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WORKING PAPER SERIES

Discipline: Management/Education

E-learning and blended learning in the Gulf region

Soly Mathew Biju
University of Wollongong in Dubai

WP 70/2008
June 2008

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E-learning and blended learning in the Gulf region

Dr. Soly Mathew Biju
College of Undergraduate Studies
University of Wollongong in Dubai
SolyMathewBiju@uowdubai.ac.ae

Abstract
In today's ultra modern world the traditional face to face (F2F)teaching has been replace by e-learning or online learning .Companies find this method very effective to train their employees without using up work hours. E-learning has been implemented by many educational institutions at undergraduate and graduate level in the Gulf region. Blended learning has been adopted by many schools and universities in the Gulf. Blended learning is e-learning along with onsite support. This paper will discuss different modes of e-learning, assignment design techniques and E-learning trends in the Gulf region.

Keywords: E-learning, Blended learning, second life, e-profile, wikis, synchronous, asynchronous modes, m-learning, WebCT, Moodle

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr.Soly Mathew Biju is an instructor in the College of Undergraduate studies teaching programming languages and algorithms and problem solving .She has taught various Software Engineering and IT subjects at different colleges. She is an ISTQB (foundation) certified software testing professional. She has taught numerous online courses in different colleges in Europe .She has worked in the IT industry besides working as a Systems Administrator leading Windows NT and Lotus Notes team for British Airways Heathrow, U.K. and in Pune, India.

1. Introduction

There has been an increase in the number of universities and colleges implementing in E and blended learning as an integral part of instructional activities. They are trying to make best use of the technology available to promote e-learning and to motivate students to study outside the four walls of a classroom. These technological innovations have a direct impact on current university practices policies and have the potential of changing our traditional definition of education(Daugherty M, Funke B.L. (1998)).E-learning can also mean extended learning that is learning outside the class room, from anywhere and at anytime.

Many schools in the gulf region are adopting this innovative style of teaching. Students find it interesting compared to the traditional method of teaching. Web-based instruction is already revolutionizing how students work, think , and access information (Peck & Dorricott,1994).Some schools are using the free Learning Management Systems like 'Moodle ' which provides all the essential features required for blended learning.

Universities are also adoption tools like Blackboard.com and WebCT for online support along with the onsite teaching support. This can also be integrated with some classes being held in the second life which is 3D virtual world.

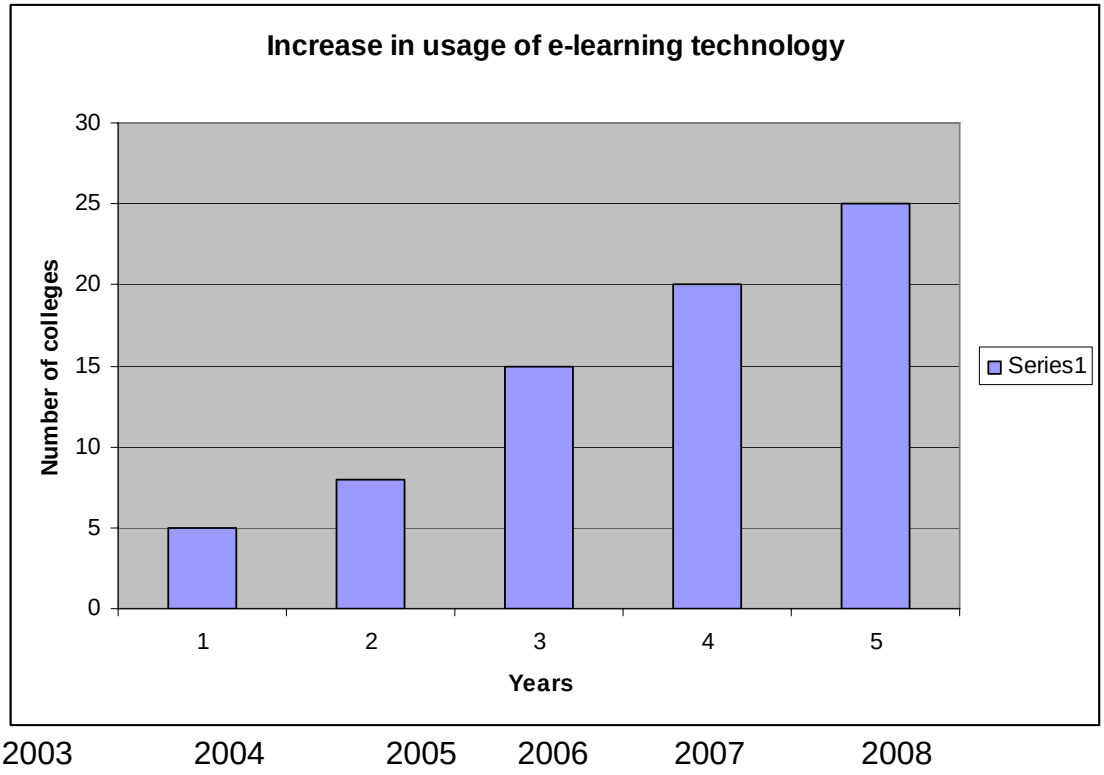

Figure1, increased usage of e-learning technology

As depicted in Figure 1, a recent survey conducted shows an increasing interest in e-learning over the years in the Gulf. Most of the universities in the gulf have a 'e-learning center for excellence'. It is very helpful at university levels for students who are working or who are frequently traveling to keep in touch with what is happening in their classes. It allows students who find it difficult to speak up in class to participate in online discussion forums. The students can participate in the online

class discussion during their free time by logging on to the online class and posting his views to the discussion folder in an asynchronous mode. Figure 2 shows a discussion forum on WebCT.

Figure 2 WebCT Discussion forum WebCT(2005)

The lecturers and teachers are able to save a lot of more time which can be utilized to develop and improvise on the course material.

E-learning can be very beneficial for students who are interested in continuing education along with their jobs and for people who have a lot of experience in the field or are currently working in the same field and want to enhance their knowledge about the subject. It does not require you to be physically present at a particular location. You can login to your class anytime from anywhere .This definitely saves a lot of time and helps the student to continue working while studying which is one of the major advantages. E-learning is a boon to specially those who have difficulty in travelling to and forth to attend the classes at the university.

2. Modes of online learning

2.1 Asynchronous mode

Online learning usually has two modes one is a completely asynchronous mode and synchronous mode. In case of asynchronous mode the lectures, assignment and examination questions are uploaded and available to the students online. The students can study from the lecture notes and specified text and then attempt the quizzes and question uploaded. There is no synchronised session between the lecturer and the student. Any query by the student will be send to the lecturer's mail id, who will then reply it within 24 hours in most of the online programs. Students used to the traditional mode of teaching may feel a little lost initially but will be able to cope up with online teaching. Figure 3 and figure 4 shows an asynchronous online class.

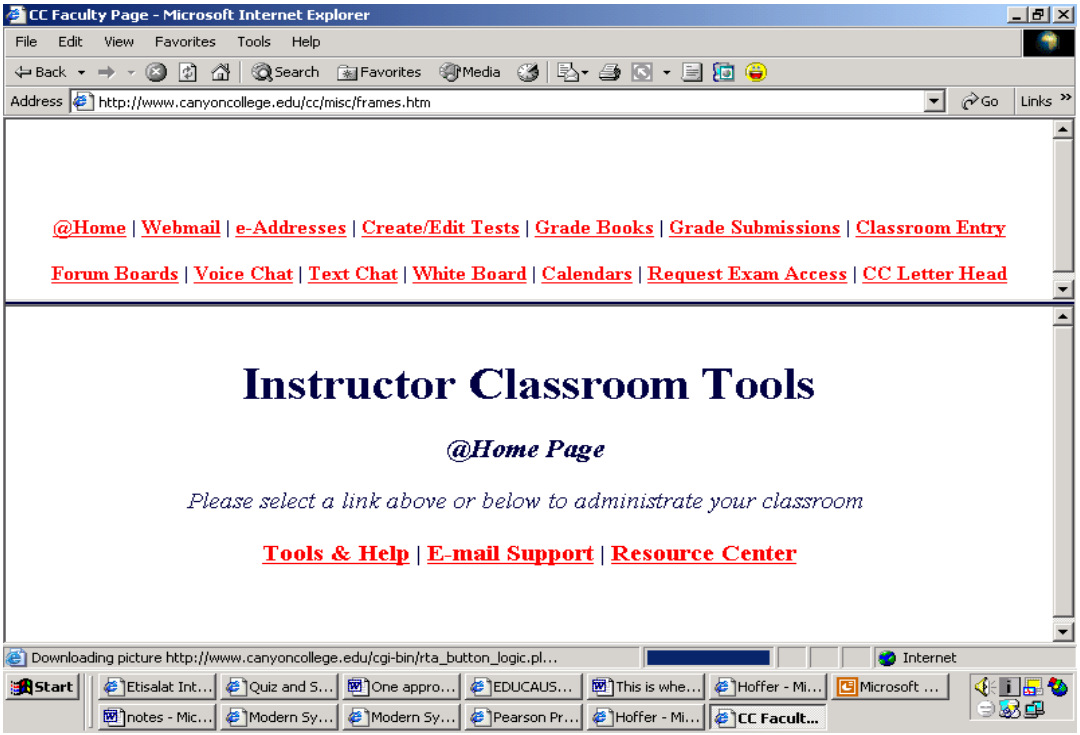

Figure 3 E-learning class (Canyon College,2006)

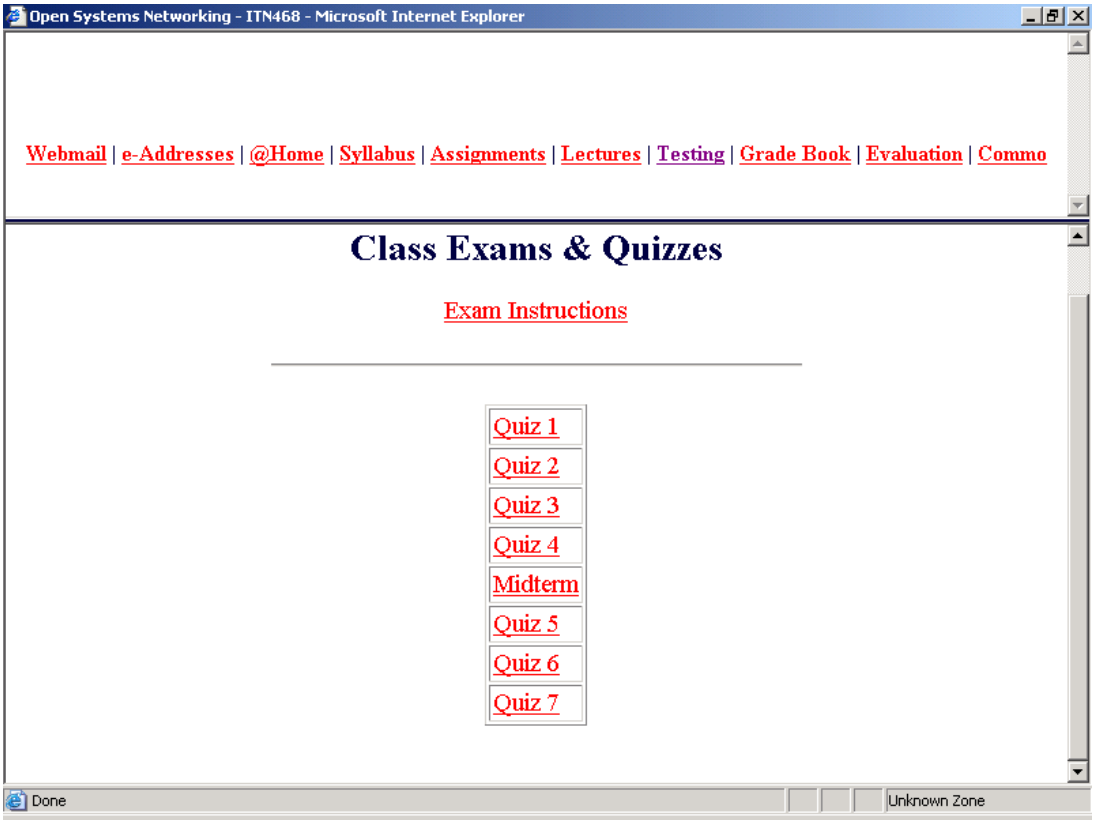

Figure 4 Online quizzes (Canyon College,2006)

2.2 Synchronous mode

In case of synchronous mode, the students and the instructors are required to login to the class at a particular time decided in advance. The lecturer will then conduct the

class using PowerPoint presentation which will be visible to the student on his screen. There are many advance softwares that support this facility. The student will be able to listen to the explanation given for each of the slide displayed .He can ask a question to the instructor by clicking on an ion provided for the same which is very similar to raising your hand in the class to ask a question.
In this case you can have a completely virtual class room experience. The only drawback in this case is that the student should login to the class at a specific time given. This may be difficult and impossible for students who are constantly travelling. E-learning involves online class discussions where the students can login in their own free time and posting their opinions and views on the topic of discussion. The students are encourages to read each others suggestions and give their view about it. Data collected for this research shows that students enjoy the discussion session the most. It motivates them to login into the class more often.

2.3 Just-in-Time Teaching

"One Web-based approach, Just-in-Time Teaching (JiTT), was first devised by Novak, Patterson, Gavrin , and Christian (1999) to teach problem solving in physics" (Benedict ,James O. and Apple, Kevin J. ,2004).This can be incorporated into online teaching .The students can be given assignments after every class and based on their performance in the assignment, the next lecture could be modified to suit the requirement of the class such that the it addresses the concepts the student have not understood correctly.
Universities in the Gulf region have adopted both these modes of e-learning. Many colleges in the U.A.E. prefer having a blended mode of teaching which is online teaching (asynchronous or synchronous) and onsite teaching(face to face) teaching.

3. Designing Assignments

Assignments could be multiple choice questions or essay type questions. There are number of software vendors who provide standard softwares to support e-learning needs.. WebCT provides a facility wherein it is possible to create a question bank and then select the question for multiple choices. These questions banks are also available in the market for certain courses. These could be material that is designed for certain e-learning tools.eg.WebCT.The instructor can select the required questions from the database of questions.
E-learning is not only converting text into an electronic form, it is making content more interactive and interesting with more audio and video effect.

The content design should be student centred. . From Oliver (2001), a number of studies in recent years have highlighted critical aspects of learner readiness that need to be addressed. Some of these include:

1. Technology skills
2. Access to Technology
3. Technology Literacy and
4. Self-regulated learning

Points 1 to 3 can be addressed easily by the universities in the Gulf .Learning at self pace is a challenging task to achieve due to the fact that the courses are always designed for a particular period of time.

Online Group Projects:
It is very effective as the class can be divided into groups by the instructor and assigned different projects. Separate folder can created for each group. The student can use these folders to post their finding so that it is available to everyone within the

group. They can also use the discussion forum or the chat session as a virtual meeting place. Instructor can keep a track of their participation and progress.

4. Other tools used for e-learning

E-learning classes could also be designed in Second Life. Second Life is a 3-D virtual world. There are virtual colleges and universities in the second life which have virtual classrooms and labs where experiments are carried out just like in a actual class room .This is very beneficial for some online programs .One such example could be a Chemistry class where experiences can be carried out in the virtual world. All the virtual chemicals used exhibits all the properties of the actual chemical. This also gives the student to explore and experiment without fear of any dangerous accidents. There a number of organizations in the Gulf region which provide training classes for flying a plane or driving a car is also provided online.

Colleges and universities are also using technologies like pod casting, wikis and blogs.Colleges, universities and schools in the Gulf are encouraging students to create e-portfolios which can then be given to potential employers.

An e-portfolio can be a web-based information management system that uses electronic media and services. The learner builds and maintains a digital repository of artifacts, which they can use to demonstrate competence and reflect on their learning. Having access to their records, digital repository, feedback and reflection students can achieve a greater understanding of their individual growth, career planning and CV building. Accreditation for prior and/or extra-curricular experiences and control over access makes the e-portfolio a powerful tool (E-portfolio, 2004) .

5. Conclusion:

The is a tremendous and fast increase in the number of colleges in the Gulf adopting for e-learning .E-learning is a very effective tool to making learning a very enjoyable and interesting experience. E-learning requires smart assignment design .The latest learning tool is the m-learning or mobile learning which is portable and a truly anywhere anytime technology. Further study needs to be conducted based on the technology used and favoured the most in the Gulf. The research will also be looking into the barriers in e-learning in the Gulf.

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University of Wollongong in Dubai
P.O. Box 20183
Dubai, UAE
Phone: (+ 971) 04 367 2400
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