

EDEN: European Distance Education Network

Webinar Series - September 14 & 21, 2020
Education in the Time of a New Normal

September 14: Webinar #1

Online transformation of universities – having faced the challenges of the pandemic, are they prepared for the new normal?

Contribution of Sir John Daniel (co-founder of EDEN in 1991-92)
Online and distance learning: what do students need to succeed?

Summary

Think of online and distance learning as a student sitting on a stool with three legs. They are:

1. Learning Materials;
2. Logistics and Administration;
3. Student Support.

If any leg is weak the student may fall (fail).

This talk addresses two questions:

How do you provide good student support through online/distance methods?

What are the keys to good logistics and administration?

Introduction

TITLE. ONLINE AND DISTANCE LEARNING: WHAT DO STUDENTS NEED

When the COVID-19 pandemic erupted in the early months of 2020, higher education institutions (HEIs) had to vacate their campuses and move operations online. Most teachers thought that they coped surprisingly well, although students were divided between those who found their online experience satisfactory and those who thought it was sub-standard.

COVID-19 STATUS

The evolution of the pandemic varies widely. Some jurisdictions appear to have controlled it. Others are seeing new waves of infection after they thought they had it under control. A few large population countries, notably Brazil, India and the United States, have lost control of the virus. The number of cases worldwide may soon reach 30 million.

This makes it very difficult for HEIs to plan for the future. They cannot know when and how the pandemic will end, nor what legacy it will leave behind. Will all HEIs make regular use of online and distance learning from now on, or will most of them return, happily, to face-to-face teaching? Only time will tell.

Today I make three assumptions.

THREE ASSUMPTIONS

First, all HEIs will aim to become more resilient in order to face the next crisis better.

Second, resilience will include the capacity to move operations online, even if only during emergencies.

Third, students should judge the quality of their online courses to be satisfactory.

I shall present an analogy to summarize what makes online operations successful.

The Three-Legged Stool

THREE-LEGGED STOOL

Think of the student learning online as seated on a three-legged stool. The three legs are:

1. Good learning materials: for both synchronous and asynchronous use.
2. Student support: academic, administrative, cultural and social.
3. Efficient administration and logistics.

A stool requires all three legs to support the weight put on it. By analogy, online education only works if all three functions are performed well. If any leg cannot support the weight the student may fall – that is to say fail.

In this year's rapid transitions to online learning, most effort was invested in learning materials. Professors concentrated on putting their classroom lectures online for synchronous delivery.

Good learning materials are, of course, vital to successful distance learning. But also, good materials that students can work on **asynchronously** are a vital complement to **synchronous** online lectures.

Today, however, I shall focus on the other two legs of the stool. During the scramble to go online when COVID-19 hit, I saw how a small HEI in Vancouver, the Acsenda School of Management, made the transition successfully. It went well because, although the learning material was mostly synchronous Zoom presentations, Acsenda also gave intense attention to Student Support and to Administration and Logistics.

Find details about Acsenda's successful transition in the first paper I cited. The second describes how management requirements evolved during the process.

Student Support

STUDENT SUPPORT

I start with Student Support.

Students need support that goes beyond their online group sessions with the professor. Four areas for support are: academic, administrative, cultural and social.

To be successful students must engage with the **academic** content of their courses. Many require more help than they get in the formal online classes. Their first need is for opportunities to ask

questions and demonstrate their understanding of concepts. This can be done by the instructor in one-on-one or small-group online sessions. For a large class this is done better by part-time tutors hired and trained specifically for the support function.

The second area is **administration**. When they are on campus, students can usually resolve issues about timetables, programme requirements, and so on by going to the relevant office. When everyone is off campus this support must be provided through clear information on websites, a friendly helpline, regular e-mail updates, and quick and accurate replies to a large volume of e-mail.

Then there is **cultural** support. Undergraduate students, in particular, look to their campus for exciting cultural activities to meet other students. On campus these often happen informally, but an HEI operating online has to organise them, which means using technology to offer events such as trivia quizzes, music nights and debates. At Acsenda the student ambassadors, who are specially chosen high-performing senior students, also organised some successful cultural events.

Finally, there is **social** support. Online study and confinement during lockdowns can be lonely, particularly for new students. They need opportunities to meet each other, if only virtually, and to talk about any personal issues that worry them. Each HEI has to decide where to draw the line between the providing social support itself and referrals to official psychological and counselling services that some countries provide through the state or voluntary organisations. HEIs should beware of taking responsibility for student issues that should properly be dealt with by state social services or by the police.

Administration and Logistics

ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

The third leg of the stool is administration and logistics. Some of this will be provided by the **learning management system**. Acsenda trained faculty to use both Zoom and BigBlueButton. It was good to have two options because in the early days of ‘crashing into online learning’ there was so much pressure on these platforms from HEIs worldwide that they did indeed crash. Most Acsenda teachers preferred Zoom but it was good to have a back-up.

Effective online operations depend on having an efficient **registry** with student management policies that have been translated into smoothly working procedures. This means user-friendly IT systems but also **telephone helplines** for students with problems that they may prefer to discuss with a real person. Expect the use of e-mail to explode!

Conclusion

THREE-LEGGED STOOL

I leave you with this analogy between online and distance education and a three-legged stool. My focus has been on the two legs of student support and logistics. I expect that my colleagues Professors Teixeira and Divjak will say more about learning materials. It has been a pleasure to work with EDEN again and I wish you well as you take your HEIs into the ‘new normal’

Sources:

[Covid-19 – A Two-Week Transition from Campus to Online](#)

[Conducting a College through COVID-19: The Evolving Leadership Challenge](#)