

# E-Learning in the USA\*

## The Storm after the Storm

Paul Jay Edelson

**Wie weit ist die Integration von Electronic Distance Learning in traditionelle face-to-face-Lernarrangements in den USA heute gediehen? Ist die Prognose realistisch, wonach der Anteil aller Belegungen für Online-Kurse bis 2009 bei landesweit 31% liegen wird? – Paul Jay Edelson geht auf das Verhältnis und die unterschiedliche Akzeptanz von Online- und traditionellen Lehr-/Lernmodellen, auf Konflikt- und Kooperationslinien zwischen öffentlichem und privatem Sektor und auf die Zukunft der universitären Weiterbildung ein. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit richtet er dabei auf den Aspekt gleicher Zugangschancen und auf soziale Faktoren.**

During the past five years college level e-learning has become an established feature on the US higher education landscape. By one estimate (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1998) over 31% of all US colleges and universities already offer some courses in this mode, with projections that the percentage will rise to over 90% by the year 2007.

Initially, this latest wave of educational technology characterized by networked computers and asynchronous instruction was greeted with skepticism, especially among educators. They had seen, in the past decades, overblown claims for distance education using television, newspapers, and lastly computers, with disappointing results. E-learning appeared to be more of the same – a fringe phenomenon for second rate students attending mediocre institutions; definitely not in the mainstream. The rapid and widespread acceptance of computer mediated distance learning came as a shock. Simply put, the revolution was over almost as quickly as it began, and the advocates of e-learning carried the day.

What we are now facing is the serious integration of distance and e-learning with face-to-face learning in American higher education. Faculty reaction has changed from rejection to grudging acceptance. In a recent report (*Academy Today*, January 18, 2001) the American Federation of Teachers, the largest teachers union in the USA, announced that students enrolled in distance education undergraduate degree programs „should“ take some of their credits on campus in traditional courses. Distance education should also be a component of official faculty workload to be determined in collective bargaining agreements. A new report issued by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Eaton 2001) provides evaluation criteria for online courses and demonstrates how these converge with more traditional offerings.

At least one major US university is requiring that students minimally take one online course as part of their undergraduate instruction while others are still debating the issue. Establishing the appropriate place for e-learning within a college or university is the task confronting many US educators, not just those in continuing education. In this paper I will address the articulation of curricula of online and traditional instructional models, conflict and cooperation across academic units, and the future of continuing education, with attention to equality of access and other social concerns.

### The Spread of Electronic Distance Learning

Between 1994 and 1997 online courses tallied an overall growth of 116% among all institutions, and 204% in public four-year schools. According to this NCES trendline, by 2009-10 online courses are projected to account for 31% of all course enrollments at the post-secondary level. This would be approximately four million students in the USA. Online student demographics, provided by New York State's SUNY Learning Network (SLN) indicate equal popularity among both full and part-time students, and among both younger and older (below and above 25 years of age). E-learning is proving itself to be, using Christensen's term, a „disruptive technology“ in US higher education, reshaping all of higher learning, including how we think about education.

Yet, American post-secondary institutions vary greatly in their enthusiasm and commitment to distance learning. The private sector, in particular, shows a much lower rate of participation, approximately half that of the public sector. This can be related to issues of resources, mission and image. Some of the elite schools, in particular have limited their involvement in e-learning to the marketing of their brand names for income-producing non-credit offerings, while restricting their high-status degree programs to conventional delivery formats (Lloyd Armstrong in *Change Magazine* 2000).

A further example of limited engagement is the example of Cardean University which represents a collaboration of the business schools of Columbia University, University of Chicago, Stanford University, Carnegie Mellon and the London School of Economics for online undergraduate instruction. Students attending Cardean, while they may have some of the same outstanding faculty as students attending these other schools, will be ultimately earning Cardean degrees (*The Economist*, February 17, 2001, p. 70). On the other hand, there are cases of equally illustrious private schools offering their „big ticket“ programs at a distance. Duke University and Purdue University's renowned Krannert School, for example, are offering their highly

Dr. Paul Jay Edelson is Dean of the School of Professional Development and Director of the Professional Development Research Center at Stony Brook University, New York. He is the author of „Weiterbildung in den USA“, published by the DIE in 2000. paul.edelson@sunysb.edu

regarded Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree programs via the internet.

It is safe to generalize, however, that public higher education, especially „state universities“ in the USA have a long experience with correspondence education and this has served as a fertile seed-bed for their experimentation and involvement in electronic modes. Ironically, some of the largest correspondence courses are virtually unknown, outside of the responsible continuing education unit, on their home campuses. What is different now however is that online e-learning courses have benefited from all the attention recently paid to e-commerce, both positive and negative, and thus enjoy a much higher profile in academia today among faculty who have never previously directly encountered any form of distance learning. Accordingly these online courses have served as a lightning rod for faculty opposition to non-traditional courses and students in ways that correspondence has not. The virtually complete marginalization of correspondence education – separate administrative staffs, budgets, faculty, and students – has ironically shielded it from vocal opposition, unlike the high visibility online courses which enjoy frequent, if not weekly, mention in the academic press, especially the weekly *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

### The Larger Issue of E-Learning

Just as the term „electronic distance learning“ appears to be interchangeable with the term „distance learning“ we tend to also conflate „distance learning“ and „e-learning,“ not always aware that we are talking about different phenomena. For example, distance learning also includes correspondence, video and audio cassette, satellite broadcast, and television. These other modalities are still very active, now often in combination with electronic distance learning. E-learning can be a feature of traditional classes, not just an attribute of courses that are 100% online and taught at a distance.

At my university, approximately 500 traditional face-to-face courses use the software program Blackboard as part of an online dimension to facilitate faculty/student interchanges. An even greater number of faculty and students, exclusive of these courses, use some form of computer technology, often linked to the web, as a dimension of their teaching and learning. This might be as basic as using web resources for college assignments and papers, providing web links to students seeking further information on a subject, or as the basis of interaction between faculty and fellow researchers at other institutions. As

campus libraries allocate additional resources to online journals and books and provide professional support to faculty and students seeking to access information through the web, it has become abundantly clear that e-learning is an established and growing feature of the higher education landscape – not just for online continuing education students and faculty. It is a rare campus library today that does not have an online catalogue and subscriptions to at least a score of online journals and databases.

Even faculty who are critical of courses taught exclusively online would be reluctant to forego the advantages of our modern web-based academic environment. For this reason, the growth of „hybrid courses“ combining technology and classroom interaction in complimentary fashion will continue unabated contributing momentum to distance learning. I hasten to add that in my opinion this development will neither improve nor weaken educational quality. I view quality as independent of instructional mode and instead dependent on the level of effort of faculty and students. Undoubtedly the debate will continue on the integration of technology and education. Clearly, educators must attune themselves to the reality of rapid change and all that this entails.

\* An expanded version of this paper was presented as a keynote address at the University Association for Continuing Education Annual Conference, April 9-11, 2001, Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Scotland. The full text is available at <http://www.sunysb.edu/spd/dean.htm>

### References

- Armstrong, L. (2000). Distance Learning: An academic leader's perspective on a disruptive product. *Change*, 32(6), 20-27
- Brown, J. S. & Duguid, P. (2000). *The social life of information*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press
- Christensen, C. M. (2000). *The innovator's dilemma: When new technologies cause great firms to fail*. New York: HarperBusiness
- Collins, M. (1991). *Adult education as vocation: A critical role for the adult educator*. New York: Routledge
- Donaldson, J. & Edelson, P. J. (2000). From functionalism to postmodernism in adult education leadership. Ch.13 in Wilson, A. L. & Hayes, E. R. (eds.), *Handbook of adult and continuing education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Dyer, J. (1956). *Ivory towers in the market place: The evening college in American education*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill
- Eaton, J. S. (2001). *Distance Learning: Academic and political challenges for higher education accreditation*. CHEA Monograph Series 2001, No.1. Washington, DC.: Council for Higher Education Accreditation
- Grubb, W. N. (1996). *Working in the middle: Strengthening education and training for the mid-skilled labor force*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
- Noffsinger, J. S. (1926). *Correspondence schools, lyceums, chautauquas*. New York: Macmillan
- Rosentreter, F. M. (1957). *The boundaries of the campus: A history of the University of Wisconsin Extension Division, 1885-1945*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press

#### Zusammenfassung:

Rief die technologische Weiterentwicklung in den USA nach anfänglicher Euphorie für elektronisches distance learning bald Skepsis – vor allem aufgrund nur marginaler Lernerfolge – hervor, so ist seit etwa fünf Jahren auf College- und Universitätsebene eine breite Akzeptanz von e-learning in Kombination mit face-to-face-Lernarrangements zu verzeichnen. Landesweit wird der Anteil aller Belegungen für Online-Kurse bis 2009 auf 31% prognostiziert. Allerdings zeigen sich heute vor allem private Elite-Schulen und Universitäten gegenüber e- und distance learning reservierter. – Die wachsende Verbreitung elektronisch gestützten Lernens hat jedoch nichts mit der pädagogischen Qualität zu tun: Diese ist – unabhängig von der Unterrichtsmethode – abhängig von Leistung, Begabung und Anstrengung der Lernenden und Lehrenden.