

RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS IN THE DESIGN OF A GLOBAL GRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAM DELIVERED BY ONLINE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine the unique areas of concern when establishing an eLearning program in the field of global business. A survey of eLearning and a global management subject matter appears. This paper identifies potential challenges in program design and raises practical concerns for future research.

KEYWORDS

Subject matter course design, distance learning, graduate global business courses, international business program, eLearning, global management competencies

1. INTRODUCTION

Workforces are becoming more global (Remtulla, 2007a) and educational instructions are moving more towards non-traditional learning ("Online enrollment", 2010). Since the use of a delivery method can significantly shape the success of a program, the success of graduates, and the success of an institution's reputation, it is important that the choice delivery method be examined thoroughly. As different programs within an institution have distinct subject matter that needs to be uniquely presented and tailored it is important that the design and delivery of each topic of study is looked at individually.

The purpose of this work was to add to the breadth of research available by examining questions that should be answered in a global business master's program delivered online. The project also calls to attention a large gap that existed in available research material. Information on pedagogy, eLearning, the global realm, and graduate business programs as isolated areas is plentiful. However, finding material that ties these areas together or focuses on the course subject matter is not an easy find.

A global business program may also be known as names such as an international business program, a global management program, or similar title. The program may appear as a solo offering or as a concentration within another field (such as an MBA program with a global business concentration). This paper will not distinguish; it will focus on courses that are solely delivered via an eLearning format.

If there are areas of global business management that cannot be taught via eLearning educational leadership will need to know this. If there are areas that are difficult to teach, educational leadership will need to know what techniques are effective. Limitations need to be examined honestly as there will be ramifications on the success of the program. An institution should also be proactive in this search for information as finding a problem out reactively could mean the problem is widespread and debilitating to the institution.

2. EXAMINING ELEARNING

Rosenberg (2001) defines eLearning as, "the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance". Rosenberg further states that eLearning is networked, delivered via a computer and standard internet technology and that it is focused on the broadest view of learning.

eLearning is a popular, but smaller segment of the field of distance learning. Distance learning can involve areas such as media tapes or delivery via standard mail. A key to eLearning is the replacement of face-to-face interaction with a hardware interface (Remtulla, 2007b).

A survey by Babson Survey Research Group study revealed, in 2013 online students numbered 7.1 million, a 6.1% increase from the previous year, and the lowest recorded increase in a decade of steady increases. 33.5% of higher education students reported taking at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

eLearning can provide students with an opportunity to attend courses without altering their existing schedules, or moving house. Students can pick their most convenient times to study (within some restraints) and have a better chance of maintaining work-life-school balance (Li, 2008). Individuals who do not feel as though they are being developed in the workplace may turn to eLearning at a university for a form of self-development in hopes that it may set them up for a future position.

Desai and Pitre (2009) list several advantages to offering a course online. These include the time flexibility for students, the chance for a school to increase enrollment, the chance for students to have diverse group interactions with students from other cities and countries, possible exposure to unique culture and language, a wider perspective of problem solving, and project variety.

Chau (2010) acknowledges that cost, accessibility and flexibility may be motivations for institutions moving to online learning. However, Chau also proposed that educational institutions are motivated by providing a commodity in current demand in the consumer marketplace.

3. CHALLENGES OF ELEARNING FACILITATION

eLearning is not without challenges. For facilitators there can be isolation, time demands, highly rigid courses, and a lack of traditional student/teacher hierarchy.

One unique challenge of eLearning is a staff that may be external to the university campus. Instructors may feel a sense of isolation from the university or program itself (Magdalena & Mellar, 2009). Instructors may have little vested interest in student success. The understanding of university support areas may be limited. Instructors working on a contract or ad-hoc basis may also be responsible for reporting or fixing the problems found within the course (Magdalena & Mellar, 2009).

Students may also experience isolation. Students did not miss the opportunities for social interaction when taking courses online (Mallory, 2007; Smith & Duus, 2001). However, in a traditional setting students may feel a closer bond to the instructor (Lucas, 1996). Smith and Duus (2001) stress the need for small class sizes due to the intense dialogue interaction that is needed between student and instructor. Smith and Duus (2001) further note that although offering a class online may result in cost savings due to increased opportunity, the small class sizes may make that savings null.

An additional challenge to instructors may be the rigidity of the course. One study found that "the demands for a structured and focused approach to virtual interactivity may be too much of a challenge for some" (Smith & Duus, 2001). Although the course itself may be more rigid than a traditional course, instructors may find the student/teacher hierarchy within the course much less so. A course with open discussion forums may also blur the line between the instructor and peers in interaction. Instructors need to learn how to be leaders in the virtual world and build a sense of community and collaboration. Engaged faculty can help students feel connected (Cook, 2010). However, instructors who move from a traditional course to teaching online may find the time demands much more difficult, as students may expect quick answers to questions at any hour (Cook, 2010; Smith & Duus, 2001). Du-Charne-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (2005) emphasize the need to build a distance education plan that involves actively building community, facilitating communication, and humanizing the experience. Many of the suggestions have to do with course threads, synchronous chat and engaging in more informal conversation about "how's it is going?". Although an active classroom discussion board is emphasized in the literature the desire for synchronous sessions remains under debate (Cunningham, 2014; Nicholas, 2014).

One study suggested universities focus on course design, instructor selection and instructor involvement, as the delivery method of the course did not have a statistically significant impact on learning (Buhagiar & Potter, 2010). Another case used the example used the social interactive website, Second Life, as an instructional tool to improve faculty engagement and to develop a sense of community among faculty and

students (Sutton, White, Mbizo & Stewart, 2010). Verene (2013) argues that complete learner-instructor and learner-learner engagement cannot take place online due to the lack of genuine, real time dialogue and communication nuances.

4. CONTENT DESIGN FACTORS

There are several factors that should impact how a course is crafted and presented. Among these are course content, pedagogy, the subject matter covered, the learners, and the media to be used.

Edmundson (2009) found that course outcomes affect the course content, pedagogical approaches, and the type of media used. Some courses such as computer courses tend to be culturally neutral. Other areas such as leadership courses were "deeply imbedded with cultural values, ideology, and worldviews" (Edmundson, 2009). As the content was more complex, the pedagogical approaches and media needs become increasingly complex as well. Making the content accessible to a culturally diverse audience may include examination by observation, focus groups, country experts, interculturalists, web interface designers and a close look at the targeted learners (Edmundson, 2009). eLearning courses should be tailored based on the content and the learners unique identity and needs.

Universities may or may not examine the subject matter of a course when deciding whether a class should be offered online. There may be other considerations, such as space concerns, instructor pool, or the need to be geographically diverse to get a wide enough student base. The decision to offer a course online may be solely administrative, yet instructional input will need to be offered. The instructional designs and technology chosen should align with the course goals and pedagogical goals (Cook, 2000). In order for this alignment to take place the specific subject matter area needs to be examined.

5. GLOBAL MANAGEMENT DESIGN

In global management subject matter design, the natural place to look for program outcomes is competencies required by organizations that employ global management professionals. Much of the research focused on competencies needed function as an expatriate employee (Bücker & Poutsma, 2010). However, some competencies discussed were the ability to use social capital and diverse networks in a way that completes work effectively (Makela & Suutari, 2009).

Criticisms of MBA graduates include that they are "ill prepared to deal with complex, multi-layered issues faced by managers in global markets" (Belasen & Rufer, 2007) and that the theoretical courses that they take result in too much emphasis on the quantitative and not enough emphasis on people skills (Sulaiman & Mohezar, 2009). Tay (2001) suggests that courses such as public speaking, conflict resolution, and team work techniques be added to be business school programs in an effort to enhance soft skills of students. Bueno and Tubbs (2004) suggest that the most important global leadership competencies are: communication skills, motivation to learn, flexibility, open-mindedness, respect for others, and sensitivity. These are soft skill areas and may be areas difficult to teach or develop in students.

Over the last thirty years business schools have been forced to react to an AACSB mandate to internationalize their curriculum. Some schools have reacted by merely adding an international business survey course. Others have integrated an international component into existing subject areas such as marketing, accounting or management. Some programs insist on going beyond mandate minimums in program design (Delaunay & Blodgett, 2005).

Some traditional universities are able to take unique advantage of opportunities around them to develop competencies. Others make a conscious effort to create international core community within the university. Suffolk University developed a Global MBA (GMBA) program with the idea that it would tap into opportunities in the vibrant international business community around Boston. The program makes a conscious effort to ensure that a global perspective is always in place within the classroom. One third of the faculty members of the Suffolk University's business school were born in and educated outside of the United States; half of the faculty base has extensive experience in work or education abroad. The University maintains several campuses abroad. Fifteen percent of the students of the school of business come from abroad (Delaunay & Blodgett, 2005). MBA students at Oxford spend six months of their program with

organizations located in other countries (Tay, 2001). Some universities offer a regional world focus when it comes to courses or offer some specializations or seminars abroad (such as finance in Japan) (Delaunay & Blodgett, 2005).

With more business practitioners becoming consultants than in the past, offering a course preparing students for consulting activities may have advantages. Students could learn about consultant communication, research, assessment and relevant business communication (Dallimore & Souza, 2002).

Foreign language requirements may be needed by those who would like to do business in the global arena. Freeman (2001) notes languages are needed for a broader range of job functions than in the past. Freeman also notes that more small firms are taking advantage of international business opportunities than ever. Staff that can communicate effectively is needed.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The lack of material available in the design of business curriculum and global business course development makes it possible to suggest areas for future research. Research that makes connections between the topics of adult learning, online delivery, a global business subject matter, and graduate level students is proposed. Programs currently exist that can be examined. Effectiveness can be looked at from a student perspective, administrative perspective, and business perspective.

7. CONCLUSION

Global management and eLearning were both found to be areas of growth. This study was a rare attempt to look at the global management within a graduate eLearning context. The need for further research was evident and some areas of future, specific study proposed. The areas of future examination include administration, instructors and students. Considerations of program validity, reliability and overall evaluation should be considered at the time of program creation.

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