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OMDE 601

October 27, 2008

Describe and explain the advantages and drawbacks of highly industrialized systems of learning and teaching by referring to the model of the Open University of the United Kingdom.

The innovations of technology have improved our capacity to communicate and interact with each other, not just as individuals, but as groups as well. Our comfort level with these new standards has also led to energetic improvements in how we develop our training and education endeavors. In particular, the creation of college and university level courses has dramatically increased to the point where they have become modules of industrialized production. To get an overview of some of the challenges that these institutions face, one only has to take a look at the well-established Open University of the United Kingdom to see why some individuals criticize and praise how these online “manufactured classes” have changed the perceptions of learning and teaching

Learning

Many people assume that a distance learning environment is impersonal, with very little interaction between classmates and teachers. The online, non-traditional classroom setting one finds in a numerous collegiate settings is still very much an unknown to many but the most recent students so there is natural skepticism as to what possible advantage there is to providing a learning experience in this manner. If anything, it is presumed that this educational environment has less value when compared to similar material presented as a face-to-face option (Peters, 2004, p. 83).

At institutions such as the Open University of the United Kingdom however, there is a focused effort to keep students engaged. Using a counselling system that combines the role of tutor and counselor, students are actively sought out and communicated with, even before they require assistance (Holmberg, 2005, p. 91). Calls for assistance go out to a wide network of aides, teachers, and students, getting replies in a very short timeframe (Peters, 2004, p.67). Students are not restricted to class-based exchanges either; instead they are encouraged to share issues openly by support personnel through friendly and confidential dialogue (Peters, 2001, pp. 55-56). These amiable partnerships have demonstrated that they produce more motivated and results-driven students (Holmberg, 2005, p. 77).

Teaching

The encroachment of the concepts of virtual classrooms, elearning, et al has created concern in teachers who work in the brick and mortar world in that they believe their courses will be treated like off-the-shelf merchandise for purchase when they are industrialized for online delivery (Peters, 2001, p. 111). Developing these types of courses is expensive, requiring that they have large audiences to pay for them or a long

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shelf life in which they are maintained, potentially creating situations where the stored knowledge becomes obsolete (Hülsmann, 2003, p. 189). These pressures and others have created an atmosphere of distrust for university teachers who feel that their authority and control is being undermined as they are being informed that their material will be integrated into these new formats (Peters, 2001, p.72).

One of the greatest strengths an educational body can have when venturing into an industrialized delivery model is to incorporate a considerate and strategic content integration and course design team. For the Open University of the United Kingdom, the concept of “course teams” have been instrumental in facilitating the blending of traditional teaching and technological methodologies (Peters, 2001, pp.70-72). The support they provide is essential to both encompassing the requirements of instructors as well as the business interests of the university – for which they have received high praise (Holmberg, 2005, p. p. 102).

Conclusion

There are certainly challenges to matching the needs of students and instructors as they are brought into the industrialized future of distance education. Keeping the principles of learning and teaching in the forefront of any development effort is a necessity in creating a rich student and instructor experience. Not all institutions will have the capacity to function as they do, but the Open University of the United Kingdom is a prime example of how a well thought out traditional-teaching-to-online-teaching operation should be carried out.

References

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