

Panel: Brick & Mortar vs. E-Learning Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this panel is to compare the long existing “Brick and Mortar” (BM) universities with the new E-Learning (EL) universities. The comparison is based on the type of people (lecturers, students, teaching assistants), and activities (lecture, lab, seminar, office hours, library usage, one-on-one meeting, working together, testing, etc.) that are involved. In this panel we will not deal with the commercial aspects and prospects of either learning methods. The result of the panel is not necessarily a clear conclusion on which method is better, more likely it will help the participants to consider which method is better in a given situation. For example: if you live in a lone farm in the middle of nowhere then E-Learning is the right solution for you. However, if you want to experiment with chemistry then you better be in a real laboratory.

Keywords: E-Learning, Brick-and-Mortar, University, Comparison

Introduction

This paper contains a detailed comparison of Brick & Mortar vs. E-Learning universities, it then follows with the panelists' views and evaluations based on their research and experience.

How to Compare ?

The following abbreviations are used: **BM** = “Brick and Mortar”, **AEL** = Asynchronous E-Learning, **SEL** = Synchronous E-Learning, **EL** = E-Learning (asynchronous or synchronous) ☺ = I am happy about it ☹ = I am not so happy about it.

Teaching a Lecture

The BM lecturer must be in a certain place at a certain time ☹ while the SEL lecturer can broadcast from his office, home or his hotel room, if s/he is on the road. Even better, the AEL lecturer does not have to be in the lecture because there is none ☺ The above discussion is true for the students except for the AEL case: the students can study anytime, from anywhere ☺

A BM lecture is a live experience where both the lecturer and the students get to see, hear and feel each other ☺. In a SEL lecture they get to see and hear but it is not a real one-on-one human interaction. Using the AEL method there is only a set of written E-Mail and discussion group paragraphs ☹.

Teaching a BM lecture is a traditional effort. Teaching a SEL lecture is new, and the teacher must learn how to use the virtual (internet) class tools ☹

To ask questions in a BM class the students raise their hands ☺, in a SEL class they click on the “raise your hand” button. The students are not supposed to talk to each other in a BM class. In a SEL class they can use a TALK tool to pass messages to each other, or consult with a professional assistant without interruption to the ongoing class ☺. Some experts claim that the TALK tool might be a distraction ☹.

Preparing material for a BM lecture usually consists of a set of hand-written lecturer's notes (sometimes not even those...). Material for a SEL lecture must include slides, notes, examples and links to WEB pages. The quality must be high which results in much work for the lecturer ☹ but in a far better documentation for the students ☺. The preparation task is even harder for the AEL lecturer, because the WEB based material is the **only** thing the students get.

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Laboratory or “software” workshop

BM laboratory (chemistry, physics, ...) is equipped with up-to-date tools and devices ☺. If you study from home in an EL course then you must buy your own (sometimes very expensive) gear ☹.

If it is a BM software workshop then the teaching assistant (TA) can come, look over the shoulder and help you ☺. In an EL workshop the TA must use “over-the-shoulder” tool (like “net meeting”). It is also a bit difficult to “lean back” and learn from your neighbors ☹.

Library

In a BM library you go to a nice quiet building and you get to feel the books and smell the pages ☺. In an electronic library you read from the screen ☹ but it is easy to search for keywords, find related material, view movies and listen to various talks and sounds ☺ not to mention other virtual activities (like roaming in 3D worlds).

If you need a book from a BM library, you get to be there, wait in line and then return it on time ☹. In an electronic library you can enter anytime from anywhere without waiting in line because the material is always (well almost ...) there.

Office hours

A BM lecturer must be in his office waiting for the students ☹. The students must come to the lecturer's office building at a certain time ☹ BUT it is a face-2-face meeting ☺. SEL office hours are almost the same, except that the meeting is not face-2-face ☹ AEL office hours use E-Mail messages with no live interaction ☹ but it is anytime from anywhere ☺

Meet your peers & Campus life

In a BM university the students meet each other in person. They enjoy ☺ the campus facilities: pool, cafeteria and sports. In EL universities there is no ☹ campus life, the students can use chat and forums to interact, but they can also hide their true identity.

Testing and Exercises

A BM test is conducted in class, and supervisors verify the student's identity ☹. They make sure the students are not helping each other ☹. EL tests are conducted via the inter-

net. It is still difficult to verify the student identity ☹ and to make sure no one is helping them ☹.

Checking a BM test is a long and frustrating job (ask me...) while an EL test is one automatically generated by the system.

Distance

If you want to study in a BM university, you sometimes have to relocate ☹. You can study in an EL university from anywhere (from the convenience of your home ☺). It is easier to get the best lecturers in an EL university.

Reputation & Tradition

It is traditional to study in a BM university, and they have been there for such a long time, so it must be good idea (??) EL university are trendy and for the young (in age and spirit) people (“it is cool”).

The Con Position – BM are preferred over EL Universities

E-Learning Universities are certainly transforming education in terms of what we learn, how we learn, and where we learn. An estimated 72% of two and four year institutions offered online courses in 1999, an increase from 48% a year earlier (Grimes, 2001). Estimates indicate 2.2 million students will enroll in distance learning courses in 2001, up from 710,000 in 1998 (Grimes, 2001). Regardless of the increasing prevalence, the bottom line in comparing E-Learning Universities with "Brick & Mortar" Universities is effectiveness, as measured through student grade performance.

Although still in the early stages, the impact of e-learning has been assessed through a number of studies (<http://nova.teleeducation.nb.ca/nosignificantdifference/> and <http://nova.teleeducation.nb.ca/significantdifference/>). The results of most studies indicate there is no difference in the effectiveness of distance education and traditional classroom instruction. Some of the studies conclude that students pursuing e-learning courses earned higher grades when compared with counterparts in a traditional classroom.

A report released in 1999 by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (Blumenstyk and McCollum, 1999) reveals a number of concerns with the methodology of 300 published studies. Among the concerns are the failure to use

randomly selected subjects, a focus on individual courses rather than the effectiveness of entire academic programs, and little concern for the limitations of "virtual libraries." It is difficult to capture the dynamics of a learning environment through an experiment that focuses on a select set of variables. For example, Schutte (1998) identified collaborative face-to-face learning with peers as the key variable explaining the higher performance of e-learners as compared to classroom learners. Is collaborative face-to-face learning a viable tool in an e-learning university?

A major area of concern with the conclusions of published studies is the widely promoted benefit that e-learning is available to students who otherwise would not be able to take classes. However, among those who otherwise would not be able to take classes are certainly those who are economically disadvantaged with no access to computers or the internet (Hamilton, 2001). The vision of democratic education at a lower cost with access to all may not be realized in the near future, furthering the divide between the digital haves and have-nots.

The major evidence that pressing questions remain is the lack of accreditation granted to e-learning institutions. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, the primary accrediting organization for business schools, states it "encourages innovation and experimentation in education" (Cleary, 2001), but has not yet accredited an e-learning business school. The American Bar Association for example, the accrediting organization for law schools in the United States, requires students be physically present in schools. This begs the question, will a degree from an e-learning university be viewed the same as that from a "brick & mortar" university?

The Pro Position – BM and EL Universities each serve a societal need and can learn from each other.

As the need for continued learning increases around the world, people need a variety of options for helping them get the information they need to function in society. The rapid pace of decision-making has increased the urgency of the need for easy and quick access to information. Corporations have been quick to take advantage of multimedia learning opportunities, and the growth of private universities such as those in corporations are testimony to the fact. Since Brick and Mortar universities sometimes cater to full-time traditional students, these private corporate universities serve a real need of a different group, the full-time workers. Soon, other private universities were into the

competition. Many large urban areas are now seeing the development of an urban campus of the University of Phoenix, for example, with instructional offerings that combine physical facilities and local sites with distance learning via the Internet. In Maryland, the historical "continuing education" institution, University College, taught courses all over the state, and for the US military, all over the world. They have now created the Institute for Distance Education to facilitate the sharing of e-learning resources and expertise with others. (See <http://www.umuc.edu/ide/ide.html>). A more recent innovation has been the transition of the Open University from the United Kingdom to an entity functioning in the United States as the Open University of the United States. This organization has at its foundation the wealth of educational materials from the parent organization and is established as a true distance education E-Learning University. Associate instructors will manage groups of online students. They have applied for institutional accreditation through the Middle States Association of Colleges and Universities, the regional accreditation body for higher education. Their September 2000 publication provides guidelines for how to evaluate electronically offered programs (Middle States Regional Accrediting Body, 2000a and b).

Meanwhile, Brick and Mortar Universities have moved toward increased use of technological tools by means of "web-enhanced" E-Learning. Using commercial software for course management and delivery, such as that offered by Blackboard™ or WebCT™, teachers make materials easily accessible to students by means of the Internet. Some levels of web-enhanced coursework require fewer in-class hours. Some extreme levels even require only one or two in-person meetings. Policies and procedures of the Brick and Mortar Universities have been often found inadequate to meet the many questions of these web-enhanced offerings. Problems facing these instructors and the institution are often faced alone, without pre-established rules. Questions of quality are being studied, as are questions of cost.

Some of the risks of E-Learning have been well documented by at least two pioneers in the computing discipline, who were often the first to call an alarm when technology was being asked to do more than they thought it should, or could reliably, do. Peter Neumann, an ACM Fellow and winner of their Distinguished Services Award for the creation of the Risks Forum, gave an excellent summary of the pro and con for the university and its students (Neumann, 1998). Henry Emurian, Associate Editor of Information Resources Management Journal, warns,

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“the transformation of higher education will produce a global, egalitarian, shared, and ultimately optimistic sociological context for education and training. ... The evolution favors a better match between the individual student and the process of learning” (Emurian, 2001). One of the many conclusions reached by writers across the world concerns the cost – it is not cheaper to provide E-Learning in a quality way. As we shift more and more to the E-Learning model, the impact on Brick and Mortar Universities will no doubt test their existing policies and procedures to an extreme limit. Evidence of awareness of the need to extend such policies is evident in committee work of organizations such as the state higher education administrations in the USA, the development of new documents for intellectual property rights within the University of Maryland System, and in higher education organizations of professors such as the American Association of University Professors.

My position: Yes, we must move to assimilate many of the new methods and materials to improve existing Brick and Mortar Universities, take actions to properly administer and manage it, whether it exists only in an integrated way or in a total learning way. We must recognize the need for a wide variety of educational experiences. We must welcome our competition in this arena, and help the student find what is best for the student’s situational need for learning. And, we must not panic (as some Brick and Mortar Universities have tended to do) and move too fast, damaging our service to those who most need it retained. This is the real challenge of the future for higher education.

Conclusion

Hopefully this panel provides you with the necessary information (and different points of view) regarding the benefits of “Brick and Mortar” and E-Learning universities.

If you are a student it should help you decide whether a virtual university with a lot of freedom in time and place is suitable for you. Maybe you prefer the company of other students, and the face-2-face interaction with the lecturers.

If you are a lecturer you might wonder how would it be to teach using virtual classroom tools. Maybe you will want to know whether your students will get the necessary academic level of teaching that they deserve.

If you represent an institute, you may wonder what is the appropriate method for your kind of students. Maybe you will think about what is the best type of instruction for you, personally. Maybe you will want to help make your institution ready for building an infrastructure to assist faculty in preparing for the E-learning future.

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Biographies

Shimon Cohen is the CTO (Chief Technology Officer) of you-niversity.com. Dr. Cohen has over twenty years experience as a Lecturer in Universities and in the army computer programmers school. Dr. Cohen worked for various hi-tech companies as a leader of projects in Artificial Intelligence, Databases and Internet.

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