaction, lacks academic rigor, higher risk of cheating, lack of commitment, and "relationships with diploma mills." Furthermore, Columbaro & Managhan (2009) found that employers would

consider candidates with degree from online programs if the degree is from a well-known and recognized institution, the institution is an accredited institution, and if students is seems to be more self-directed and disciplined.

Providing Online Programs

Since online education have so many advantages and benefits when compare to traditional education; hence, the latter half of this article will discuss about shifting from traditional education or offering only traditional education to also providing online programs.

Offering effective and successful online programs is not easy to achieve since it involves many factors as can be seen in the following excerpt taken from Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012), “full-scale solutions encompassing whole [online] educational programs involve more than teaching and learning issues.” It also involves committed and supportive management, grass root movement that originate from the department level, infrastructure, involvement and support of staff, and involvement of stakeholders (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012). In addition, ethics of educators and administrators also plays an important role in effective and successful online programs.

Supportive management is a factor that determines whether online programs would be successfully established or not. This is also supported by Hillman & Corkery (2010) in the

following quote: “ educational management plays an important role for the development from distance to totally online programs and online education cannot be viewed as a simple adjustment or a ‘tag on’.” The aspects of management that contributes to online programs being successfully established are leadership (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012) and commitment of department heads (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012; Lofstrom & Nevgi, 2007).

Grass root movement that originates from the department level is another factor that contributes to the successful implementation of online programs, which is supported by Hillman & Corkery (2010) & Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012).

Infrastructure is one of the many factors that affect the successful implementation of online programs. Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012) supports this in the following quote: “online programs require a solid institutional infrastructure to support the programs along with a willingness to collaborate and communicate among departments on campus.”

Involvement and support of staff is another factor that continues the success of online programs; this is supported by Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist (2012); MacKeogh & Fox (2009); and Roberts (2008).

Ethics of educational leaders and administrators is another factor that contributes to successful online programs. Ethics is very important for educational leaders because the best interests of students is the heart of the decision making process

(Shapiro, 2006). Furthermore, educational leaders are responsible for the “broader community welfare of the students, teachers, and parents that schools serve” (Vogel, 2012); hence, it is very important for them to have ethics.

Involvement of stakeholders is also important for the successful establishment of online programs, which is supported by MacKeogh & Fox (2009) and (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, online education has both strengths and weakness and is not for everyone due to differences in learning style that does not suit online education. Furthermore, there are many researches being conducted on online education, so it should not take too long before quality indicators are accepted worldwide. In addition, it will take time, patience, commitment, hard work (Soderstrom, From, Lovqvist, & Tornquist, 2012), and effective technical support for quality online programs to be offered successfully (Langan, 1997).

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