

another is to continue to experiment with the uses of the Internet in education and to evaluate what works and what does not, using the proven technologies of research.

Gary Matkin

Since 1994, the University of California system has been involved in online education, first through Berkeley Extension, then at other campuses, most notably at UC Irvine where a group of faculty members created the first online degree program in the UC system. These 13 years of experience have prompted several observations:

- Internet technology has had and is going to have a great impact on higher education, to a parallel extent of changes such as the GI bill and federal funding for research. In most cases, when a large external force impacts universities, the initial reaction is to overestimate the short-run effects and underestimate the long-term impact. That has certainly been the case with the Internet, where a number of wild claims were made about what would happen to teaching and learning that have proven overrated. Instead, expectations about the educational value, cost effectiveness, and learning support are beginning to be realized slowly but surely.
- While many have worried about what might be lost as a result of online teaching, most have failed to consider the benefits to be gained. It was much the same reaction when the GI bill prompted an influx of students and many worried about the effect of married veterans entering the system. The Internet indeed is changing the behavior of students, teachers and everyone involved in higher education. The speed with which one can access information and communicate back and forth across time and place is changing the way students learn. Papers are put together using rich media, social networking is occurring and distance learning is taking place. As the context of learning has changed, so has the context of teaching, with instructors doing things differently and spending time differently. There is a profound effect, and while some things may be lost, as there have been with every change, in other ways there will be great gains.

Successful Online Education

In response to a question about how successful online education is, Gary Matkin offered the following thoughts:

There's no substitute for a well-taught course – but very few people can teach a well-taught course. If you want to be successful in the distance education business, you have to do faculty training and you have to create a whole system that supports the type of student you are addressing.

We are collecting data on students who have gone through online education with us, and we will be using this data for research. One of the things our faculty tells us is that students taking a fully distance education course do at least as well as those taking the course face-to-face. After researching the cause, the conclusion is that when distance learning is well done, in essence all of the students are in the front row, raising their hands for every question asked, all are providing feedback, all are engaged.

Distance education is a very useful way for people who cannot make it to an institution to earn their degrees. The overwhelming majority are females with jobs and young children. Distance learning has brought them access and employability, allowing them to move up in their careers.

UC Irvine provides an example of the context for higher education on the Internet. In April, UC Irvine Extension will receive grades from 39 Brazilian students who have taken the first project management course translated from English into Portuguese. A local partner for UC Irvine translated the content and localized it, Portuguese-speaking instructors that were qualified and certified by UC Irvine delivered the course, and now this body of knowledge has been transferred online to students in Brazil.

What this experience proves is that it is possible to develop and transfer educational products, particularly across international and economic boundaries, from the developed world to developing countries. Today a lot of online education remains geographically defined, but inevitably the Internet will allow universities to help the world solve its problems.