7

Basing their remarks on personal experience, two recent graduates of an online master's degree program share their insights on this educational technology from the consumer's perspective, including benefits, challenges, and recommendations for students and institutions.

Meeting the Needs of Consumers: Lessons from Postsecondary Environments

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As most practitioners in the adult learning arena are well aware, distance learning has been around for a long time. However, with advances in computer technology over the last several years, the Internet has become the primary delivery medium. Institutions of higher education have taken advantage of this to expand the availability of their programs, particularly at the graduate level. For example, the Web site for Geteducated.com, an e-learning consulting firm, indicates that there are over 160 graduate programs offering postbaccalaureate distance learning master's degrees, doctorates, and advanced career certificates in business, management, and administration, including more than 90 accredited distance learning MBAs, with 43 of these accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International. More than 80 accredited graduate programs offer postbaccalaureate, advanced certificates in technology, computer science, Internet commerce, engineering, manufacturing, and other areas of distance learning. In addition, more than 60 accredited graduate programs offer postbaccalaureate degrees in distance learning and advanced certificates in education or library science and media specialties (Geteducated.com, 2003).

Traditional programs will probably never go away, but the process of learning is changing. Many institutions use online courses as a component of their programs but retain a requirement for the student to complete part of the coursework in-residence. However, there appears to be a move toward fully online degree-granting programs, as both public and private universities redefine their "market" in global terms. A recent study found that more

than 350,000 students were enrolled in fully online degree-granting programs in 2001-02, generating $1.75 billion in tuition revenues for the institutions involved. The study also notes that the market for fully online degree programs is growing at a rate of 40 percent annually (Gallagher and Newman, 2002). The question then becomes, What does an institution that wants to gain a share of this growing market need to do to ensure the success of its online programs?

Best Practices

The following eight regional accrediting commissions have developed a list of best practices and protocols for electronically offered degree and certificate programs:

1. Commission on Higher Education, Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
2. Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, New England Association of Schools and Colleges
3. Commission on Technical and Career Institutions, New England Association of Schools and Colleges
4. Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
5. Commission on Colleges, The Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
6. Commission on Colleges, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
7. Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges
8. Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities, Western Association of Schools and Colleges

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) divides the best practices into five separate components: (1) institutional context and commitment, (2) curriculum and instruction, (3) faculty support, (4) student support, and (5) evaluation and assessment. These criteria are intended to assist institutions in planning online programs and provide a benchmark to those institutions already offering online programs.

NEASC notes that these are not new evaluative criteria. Rather, they reflect how criteria already well established in regional accrediting standards apply to online programs (New England Association of Schools and Colleges, 2003). Our personal experience in the HRE Online program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) supports this assertion.

Institutional Context and Commitment. Education is best experienced within a community of learning where competent professionals are actively and cooperatively involved with creating, providing, and improving the instructional program. Our experience with HRE Online certainly

supports this assertion. Our first exposure to the program was through its Web site, which gave us a good indication of the institution's ability to use technology in the learning environment. The site was well designed and very informative, and the staff continued to make improvements to it over the three years we were in the program. During the course of the program, we were impressed with the level of communication, cooperation, and teamwork exhibited among instructors in the program, as well as among instructors and their teaching and technical assistants. It was clearly evident that mentoring relationships existed within the department.

We also found that the design of the program facilitated the "community of learning" concept. The HRE Online program organizes around learning cohorts, which are groups of students who enroll at the same time and move through the program together, taking the same courses at the same time. Research on learning in cohorts indicates that cohorts foster a sense of belonging, create an environment of mutual respect, promote risk taking, provide a forum for critical reflection and shared understanding, and encourage and sustain multiple perspectives. As a result, cohort members have positive feelings about their experiences (Imel, 2002). That was certainly our experience in the HRE Online program.

Curriculum and Instruction. Learning is dynamic and interactive, regardless of the setting in which it occurs. There are indications that online instruction can be as effective as other methods, specifically face-to-face learning, but may not be suitable for courses that require a high degree of student-instructor interaction (Johnson, Aragon, Shalik, and Palma-Rivas, 2000). The determining factor is how the curriculum designer integrates sound learning principles into the online learning environment (Johnson and Aragon, 2002). Our experience supports this assertion.

In the HRE-Online program, extensive interaction occurred in both synchronous and asynchronous sessions that created a virtual classroom. In the synchronous sessions, the instructor, teaching assistant, and technical support staff normally controlled the classroom. Live one-way audio, in this case using a commercially available streaming audio application, enabled students to hear the instructor and staff members during the session. Using the multitasking capabilities of today's PC operating systems that allow multiple windows to be open, students could also view the slide presentation for the session and participate in a course chat room. The chat room permitted students to interact in real-time with the instructional staff and other cohort members, make comments, and read comments from classmates. Both the audio transmission and the chat room discussion were archived and the files made available for review on the course Web site—a big plus for those of us who had to miss a class session.

Another level of interaction took place "behind the scenes," as students used instant messaging applications to carry on private discussions. Often referred to as "passing notes in class," it could be as distracting in the virtual classroom as side discussions in the traditional classroom. However,

these discussions did not distract the instructional staff, who were unaware of this activity in their virtual classroom. Interaction in the asynchronous portion of the courses usually took the form of posting information on a course Web board or exchanging e-mail. We were extremely pleased with the level of interaction throughout the entire three years of the program.

Faculty Support. Instructional programs leading to degrees having integrity are organized around substantive and coherent curricula, which define expected learning outcomes. The nine courses that make up the HRE Online program are the same courses offered to on-campus students pursuing a master's in global HRD. At times during our program, we had on-campus students enrolled in our online course when their schedule would not permit attending an on-campus class. The direct implication here is that the UIUC views online courses as equal to traditional, on-campus offerings. A standard practice for instructors in the HRE Online program at UIUC is to provide a detailed course syllabus that is published on the Web site for the course. The syllabus served as a road map for the course, defining expected learning outcomes and describing specific course requirements and grading criteria. This proved to be a valuable resource for us.

Student Support. Institutions accept the obligation to address student needs related to their academic success and to provide the necessary resources. We found this to be especially true in the online learning environment. Research indicates that online students need certain technical knowledge and skills to successfully participate in online programs (Johnson, Palma-Rivas, Suriya, and Downey, 1999). Institutions offering online programs should provide the necessary training to the student before and during their participation in online programs. Technical support should also be available to the students. UIUC met this obligation in the HRE Online program by clearly stating on its Web site what knowledge and skills a student should possess to participate in the program. Students were also required to complete an online orientation program that familiarized them with some of the software they would use in the program and the instructional design format that was used consistently throughout the curriculum.

In addition and perhaps most important, the program provided a technical support staff. The staff for each HRE Online course included the instructor, a teaching assistant, and one or more technical assistants knowledgeable in the applications used. All were present for each class. If needed, technical assistance was available via telephone, FAX, e-mail, and instant messaging. The HRE Online technical support staff was accessible via instant messaging, e-mail, and telephone seven days a week to provide technical assistance if needed. Many of us took advantage of this support and felt it was a strength of the program.

Evaluation and Assessment. Institutions undertake the assessment and improvement of their quality, giving particular emphasis to student learning. Almost all institutions conduct assessments of their programs. However, it is what they do with the information that really counts. We were

asked to complete an end-of-course evaluation after each course. At first, many of us were skeptical that anything would be done with our evaluations, but most of us were pleasantly surprised to see that our comments and suggestions did have an impact. We were able to see changes from one course to the next, based on our recommendations. As the program progressed, we became more comfortable at giving "right now" feedback about the program and about how to improve our learning experience. The administrators listened and sometimes were able to implement changes during a course. One suggestion that we offered—(and were extremely pleased when it was implemented)—was the appointment of a "student advocate"— a staff member whose function was to be the "single point of contact" in the communication process between the students and the HRE Online administration. We felt this facilitated the communication processes.

What Makes a Successful Online Instructor?

Even when an institution follows the best practices, the impact of the learning experience relies heavily on the online instructor. The Illinois Online Network Web site lists several criteria for a successful online instructor that coincide with our own experience (Illinois Online Network, 2003).

Have Broad-Based Life Experience. Instructors should have a broad base of life experiences in addition to academic credentials. Literature supports the notion that knowledge is in part a product of the context in which is it developed and used. One of the best ways to promote contextual learning in the online environment is to simulate reality using appropriate case studies (Johnson and Aragon, 2002). Our experience was that the instructors who could best provide real-life examples were those who had a basis of practical experience outside academia, either as employees or as consultants. Some of our better instructors were the program's adjunct professors who were either consultants or employees of a business. They were active HRD practitioners and taught college part-time because they wanted to, bringing a wealth of experience to the classroom on how to apply concepts in the real world, which they willingly shared with us.

Be Open and Flexible. The instructor's personality should demonstrate the characteristics of openness, concern, flexibility, and sincerity. A benefit of online learning that makes it so attractive to older students with full-time jobs is the ability to participate in class from any location with Internet access. However, this benefit also creates conflicting priorities. Most of our HRE Online cohort were working professionals who had to juggle the demands of their job, family, and classwork. Sometimes class had to take second place. Flexible and understanding instructors and staff helped students make the most of these difficult situations.

Possess Good Communication Skills. The instructor should be comfortable communicating in writing. The face-to-face contact found in traditional classroom settings does not exist. The communication exchange

is now conducted primarily via keyboard. From our experience, the pace is often intense and demanding, and the best instructors are those best able to communicate in writing—a fundamental skill in the online learning environment.

Be a Proponent of Online Learning. The instructor should be a proponent of facilitative learning, seeing it as equal to the traditional model. Our cohort experience increased the value of the degree. Learning occurred not only from self-study and the instructor's sharing of knowledge and experiences but from members of the cohort who challenged our ideas and provided insight based on their experiences. Some of our most valuable synchronous sessions were those in which the instructor initiated a structured discussion related to that week's content, then assumed the role of facilitator as cohort members explored, interpreted, and challenged the content from our various perspectives.

Value Critical Thinking. The instructor should value critical thinking as a part of the learning process. By design, the online learning environment requires students to use reflective observation (learning by watching and listening) and abstract conceptualization (learning by thinking), simply because of the way course materials are organized and delivered (Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik, 2002b). To facilitate both, HRE Online instructors used a variety of techniques that included organizing courses around projects. For example, both the Instructional Systems Design course and the instructional technology course had major individual course projects, whereas major projects in other courses required a team initiative. Instructors also used small-group discussions during synchronous sessions and required students to complete short writing assignments on a particular topic as a means of assessing learning.

Be Trained in Online Instruction. The instructor should be experienced and well trained in the online learning experience. Our experience is that the characteristics of an effective online program are not necessarily synonymous with those of a classroom program. Consequently, competencies of a classroom instructor do not directly correlate with those of an online instructor. Online instructors must develop new instructional skills (primarily related to the use of technology), as well as refine and augment existing skills (feedback, communication, innovation, and courseware design, among others). The educational institution can assist instructors new to online programs by providing training in the technology, introducing innovative instructional strategies, and offering suggestions for adapting classroom teaching methods to the online environment.

What Should Students Expect from the Instructor?

Responsibility for learning should be shared between the instructor and the student. Just as the instructor has specific expectations for the student, the student can and should have certain expectations of the instructor. The

business experience that several of us in the cohort possessed led us to a customer service perspective on our expectations of the instructor. In other words, we tended to view the instructor as a service provider and ourselves as the customers. To us, satisfaction with the program was very important, and how well the instructor met our expectations contributed significantly to our satisfaction. Based on our experience, the student should expect the instructor to do the following:

• *Create a learning environment that uses work, life, and educational experiences to make the learning meaningful and relevant.* Relevancy was critical to maintaining student motivation within our cohort.

• *Present the material in a way that facilitates translating theory to practice and application.* As adult learners, we wanted to be able to apply what we were learning. In fact, many of the course projects were developed with work-related circumstances and actually implemented after the course was over.

• *Solicit and listen to feedback.* Instructors should be attuned to concerns and suggestions about the course, instruction, staff, and support functions. They should take action when appropriate to improve the program and be willing and able to explain why suggestions can't be implemented.

• *Provide timely and constructive feedback on the students' efforts.* Several members of the cohort were self-proclaimed overachievers with a high need to know what they could do to improve their performance. Regardless of our self-perceptions, we all wanted to know how we were doing. The courses we were most disappointed with were those where feedback from the instructor was lacking.

• *Keep students informed on the status of course requirements.* Give regular updates on what is due, what has been turned in, and what is missing. This simple act helps give students a sense that they have some degree of control by helping them manage priorities.

• *Be readily available to answer student questions and address student concerns.* HRE Online instructors accomplished this by establishing regular online "office hours," when they would monitor instant messenger sites or Web boards, as well as respond promptly to e-mail messages.

What Makes a Successful Online Student?

The student in the online program shares responsibility for the success of the learning process. According to the Illinois Online Network Web site (Illinois Online Network, 2003) and our own personal experience, a successful online student should be able to do the following:

• *Be able to meet the program's minimum requirements.* The requirements for an online program are no lower than for any other quality educational program. The admissions requirements and procedures into UIUC's HRE Online program were the same as the on-campus program. Our expectation

was that participating in the online program would be more convenient than the on-campus program, not easier. We weren't disappointed.

• *Have access to and a minimum proficiency in the use of the necessary hardware and software.* By its very nature, online distance learning is dependent on technology. UIUC established the minimum hardware and software requirements needed for a student to be able to participate in the program. Anything less severely hampered the student. We would compare it to a student trying to complete a traditional course without using pen and paper. It also seemed to us that individual success in any course was influenced by the student's level of proficiency. In addition, we found the level of student frustration to be dependent on the student's proficiency with the hardware and software. Generally, those who were comfortable with the hardware and software seemed to do better in the program.

• *Be able to communicate through writing.* The majority of interaction with the instructional staff and with teammates and cohort members is in writing. Much of that writing is in a chat room format, which requires rapid keyboarding and quick development of thoughts in a clear, concise format. Often this occurs while listening to the instructor's lecture and reading classmates' comments as they scroll across the screen. Therefore, the ability to multitask is a critical skill for the student.

• *Be self-motivated and self-disciplined.* Research supports our contention that the student's level of motivation affects the level of learning (Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik, 2002a). We believe our cohort was successful because the members wanted to be in the program, not because they had to. The primary reason people gave for dropping out of the program was that their personal goals and priorities changed. The second major reason was that they got behind in the work and could not finish the course requirements. It was very apparent to us that success also depended on our personal self-discipline.

• *Be willing and able to commit sufficient time per week to coursework.* Pursuing an advanced degree requires a significant commitment, whether one selects a traditional program or one offered online. The initial information we received from the university said to expect to spend ten to fifteen hours per week with the HRE Online program. In fact, the time required was on the high side of this range. At times, we found ourselves spending more than twenty hours online, not including the time working on assignments when we were not online.

• *Be willing to speak up if problems arise.* We found that the distance format increased a sense of isolation; instructors and classmates were invisible, and you didn't have the ability to incorporate body language or tone into written communication. If you didn't speak up, you could quickly get left behind, and the instructor might not detect your problem until it was too late. The student must accept responsibility for learning and take the initiative when necessary with instructors and with teammates.

• *Accept critical thinking and decision making as part of the learning process.* Because of the design of online courses, critical thinking and decision making are essential elements of the learning process (Aragon, Johnson, and Shaik, 2002b). Instructors encouraged us to self-critique and provide constructive feedback to others. Courses were organized around real-world projects that required us to decide how to apply concepts and theory presented in class. Working in virtual teams initially posed some problems for us, but deciding how to resolve these issues enriched the overall learning experience.

• *Be open-minded about sharing experiences as part of the learning process.* As we indicated earlier, context is an essential central element in learning (Johnson and Aragon, 2002). We found that one of the best ways to place learning in context was through shared examples from experience. Several members of our cohort were active HRD practitioners who brought a wealth of experience to the program. More important, they were willing to share their experiences with the cohort and thereby expanded the opportunity for learning for everyone.

Conclusion

Online learning is having a tremendous impact on the education process in schools, universities, and corporate settings. As technology continues to develop, this delivery method will increase in quality and quantity. Consumers should be cautioned, however, that all online programs are not of equal quality, and they should carefully evaluate each program.

From our perspective, the experiences that led to our graduate degree in HRD were as meaningful and valuable as any we would have received as an on-campus student. Our learning experience increased in value as we developed new competencies by using the learning technologies. We believe that online learning provides experiential learning in the course content, as well as the learning technologies and supports the development of new skills and character traits that are beneficial in all areas of life.

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