



The Chronicle Review

From the issue dated September 7, 2001

SEARCH THE SITE

SITE MAP

SECTIONS:

Front Page
Today's News
Information Technology
Distance Education
Teaching
Publishing
Money
Government & Politics
Community Colleges
Students
Athletics
International
People
Events
The Chronicle Review
Jobs

FEATURES:

Colloquy
Colloquy Live
Magazines & Journals
New Grant Competitions
Internet Resources
Facts & Figures
Issues in Depth
Site Sampler

CHRONICLE IN PRINT:

This Week's Issue
Back Issues
Related Documents

SERVICES:

About The Chronicle
How to Contact Us
How to Register
How to Subscribe
Subscriber Services

POINT OF VIEW

Lessons From the Open University: Low-Tech Learning Often Works Best

By SIR JOHN DANIEL

A common error is to overestimate the impact of a new trend in the short term and underestimate its effect in the long term. Recent public discourse about the use of online technology in higher education has fallen headlong into that trap.

Eighteen months ago, pundits were telling us that e-learning would sweep away college campuses as we know them, and that distance education would not survive unless all learning could be delivered online to a computer screen. The dot-com frenzy of late 1999 and early 2000 was a nerve-racking time, even for those of us at a distance-teaching university as successful as the Open University, in Britain, where I was vice chancellor from 1990 until a few months ago, and which has served more than two million students since 1971.

Were our 180,000 degree-credit students about to shun our system of "supported open learning" -- in which we employ an evolving blend of multimedia materials, including those found online -- for an exclusively online approach? How should we reply to the dot-com start-up that threatened to buy the university if we refused a close partnership with it?

The passage of time provided answers to both questions. Last year, the Open University had a record number of student enrollments, and a new, low-tech course, "An Introduction to the Social Sciences: Understanding Social Change," attracted nearly 13,000 students, an all-time high for a single course. Materials for that class, like many others at the university, included books, study guides, audiotapes, and specially produced half-hour television programs, as well as CD-ROMs and online information.

Students were obviously not deserting the university, nor were they opting only for Web-based courses. In March 2000, the aggressive dot-com that had talked of buying the university a

[Change Your User Name](#)

[Change Your Password](#)

[Forgot Your Password?](#)

[How to Advertise](#)

[Corrections](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[The Mobile Chronicle](#)

[Help](#)

few months earlier was put up for sale itself. Shortly after that, the Nasdaq began its slide, and rational discussion of the impact of online technologies on colleges and universities became possible again.

Meanwhile, Open University students continued to exploit the evolving e-world in a pragmatic way. In fact, because of the scale and scope of the e-services that it offers, the university now has solid evidence of student preferences in the use of online technology -- based on the behavior not only of degree-credit students, but also of 100,000 schoolteachers who are studying how to use communications technology through the university's Learning Schools Program.

What have we learned? Certainly, the number of students using online connections has grown steadily; between 1999 and 2001, the total has increased from 60,000 to 150,000, now constituting a clear majority of the student body. But the main lesson that I can share with other colleges is that students use the new technology for specific services -- making administrative transactions, obtaining documents and information, and communicating with peers and faculty -- much more than to study course material.

Massive numbers of students are turning to the Web to find out about the university and make course selections. Our Learner's Guide receives 70,000 hits a week and evokes enthusiastic comments. Besides discovering how the university's learning system works and what courses it offers, students can access information on such topics as financial aid, career guidance, credit transfer, and services for the disabled.

Similarly, putting the student handbook online has been a win-win application. The university saves the cost of printing and mailing 200,000 copies, while students can immediately consult the current version and locate the sections of most interest.

Many of the university's most popular online services are interactive. For example, students can list their previous credits from other institutions and get an indication of how the Open University would count them toward a degree. A service that allows each student to check his or her grades in current assignments and courses, previous courses, and other records online is especially popular; as many as 35,000 students consult those records each week. The university's 8,000 associate faculty members also use the service to obtain information about the students whom they tutor.

Online information leads to online transactions. Roughly 75,000 online course registrations have been made in the past

year. However, only 30 percent of all students have registered online, and the university suspects that the remaining 70 percent feel that they need some human reassurance about their choices.

Students have no such reticence about using the Web for simpler transactions, however. Many Open University courses, lasting up to a week, are held on the campuses of traditional universities in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. Students like being able to review the dates and venues, make a reservation, and receive immediate confirmation. The university offers a similar service for the more than 30 commencement ceremonies that it organizes each year in locations in Britain and Europe. Graduates can find out where each commencement will be held, obtain the schedules, note any limits on the number of guests, and reserve places at the event of their choice.

One traditional weakness of distance learning has been the difficulty of accessing ancillary documentation, such as reports related to the student's course. The Open University provides such materials to each student online, at no extra charge. It also arranges for the documentation to be available at its 15 regional centers and even in local libraries.

In fact, the university library, which used to focus on serving the needs of faculty members for course development and research, now concentrates on providing students electronic access to databases and documents. Faculty members are helping the library develop a service that selects and keeps up-to-date a set of relevant documents for each course. Already, the system has 2,000 such documents, relating to 100 courses. The number of times that students used e-technology to obtain such information jumped from 60,000 in 1999 to 176,000 in 2000. They appreciate being able to go straight to relevant material instead of navigating through links on the Web.

Far more popular than access to documents and practical information is computer conferencing. As many as 110,000 students now communicate regularly through some 16,000 conferences -- 2,000 of which the students themselves moderate, under the aegis of the student association. (When a particular course has no official conference, the student association organizes one and finds a moderator for it.) Every day, 150,000 messages fly around such virtual conference rooms. While not all messages may be of lasting academic significance, the communications greatly reinforce the sense of community among students and the effectiveness of the student association.

To the surprise of many promoters of e-learning, however, students aren't nearly as interested in using online technology to study course material. They make it clear that they want to read books as books, not as downloaded computer files. Information in CD-ROM and Web formats accounts for only a fraction of students' total study time. I am convinced that students prefer courses to blend online information with other materials.

Grading student assignments is another area where the apparent gains from online technology have been illusory, despite the university's concerted efforts to develop user-friendly electronic grading tools. Although submitting and returning assignments electronically is quicker than the postal system, most associate faculty members still prefer to comment on and grade student work through the traditional method of writing in the margins.

Clearly, online technology has enabled the university to provide better services to students at lower costs, improve access to library resources, and break down barriers to communication. However, my experience has taught me that the activities at the heart of the academic endeavor -- study and assessment -- lend themselves less to online technology than do other aspects of college life. Online technology should be used strategically, to provide specific student services.

Yet in being responsive to students, we should not just wait for them to tell us what they want. Even students, once they have become accustomed to a system, do not like to see it changed. For example, the heavy use of computer conferencing at the Open University has generated inertia that makes it difficult to migrate to new and better software. By contrast, our new sister institution, the United States Open University -- which took its first students in 2000 and where I have also served as president -- is unencumbered by such traditions and has been able to integrate technologies, like conferencing and the Web, in new and better ways. For example, one password gives students access to all parts of the Web site. It should soon be sharing those new applications with its British counterpart and affiliates around the world.

In fact, perhaps the most important lesson I've learned is that we need to work in partnership with students. Sometimes we should follow their lead, and sometimes we should lead them, as we scout our way through the technological frontier.

Sir John Daniel is assistant director-general for education at Unesco. He is a former vice chancellor of the Open University in Britain and a former president of the United States Open University.

<http://chronicle.com>
Section: The Chronicle Review
Page: B24



[Easy-to-print](#) version



[E-mail](#) this story

[Copyright](#) © 2001 by The Chronicle of Higher Education

Find that *book* and *buy it*
chronicle.com/books

