

E-LEARNING: THE STRATEGY CONTINUUM

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Introduction

E-learning technologies have caught the attention of educational institutions in recent years. Established institutions – from small technical colleges to the largest universities – and new specialised vendors have invested significant resources to gain a foothold in this huge and rapidly growing market. Although some high profile e-learning ventures have been discontinued in the last few months, in some cases after incurring heavy financial losses, industry analysts suggest that this may be part of a process of industry consolidation rather than a sign of decline (Adkins, 2002).

For established educational institutions, e-learning technologies seem to hold great potential. The prospect of offering educational services across physical and time boundaries, reaching new markets and increasing enrolment and revenue while avoiding costly investments in physical infrastructure certainly lures educational administrators. National or international competition for students, historically limited to the top educational institutions with powerful brands and ample residential resources, suddenly seem within grasp of any institution with adequate technology and enough human talent.

As exciting as these scenarios sound, realising the potential of e-learning technologies has proven to be more complex than foreseen. At ORT Uruguay University we have been using e-learning technologies since 1999 and had our fair share of successes and failures. Many lessons have been learned in the process. This paper provides a framework to help thinking about e-learning projects based on our experience.

Dimensions of e-learning applications

E-learning applications have different dimensions that must be accounted for in any feasibility analysis: technological, economic and pedagogic among others.

Technological decisions are usually the most salient in e-learning discussions, with decisions strongly influenced by tech staff or faculty with a strong technological interest and (sometimes) expertise. Risk is that tech-dominated thinking may lead to decisions oblivious of pedagogic or financial considerations.

Economic and financial issues tend to be overlooked in the initial stages of e-learning projects. A “light touch” by administrators may be beneficial for individual innovators experimenting with new technologies and teaching approaches in large educational institutions. However, to harness the power of e-learning, relatively large

numbers of teachers and courses must be involved. As the use of e-learning expands and becomes more systematic within an institution, financial and marketing planning and management become more important to ensure sustainability. E-learning is a rapidly changing field though, where relatively little academic or practitioner knowledge is stable, tested and publicly available. Consequently, economic and marketing studies tend to uncritically project assumptions from FTF (face to face) education to the e-learning field in the same manner that early cinematographers produced movies shaped by the scenic rules of theatre. As most of us have learned by now, FTF assumptions and rules are not necessarily applicable to the on-line realm and in some cases they may lead to highly unrealistic scenarios.

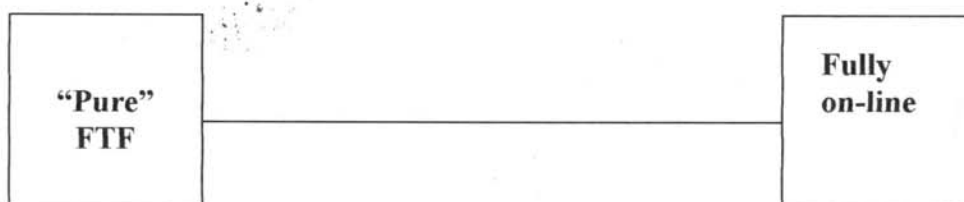
On-line pedagogy has been the object of research in recent years. A discussion of this literature exceeds the purpose of this paper. However, it is important to note that in the on-line realm pedagogical strategies are tightly interwoven with technological and economic resources and decisions to a much larger extent than in FTF education. Consequently, e-learning applications rapidly exceed the organisational resources, expertise and decision levels of individual teachers. Thus strategic decisions at the institutional level must be taken to ensure that e-learning ventures go beyond the scattered work of individual teachers with no specific focus or common standards. The point is that e-learning is a complex and changing field of education where leadership cannot be provided by technologists, administrators or teachers on their own. Our experience suggests that a holistic, multidisciplinary view of the several dimension of e-learning is needed to conceive, launch and sustain successful applications.

A sober and realistic strategic analysis of the use of e-learning technologies should precede tactical or operational decisions about technology, economics or pedagogy. This analysis consists of a systematic review of: a) the educational services offered by an institution, b) those existing educational services it aims to improve, new services it aims to launch or new markets it attempts to reach and c) how e-learning technologies might bridge the gap in a technologically, financially and pedagogically sound way, (i.e.. the e-learning strategies to be used to attain institutional goals).

Use of e-learning technologies: the strategy continuum

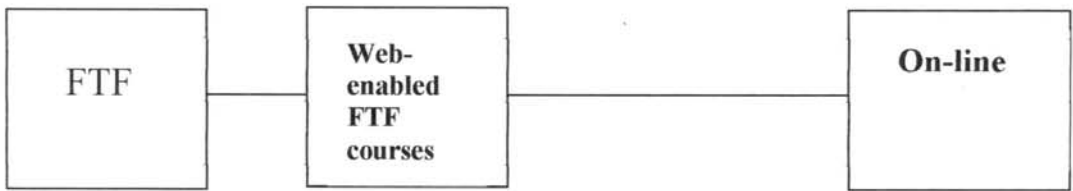
E-learning strategy discussions seem dominated by a “binary” approach: educational services are delivered either FTF or at a distance (i.e. in physical classrooms or fully on-line). E-learning is often used as a new form of (or platform for) distance education. This is true for some educational institutions, for example on-line corporate training providers (a 10-billion dollars business according to a 2001 estimate by CIO Magazine). However, in established institutions, educational services are delivered in more diverse and complex ways. In fact, e-learning strategies may be conceived alongside a *continuum*, stretching from fully FTF to entirely on-line teaching. This is important because technological, financial and pedagogical choices may vary for different parts of this continuum.

As discussed above, the extremes of this continuum of educational services are defined by the “pure” forms of FTF and on-line education. At ORT Uruguay University we have been teaching fully on-line, distance courses since 2000, when the on-line postgraduate Diploma in Education (Grunberg, 2001) was launched, followed in 2002 by the on-line postgraduate Diploma in Educational Planning and Management.



An interesting example of the many schemes of educational delivery that may be found between these two extremes is the use of e-learning technologies to enrich or complement FTF courses (see for example Bonk and Dennen, 1999 for a discussion of “web-enabled” courses). This e-learning strategy fundamentally differs from fully on-line implementations in terms of teacher training programs, choice of technology and student support systems, among others.

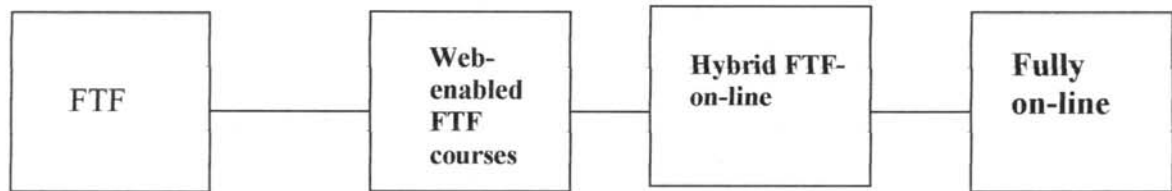
“Web enabling” courses do not aim at enrolling new, distant students but at improving existing educational services. From a pedagogical point of view, e-learning technologies may be used to give students access to much livelier and up-to-date materials than what can be usually distributed in printed form, facilitate peer exchange, support collaborative activities, consult practitioners and expand communication opportunities with the teacher. Based on our research on e-learning, a highly valued benefit of this approach is the possibility of conducting structured discussions beyond the rigid time confines of the class session. This is important because it increases student participation and may lead to deeper coverage of syllabi. From an institutional point of view, “web enabling” courses may provide a basis to differentiate the institution from its competitors and reduce student attrition through improved communication with teachers and fellow students.



A step away from web-enabled FTF educational delivery is the approach used by ORT Uruguay for faculty development. Most of our lecturers are specialists in their own fields but with little systematic knowledge of pedagogy or learning. In-service development courses for teachers were offered each year but were traditionally poorly attended due to the complex schedules of faculty who by and large teach only part-time at the university. Teachers found these courses too short to really have an impact on their practice. On the other hand, their commitments within and outside the university inhibited them from attending longer courses.

Beginning in 2001, a new strategy was adopted with considerable success. The new Certificate in College Teaching is an eight-month development course that combines FTF and on-line delivery in a “hybrid” mixture. This approach has proved appealing in its breadth and scope to teachers and at the same time compatible with their time commitments. The Certificate focuses on improving teaching practice and encompasses a relatively small number of FTF sessions interspersed with relatively long periods (typically four or five weeks) of on-line discussions and guided readings.

This approach is qualitatively different from the previous one, not only in terms of *proportion* of FTF to on-line sessions, but also course goals and pedagogical strategies. In the previous approach the social and pedagogical “backbone” of the course is still the sequence of frequent and regular FTF encounters with the teacher. In the “hybrid” approach, this “backbone” shifts to a new centre of gravity with the FTF and on-line components complementing each other socially and pedagogically. A balance must be struck in the number of FTF sessions that for many participants provide the social “glue” that keeps them feeling part of a group with a common focus. Too many FTF sessions may prove logistically too costly for participants while too few may prove insufficient to keep participants on track (especially in non-degree voluntary courses).



Conceptually, these may be conceived as milestones in a continuum rather than discrete, mutually exclusive e-learning strategies. For example, systems that fully rely on FTF teaching may still use e-learning technologies to deliver “peripheral” services such as remedial courses, general skills (e.g. communication skills or basic computer skills) or formative assessment. In this way, “peripheral” services do not logistically stand in the way of the core syllabi and enable students to obtain service they personally need when they most need it. Conversely, systems relying mostly on on-line delivery may still require or offer regular FTF sessions for advice and guidance and to boost motivation levels. In fact, it is our contention that local educational institutions may be able to compete with global players in the e-learning market because they have the ability to provide the local “human input” without which fully on-line courses may become socially and psychologically unbearable.

E-learning technologies as agents of change

In the future, as the “stock” of on-line courses grows in established educational institutions and teachers move ahead in the learning curve, a larger degree of flexibility in media (e.g. FTF, on-line or videoconferencing) may be offered to students who may find convenient to “attend” some courses FTF and others on-line based on their time availability, the priority they attach to different subjects or their personal learning styles.

The strong development of e-learning technologies may prove in the long run important not only as the platform for a whole new industry as we have witnessed in recent years but for its potential to foster change and innovation in existing educational systems which have been organised in essentially the same ways for literally hundreds of years.

Adkins, S. (2002) Market Analysis of the 2002 U.S. E-Learning Industry Convergence, Consolidation and commoditization, Brandon-hall.com 2002 Market Analysis Series.

Bonk, C. and Dennen, V. (1999) Teaching on the web: With a little help from my friends, Journal of Computing in Higher Education, 11(1), 3-28

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