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PRACTICE PAPER

Online Learning and Teaching in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism: Myths, Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

This paper identifies and confronts five key myths explaining why many academics in the fields of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism are quite reluctant to introduce online learning and teaching activities into their courses and modules. Designing and delivering high quality online sessions, in order to support and complement rather than replace face-to-face interactions, is by no means easy: the learning curve is a steep one, and one is bound to encounter technological, pedagogical and practical problems. Yet research carried out at the University of Gloucestershire in Autumn 2001 shows that online learning and teaching is beneficial for students and tutors alike, equally in terms of Information Technology (IT) skills, innovation, flexibility and support.

Keywords: Online learning and teaching (OLT), Information Technology (IT), Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

Introduction

With the increasing use of Information Technology (IT) and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) for the delivery and assessment of educational programmes, online learning and teaching (OLT) has become more than a buzzword in the academic world: in most institutions, many modules are already supported online; yet in terms of life-cycle, OLT in the fields of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism is still in its introductory phase. There is a wide spectrum of opinion regarding online activities:

- A minority of academics are already engaged both in the practice of OLT and in the critical modelisation which theoretically underpins and sustains practical developments and improvements. This paper is not for them, because as pioneers and innovators they have already reflected upon the myths, opportunities and challenges offered by OLT.

Dr Loykie L. Lominé started his academic career at the University of Gloucestershire (previously known as Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education). He has now joined King Alfred's College, Winchester, where he lectures in tourism management. His academic interests include the sociology of tourism, special interest markets (gay tourism, sports tourism, holocaust tourism) as well as qualitative research methods. His pedagogical interests include online learning and teaching, assessment strategies and disability issues.

- A minority of academics are wholeheartedly opposed to the very idea of online sessions, be it for pedagogical reasons (“Why use computers in education?”) or for technophobic reasons (“Who needs computers anyway?”). This article is not for them either, as it starts with the assumption that IT and CMC are much needed nowadays in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism, to the benefit of students and tutors alike.
- A majority of academics are neither for nor against OLT, but chiefly need further and clearer explanations about key issues. They represent the target audience of this paper, which aims to demystify OLT by denouncing some widely held myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings.

It must be stressed that this paper is not about programmes delivered exclusively online through distance learning (on the model of the Open University), or the numerous dot-com enterprises and broadcasting organisations which offer educational products and services delivered with no classroom contact whatsoever. That model could not fit most existing programmes in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism, as they have been designed with face-to-face, staff-student interactions as a key component; attempting to put them directly online without any thorough rethinking would be an educational mistake worse than the first generation of correspondence courses. OLT is not about putting the whole classroom onto the web, with lecture notes and assignments available online, discussion groups, chat, web-boards and email: that approach could only go wrong and be inappropriate both for students and tutors (Benyon, 1997; Colvin, 2000). The concern of this article is the online delivery of parts of a course, which in practice means that some sessions would not take place in the traditional class environment, but in a so-called virtual learning environment (often abbreviated to VLE). That this innovative practice will be beneficial for students and tutors alike is precisely what this paper aims to analyse and illustrate, whilst demystifying some aspects of OLT often misconstrued, if not wrongly feared by many academics.

Misconceptions

Misconception number 1: Online learning and teaching is not for me because my subject is not appropriate at all

It is true that business schools and business topics have predominantly been the early adopters of OLT, but there is no reason whatsoever why subjects taught within Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism could not and should not jump on the online bandwagon. Some schemes do lend themselves very well to OLT, either because of their topic (for example the postgraduate module Electronic Distribution in the Travel Trade offered at Oxford Brookes University), or because of their target (for example the HOST programme (Hospitality Online in-Service Training) offered at the University of Gloucestershire). Tutors reluctant to use OLT activities may want to argue that a virtual environment is not appropriate for them because their subject has a strong practical element (for example, with events management in leisure, sports coaching or catering operations), but online work can take many forms, including:

- Conceptual learning: making students discover and practice new theories and models, for example through concept-maps and exercises. Students can be asked to email their answers to the tutor or to their groups, or to keep them as part of a portfolio of evidence for their coursework.
- Collaborative learning: students can be asked to contribute to web-board discussions to share knowledge and develop their understanding. Their input can be marked (both in terms of quantity, i.e. regular contribution, and quality, i.e. substance).
- Research and analysis: students can be asked to use the Internet to gather information (documents, objects, texts, pictures) which can then be critically analysed and evaluated.
- Presentations by teachers or other students, not just text and notes, but graphics and animations (Powerpoint is commonly used in this way).

Many illustrations of OLT can be found on the Internet itself, notably through the sites of numerous American universities where VLEs tend to be used more than in Europe. A good gateway is the Virtual Resource Site for Teaching with Technology based at the University of Maryland University College. The way one course is designed may not welcome or facilitate the development of online activities, but the problem is then with the design of the course, not with the nature of the subject.

Misconception number 2: Online learning and teaching is not for me because I am not good enough with computers

That OLT requires a high level of IT literacy is a myth readily perpetuated by some tutors desirous to be admired as if they had mastered highly complex and specialised IT skills. There are a growing number of software applications created for online education, for example WebCT, Blackboard CourseInfo, TopClass and LearningSpace. Their designers, well aware that their target market is not composed of IT specialists, but of tutors with understandably limited IT abilities, produce programmes which are increasingly user-friendly and make it quite easy to set up a discussion board for students to post messages, or an online quiz to test their knowledge and prepare for their exams.

Learning to use these programmes is not more challenging than learning to use Powerpoint or Excel. It is certainly a learning curve: the first hours and the first tasks may be comparatively difficult, but the more one practices, the easier it gets. As Powerpoint and Excel offer sophisticated functions many people are unlikely to need and master, WebCT and TopClass do contain elements beyond first-timers' grasp, but this is not an excuse to refuse to start. The amount of time necessary to become familiar with a programme, and be able to use it to create and deliver a high quality online session may undoubtedly be an issue in terms of staff development, but not necessarily to the extent feared by academics and their line managers.

Misconception number 3: Online learning and teaching is not for me because I would not know where to get support

Depending on the institution and the extent to which OLT is already practiced and encouraged, support is available from a variety of sources:

- *IT support staff*: They may organise training sessions to familiarise academic staff with the use of the technology, and ideally also to train them on the role and specificities of the online teacher (as online teaching is very different from classroom teaching, thereby necessitating training in the specific skills involved);
- *Experienced colleagues*: In most institutions, OLT has already been adopted by a few innovators. Be it out of genuine interest in computer mediated education or to reinvent themselves academically, those pioneers and precursors are valuable agents of change whose experience can only benefit colleagues willing to embark on online projects;
- *Online resources*: Many developers publish their work and experience online, making the information freely and easily accessible to all. The best example in Britain is probably Dr Gilly Salmon from the Open University Business School, well known for her work on e-moderating and her 5 step-model (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001);
- *Printed support*: There has recently been a sharp increase in the number of excellent books on the topic of OLT, for example Jolliffe's *Online Learning Handbook* (2001), Lockwood and Gooley's *Innovation in Open and Distance Learning* (2001), and Stephenson's *Teaching and Learning Online* (2001).
- *Ensuring quality and academic standards*: The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) guidelines on distance learning (2000) and the work of the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council (1999) need to be mentioned, as they offer useful (albeit sometimes dry and general) advice about assuring the quality and academic standards of teaching material produced for online purposes.

Misconception number 4: Online learning and teaching is not for me because I do not understand the jargon

Without necessarily realising it, tutors and writers who engage in online activities may sometimes use technical terms which can be resented as alienating and frustrating, but the same could be said of all subject specialists: each discipline (including pedagogical disciplines) comes with its own terminology, and so does OLT. 'Asynchronous delivery', 'hard technology' and 'netiquette' are not elitist terms coined by a minority willing to sound esoteric and remain misunderstood: they designate important elements of OLT. Asynchronous delivery refers to the fact that interaction between staff and student (and between student and student) does not take place simultaneously (for example, through discussion boards, as opposed to video-conferencing); hard technology refers to the physical media used such as computers, televisions, telephones and video cameras (as opposed to application software); netiquette (from 'network etiquette') refers to the conventions recognised in discussion forums, such as the avoidance of cross-posting and texts in capital letters. Those terms may sound jargonistic at first, but they prove very useful if not essential to understand what exactly takes place, analyse strengths and weaknesses, identify new opportunities and develop better online learning activities.

Misconception number 5: Online learning and teaching is not for me because my students are very happy with the way my course runs

It is difficult for students to evaluate the quality and potential of any change they cannot necessarily test or imagine. Students' opinions of online learning and teaching certainly reflect the spectrum of opinion of their tutors: a progressive minority are likely to be extremely interested and willing to work with computers as much as possible, while a conservative minority will be very reluctant, almost by principle. The majority will be somewhere in the middle, concomitantly happy to give it a try (because it is different), but a bit anxious too (precisely because it is different, and also because computers often retain an aura of technological complexity). That attitude towards change and technology is human and predicable, yet there is a strong argument in favour of online work, based on the paramount and ever increasing importance of IT and CMC in Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. Providing students with more opportunities to engage in online learning activities is a further way to prepare them for their future careers. The second part of this article further develops the advantages students can gain from online work.

Myths of online learning and teaching in hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism

Neither fictional nor far-fetched, but heard from academics reluctant to discover and use OLT, the five common myths presented in this practice paper can be summarised as follows:

- Myth number 1: Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism are not suitable subject areas for online learning and teaching.
- Myth number 2: One needs to have highly developed IT skills.
- Myth number 3: There is little support available.
- Myth number 4: It is all jargon and empty signifiers.
- Myth number 5: Students do not need it anyway.

Based on ill-informed misconceptions and widespread misunderstandings, these five assumptions need to be corrected in people's minds to enable a wider development of online activities in our programmes. The next part of this paper, based on research done in the field of Tourism Management at the University of Gloucestershire in Autumn 2001, shows how students perceive the advantages and disadvantages of online work. The tutor's perspective is then presented, again in terms of advantages and disadvantages, to finally draw an interesting parallel between students' experiences and those of their tutor.

Online learning and teaching: the student experience

Research was carried out with the students of two tourism modules partially supported online at the University of Gloucestershire: a level one module Introduction to Sports Tourism and a level two module Communications in Tourism. Students' feedback on their new online experience was regularly requested and analysed, every three weeks on average, both through anonymous questionnaires (quantitative aspect of feedback gathering), and through focus groups (qualitative aspect of data collection), resulting in a total of 140 questionnaires and four focus groups by the end of the semester.

The students' feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and they all welcomed this innovative aspect of their course. One out of five even voiced their desire to see other modules operate in the same way, with an online component; this encouraging point will certainly put some pressure on other academics to develop online activities, as an answer to the new demand coming from the students themselves. Students have identified four key advantages in terms of IT skills, innovation, flexibility and support:

- *IT skills*: Online work enables them to develop their IT skills directly and effectively, whereas other traditional modules only promise to do so implicitly, by asking students to carry out some research through electronic databases or on the Internet.
- *Innovation*: Online work is a welcome break from traditional classroom sessions, offering a different way to learn, thereby comparable to watching a relevant video, hearing a guest lecturer from industry, or doing a fieldtrip.
- *Flexibility*: Online work offers more flexibility: no need to be in the classroom at the same time on the same day every week. During weeks when the session is delivered online, it is possible to make alternative arrangements for work or to meet with other students for group assignments. Students who have access to the Internet at home can work from home in the evening: what matters is the work done and the learning experience, not their presence in a university classroom.
- *Support*: Online work is better because it is possible to go more slowly over certain concepts and their applications, move backward and forward between ideas and illustrations and understand the objectives of the module as a whole.

The highest majority of students did not mention any problem or disadvantage regarding their online experience. A few days before and after the first online session, some students came to see the tutor to complain and voice their anxiety against online work. They argued they did not know where to start, but it transpired that they had failed to attend the introductory session in the computer lab where the programmes were presented, passwords given and so forth. Put another way, to the surprise of the tutor and IT support staff, students have been extremely happy with their online experience, articulating a variety of advantages, and no problem or challenge was voiced or raised.

Online learning and teaching: the tutor experience

Prior to autumn 2001, the tutor had never taught in a virtual learning environment. A logbook in the form of a diary was kept to record impressions, difficulties encountered, progress made and achievements with WebCT, the software used at the University of Gloucestershire. Whereas students had found the whole process smooth and utterly beneficial, the tutor was confronted with three main types of problems, which can be regarded as the three main disadvantages of the creation and design of online activities:

- *Technological problems*: Rather unexpectedly, the main difficulty in this respect was not to learn how to use the programme in general, but how to carry out specific actions (such as: how to change the order of icons or how to integrate a self-marking quiz). Much time was spent struggling with minor problems, and the answers often proved more simple and more straightforward than anticipated.
- *Pedagogical problems*: The main challenge was to design web pages being both intellectually stimulating (as can be expected in higher education) and visually pleasant (as students' familiarity with the Internet raises, so too do their expectations regarding the quality of their VLEs) (O'Donoghue et al., 2000).

- *Practical problems:* These minor, idiosyncratic difficulties only added to the pressure to make the online project run smoothly, and for example involved the late booking of a computer lab for an introductory session (most necessary to ensure that students would understand how to start with the online work), or the organisation of the invigilation of the online test (which was part of the assessment strategy for the level one module Introduction to Sports Tourism).

Preparing, designing and delivering online sessions to support and complement the traditional, face-to-face sessions was sometimes stressful and time consuming, yet four main advantages were identified, interestingly in the four areas judged beneficial by students, in terms of IT skills, innovation, flexibility and support:

- *IT skills:* Online work opens new possibilities in terms of visual aids and multimedia, notably with hyperlinks to online articles or to the websites of existing companies as full case studies (which could only be shortened and simplified in classroom contexts).
- *Innovation:* Online work is an invitation to reconsider learning outcomes and the most suitable ways to reach them, encouraging creativity and a break from traditional, discursive, face-to-face interactions, for example with the possibility to have students support one another or formally exchange ideas on discussion boards.
- *Flexibility:* Online work leads to new opportunities in time management, as there is no need to be in the classroom at the usual time: instead, one can organise other appointments, tutorials or meetings in the free hours when the teaching would normally take place.
- *Support:* Online work is not only beneficial for weaker students as well as some disabled students (such as dyslexic students), as they can review the information when necessary, or relocate specific notions within the programme, but it also makes it possible to provide individual responses and personalised feedback to those students who do not score as well in the online tests, or who send incorrect answers in their email exercises.

Conclusion

OLT has recently entered the fields of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism. Estimable pioneers, the first members of staff who have paved the way are followed by an increasing number of colleagues, although there is still much reluctance amongst academics because of several enduring myths that this article has tried to identify and confront. With existing programmes not principally designed to be delivered and assessed online, embarking on the e-wagon means using IT and CMC to support rather than replace face-to-face interactions. It is by no means an easy task: the learning curve is a steep one, and one is bound to experience frustrating technological, pedagogical and practical problems, at least in the beginning. Yet it is undoubtedly worth it, not only because of personal reward (feelings of achievement and self-esteem, popularity amongst students and colleagues as a successful innovator), but also because of four key advantages, in terms of IT skills, innovation, flexibility and support. Interestingly, both students and tutors seem to benefit from OLT in those four directions, which may well be the ultimate sign, if necessary, that everyone can gain from developing online activities in higher education in the subjects of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism.

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