

Tech Talk Episode 9: Online Learning

Online learning? (Susan searches a book for a definition) Ah! Here it is. Let's see. Online learning involves delivery of courses and learning components via the internet. Fast, fluid and flexible, text and graphics, animation and simulations, audio and video, discussion boards, email, chats, testing. One hundred million online learners by 2004! Wow!

Tech Talk Intro plays.

Susan: Hello and welcome to Tech Talk from the University of Minnesota. I'm your host, Susan McKinnell. Technology is all around us. It's a challenge to keep up. Not only with the technology itself, but with the uses we put that technology to. It runs our cars, it cooks our food, it opens us to our world and more and more it is becoming a tool by which educators teach. It has a variety of names, distance learning, or elearning. We're going to refer to it today by the name that most people call it, online learning. Some of the terms you'll hear today include: web enhanced and web centric. Just as education once depended mainly on blackboards and chalk, paper and pencils, online learning depends on a certain foundation as well. Linda Jorn knows all about that foundation. She is director of the Digital Media Center at the University of Minnesota. She works with faculty, staff and students to provide a strong instructional and technological infrastructure. She chairs the Big Ten learning technologies group and is a member of a national committee focused on teaching and learning. Linda, it's very nice to have you with us today.

Linda: Thank you for asking me to be here.

Susan: Now, can you tell me first of all, what is online learning?

Linda: Well, online learning we like to define about thinking about learning that occurs on the web. And I think often we about the web as a super-highway of information, and I like to think of the web as a place. We go there to do things, shop, entertainment, chat with others, and now students and learners can go to the web and go to a course website where they can learn. They can read information, they can interact with that information, take quizzes, they can chat with other learners, they can chat with the faculty member...

Susan: Now, that's one of my big questions, to me, it's like I think about online learning, maybe they take a course and just stick it up there and then you've got, basically, a book online. But that's not really all there is to it, is there?

Linda: No. When faculty go to design an online learning experience, they think very hard about what the learning goals are for the learners and what activities those learners can engage in. And I think that's one of the things we're finding about online learning, is that there can be a lot of rich interaction between students. They can respond to each other's thoughts, they can chat and brainstorm about ideas and so a lot of design and thinking goes into designing these course web sites.

Susan: So, even though they are not face to face, the student talk to each other, the instructor and student talk to each other as well.

Linda: Yes.

Susan: Now, I know that different courses use different amounts of online activities. Not all courses are ALL online but they use the web for some things.

Linda: Yes. I think that's important. I think that a few years ago we talked about online learning and we thought, "It's all online." But what we're finding is a continuum of learning and some common language that's emerging is words such as "web enhanced" courses and recently we did a survey at the University of Minnesota of students across four colleges and 83% of those students had taken a web enhanced course. And this means they still meet face-to-face for the same amount of time, but that the faculty member is using the web to enhance the course. Then we kind of move to the next stage which we call "web centric" or "hybrid" type of courses where they are actually decreasing the amount of face-to-face time that they're meeting and then designing learning activities online. And then we move over to the fully online course, where you have students that are disbursed at different locations and they design the course so that all the learning occurs online. And even a lot of those courses will have a cohort of students who start together in a curriculum or a program and they meet face-to-face for a day and then they have the rest of the semester online, and sometimes they'll meet again at the end. So, you see this whole variety.

Susan: So, here at the University we have some courses that are completely online.

Linda: Yes.

Susan: And it sounds like we have a lot of courses that use the web as an additional tool.

Linda: Yes.

Susan: I know you've got some examples of some websites. Can we take a look them?

Linda: Yes. Yes. The first site I'd like to show you represents a web-enhanced course this is Dr. Sheila McNally in Art History and she has students look at how myths are represented across different cultures. And so they meet face-to-face but she uses the web to enhance the class. What I really like about this class is that students use this course website to share presentations that they've created. And so here you see topics about wisdom, ancient and mythological dance, and if we just open it, so here we see Yoda and talking about wisdom. And so students have to, really they are learning to create a new genre of document. You know, in our world now, we have to know about images and text and how to get things online.

Susan: And how to impart messages through that.

Linda: Yes. Yes. So it's a really rich learning experience for the students. And then Dr. McNally has students get on the web with a discussion tool and provide feedback to their peers, so they really have to reflect and think about what they are creating. So it's really a rich additional learning activity besides face-to-face.

Susan: Absolutely. So once again, this isn't just writing papers and throwing it up there. It's creating other media.

Linda: Yes. Yes. The students learn from each other in creating the documents and so that's a lot of work. Another example that I have is an example of this hybrid course. And in this case Dr. Laura Molgaard has created a website to enhance her clinical lab but they had two ten-week courses and when we converted to semesters they had to turn this into a fourteen-week course. So, they had a lot of information. So, they put some of the information that normally would be delivered during a lecture period and students didn't have to come this lecture. And so for example, they can go and learn how to do a transtracheal wash

Susan: Whatever that is. (Laughs)

Linda: Whatever that is, (nods in agreement) and they learn about why and complications and they see the instruments they'll use and then after each one of these skills, they'll actually take a quiz and then the instructor knows when they've taken their quiz and it's only then that they actually come into the lab and meet with the instructor and do the practice session. And the faculty have found that because the students, at their own pace, can interact with this information as much as they want...

Susan: They can come to it anytime...

Linda: (Nodding) They can come to anytime, they are really much more prepared for the face-to-face session. And their questions are a lot richer.

Susan: So the online experience has really enhanced this particular course.

Linda: Yes. Yes. And it's allowed instead of going to a lecture and hearing some of this, it's online and now their face-to-face meetings are more focused as a result.

Susan: Mm. Hmm. So, it's really using the time wisely.

Linda: Yes. Using it wisely. And then these resources are always up there and these students can always go back a review these techniques and skills as needed. So it is very nice. And then the last site I have that I'd like to show is a site by Dr. Marte Hult from our College of Liberal Arts. She has an online course for learning Norwegian. The goal of this class is not to become fluent in Norwegian.

Susan: Okay.

Linda: But these are for learners who know nothing about Norwegian and so they can understand, kind-of, every day language and activities.

Susan: Okay.

Linda: And, again, this is an online course and I just want to go in and show an example.

Susan: Now, this one is completely online.

Linda: Yes and her students, actually most of them are in the Twin Cities area, but she has, I think, one student in Vermont, and two other learners at a very distant location. She did have the students come and meet face-to-face right at the beginning to get oriented to the website, but it wasn't necessary, but the rest of the learning has been online. What I wanted to show here, was, students; every week, they get on and they see their assignments.

Susan: And it's not just on the web, I see you've got CD-ROM component as well.

Linda: Yes, she has a CD-ROM with video so students hear people and watch people do everyday activities. They go to the websites and they have exercises they do online and also they go to an asynchronous discussion tool for example here she says, "Write about what you will do tomorrow in future tense." They write in Norwegian and then the second posting can be of their choice. And then students have to respond to each other, so they have to think about their writing.

Susan: So, interacting online?

Linda: Rich interaction. And she also has a chat. So, once a week she has divided the students up into different groups and she meets with them online at a certain time and they all talk real-time and here, this week, they're talking about their daily routine and asking others about their daily routine.

Susan: Now by talking, obviously, it's just typing.

Linda: Yes.

Susan: And this is my big issue with, say language stuff, that this may be very useful for beginning, but, would this be useful for a more advanced student who needs to learn pronunciation and that sort of thing?

Linda: I think you find in some of your more advanced classes that they have face-to-face meetings. For example, in Spanish they have two of the sessions online a week and three face-to-face and some other examples I've heard of are if the student is at a distance site, they'll find a mentor or a preceptor in that community so they can practice that language.

Susan: So, there are all sorts of ways to combine the learning in both ways.

Linda: Yes. Every discipline understands and thinks about what needs to happen in the face-to-face environment or online.

Susan: Now, speaking about pronunciation, we've got just a little bit of time left, but I did want you to show...

Linda: Yes. We have one example here where students, Dr. Hult has a lot of practice sessions on here and one of the practice sessions is where students can actually listen to her talk and so we'll hear Dr. Hult here in just a second.

Susan: And so they just go to this web page and click on the little play button (Sound of Dr. Hult speaking Norwegian) and there's a little bit of Norwegian.

Linda: And I don't know what she's saying but maybe she's drinking coffee or something.

Susan: I don't either. I don't speak Norwegian. Well Linda, thank you so much for bringing this with you today.

Linda: Yes.

Susan: And thank you for being with us, Linda Jorn from the Digital Media Center, here at the University of Minnesota.

Linda: Thank you.

Susan: Online learning is having an impact on education at all levels, from the elementary grades right through preparation for college. Cheri Pierson-Yecke is the Commissioner of Education for the State of Minnesota. We talked to her about online learning's use in Minnesota schools.

Cheri: Well, a recent survey has found that 30% of Minnesota's school districts are doing some sort of web-based instruction. We were quite surprised by that number. You are going to see more of it at the high school level than at the elementary school level, though. You have some school districts, such as South Washington County or Hopkins, offering high school level courses and making them available across the state. So you may have a rural area up in Northwest Minnesota where students want to study, for example, Japanese, and they can't afford to bring a teacher on, so instead, you can contract with other school districts and bring this online learning into your school for your students. I don't think that online learning, especially in the elementary and Middle-school grades will ever really replace a good classroom teacher, but it can be used to supplement good classroom instruction.

Home schooling and online learning has become an interesting partnership. For example, if a family is home schooling their children, and perhaps the children become advanced at math, it may go beyond what the parents know. So then if there are online opportunities for that child to take online algebra or calculus or trig, you know, then the parent can continue home schooling but they can access online learning for those areas that they personally feel that they need more expertise. So, I think, there's really been a strong movement among the home schooling population to access online learning for that very reason.

I think that if you look at parents and teachers and what concerns they have, again from my conversations with folks, is the idea of isolation. They are thrilled with the opportunities that online learning can present to children, but very concerned that children not be isolated. And so in some cases you may have opportunities to attend an online course or be part of that course but it includes physical interaction; actually meeting with a group of students or teachers as part of that.

Susan: The focus of Minnesota's commissioner of education, Cheri Pierson-Yecke is on K-12 education, but what affect does online learning have at higher educational levels? That definition I read at the very beginning of the program touches on that very question. It says a projection of one hundred million online learners by the 2004. Merrill Lynch predicts that the online learning market will soon approach 25 billion dollars. The number of four-year, for profit institutions that provide online learning environments grew by 266% over the last 10 years. The author of that encyclopedic definition is Professor Ann Hill Duin. She's taught at elementary, secondary, collegiate and corporate levels in the U.S. and abroad. And she has also designed online learning environments in all of these settings. In fact Professor Hill-Duin designed the first fully online graduate course at the University of Minnesota. Ann, it's nice to have you with us today.

Ann: It's great to be here, Susan.

Susan: Now, commissioner Yecke thought that an exclusive online environment is not appropriate for children. Is that the case with adult learners as well?

Ann: Well, an adult is a very different learner. We still, of course, need interaction and so on, but an adult has a profession, most of the time and is working, quite often and so people have found that the access alone is probably one of the strongest pieces for online learning. The online learning that occurs in the U.S. and world-wide, about half of it is for professional reasons: I want to be certified in something additional, I want to be better prepared for a different aspect of my work, but about half of it is also personal. People study gardening, they study wine, you know, they study whatever they are personally interested in. So, online learning bridges both the credit side and the noncredit side. So, it fulfills a number of different learning needs that an adult has.

Susan: Absolutely. So, online learning is used very much in the adult world, not just in college or in grade school.

Ann: Yes. Mm. Hmm.

Susan: And then I can get credit for online courses?

Ann: Yes you can. You can get credit from increasing numbers of institutions. Just in the last several years, the number of online degree-granting programs has been growing by 40% a year.

Susan: Hmm. That's amazing.

Ann: So many institutions are entering this and seeing that their constituencies are asking for more online learning options.

Susan: Now are most of these institutions that are growing exponentially, are they being offered by traditional institutions? Traditional universities and colleges or...?

Ann: I'd say both. The greatest growth is, as you read in the definition, is in the For-Profit sector, for example, I have University of Phoenix up here and its site, they say, "One university; many ways to earn your degree: Online, Campus and Flexnet, is what they call the blended or hybrid environment where you have some online and some face-to-face. But it's offering the adult a suite of options. So the adult is put more in charge of your learning in this type of an environment. But the people who are doing that the fastest are in the For-Profit sectors of higher education. However, it's rare to find an institution that is not designing online components to either supplement its courses or one or two online programs be they at the bachelors, masters or doctoral level.

Susan: Are there lots of institutions that are exclusively online these days?

Ann: Yes. There are exclusive online institutions, certainly.

Susan: Mm. Hmm. Now, you mentioned a couple of the advantages of online learning for an adult learner, the flexibility...But, what else is there? Why are people seeking this out? Why is growing so much?

Ann: I believe part of the reason its growing is because of the interaction. Now, many people say, "Well, there's got to be less interaction because I'm isolated, I'm just with this screen." But, people have access to people around the world that are studying together. You have to design the online learning environment so it builds interaction into the class, per se. But you have access, not only to online learning libraries and its various components, but you also have access to people and to expertise from around the world. You are no longer dependent to the "Sage on the Stage" as some people would say.

Susan: Mmm. The traditional lecturer or professor?

Ann: That's right.

Susan: Now, they access to other people through chats, discussion, email, I think there is this perception, or some people might think that for a professor, for an instructor, that once they are over the technical hurdle of learning how to put something online, that it's easier for them to do an online course, they don't have to be lecturing in front of a bunch of people. Maybe they don't have to spend as much time in the classroom. What are your thoughts on that?

Ann: Well, I wouldn't say it's easier. I would say it's a different approach, a bit of a different style. You have to plan more. You have to be more organized, I believe, than in the face-to-face environment. You have to have thinking ahead and planning out the term so your learners...now, I'm thinking about more in the credit-based, where you're planning in terms of weeks in a term quite often and you have to be thinking ahead for what your students will need at all those points. Not that you don't do that in the face-to-face classroom too. But you have to plan for the interaction: what information your students will get, you need to be more of a mentor and a guide and facilitate so the students will learn from their peers. It becomes far more work and intensive if you rely on yourself as being the sole person that all those email messages can come to; that interaction, but if it's designed well, the students have a much richer interaction with their peers and with experts from around the world.

Susan: So, obviously there's a lot that goes into developing an online course. It takes a lot of work. Are there advantages for the instructor in doing this?

Ann: Part of the advantage is you have a chance for a greater variety of students. You have a greater chance for a blended audience, in the sense that it could be students from a certain industry in another state, or another country or just other collegiate units and so forth. You will have much more of a blended audience that will learn from each other.

Susan: Yes. Students do bring so much to the classroom.

Ann: By just going through that transformation of thinking through your class again. I mean, "What are my outcomes?" "What are the competencies and how will I measure those to make sure learn that?" I mean this is what every good teacher does. And it needs to be done all the more so in an online learning environment. But just be working through that change an instructor, quite often, discovers new things about their own teaching. It's a bit of a reinvigorating kind of experience.

Susan: A growth for the instructor as well. That's fabulous. It does take a lot of development. What sort of cost are we talking about here? Is it more costly to put things on the web or are there advantages to it?

Ann: It depends on the course. I know a "depends" sort of answer doesn't always get you very far, but obviously some disciplines are much more intense, they need greater tools for online labs, and this type of thing than something that is more text-based. That is just sort of a given. In terms of cost, if you look at it from the development standpoint some places, for example, Unext.com a Cardean University that I had up here, they put in

vast amounts, it was a collaboration with Columbia Business School, Stanford University, University of Chicago, Carnegie-Melon, and London School of Economics, they put in vast amounts of money into their different classes and so on. Did they need to? In the end what they did was unbundled a number of these larger classes where they had spent a lot of money and put them more in modules or smaller bits to be used in a noncredit and credit environment. So cost? If you think of it as all this development effort for one time, one use, no.

Susan: No, it wouldn't be worth it.

Ann: But if the value is that it's modular, you reuse and you start developing and there are any number of places where online teachers and face-to-face teachers using online resources can share their learning objects. And it's almost like your set of Legos™ and “Yeah, I can add here,” and “Oh! I've got some from there.”

Susan: Of course that is the beauty of the web too, that it expands the world, and you can share with people all over.

Ann: And good teachers have always done this. It was a chapter here, and it was a course pack. It's the same type of thing, it's just digital and it's accessible.

Susan: Wonderful. Professor Hill Duin, thank you so much for being here with us today.

Ann: Well, it's been a pleasure.

Susan: There's a lot more to online learning than just turning on your computer and tuning in. So let's review a couple of the points our experts made today *For Your Files*.

Susan: Mention online learning to the average person and they usually think, “A professor's book online” but, Linda Jorn this is not so.

Linda: What we're finding is a continuum of learning and some common language that's emerging is words such as, “web enhanced courses” and recently we did a survey at the University of Minnesota of students across four colleges and 83% of students had taken a web enhanced course which means they still meet face-to-face the same amount of time but the faculty member is using the course to enhance the course. Then we kind of move to the next stage which we call “web centric” or “hybrid” type of courses where they are actually decreasing the amount of face-to-face time that they're meeting and then designing learning activities online. And then we move over to the fully online course, where you have students that are disbursed at different locations and they design the course so that all the learning occurs online. And even a lot of those courses will have a cohort of students who start together in a curriculum or a program and they meet face-to-face for a day and then they spend the rest of the semester online, and sometimes they'll meet again at the end. So, you see this whole variety.

Susan: Minnesota Education Commissioner, Cheri Pierson-Yecke, had strong convictions about online learning at certain grade levels.

Cheri: I don't think that online learning, especially in the elementary or middle school grades will ever really replace a good classroom teacher. But it can be used to supplement good classroom instruction.

Susan: Professor Ann Hill Duin says online learning is not just for college students.

Ann: Online learning that occurs in the U.S. and worldwide, about half of it occurs for professional reasons, "I want to be certified in something additional, I want to be better prepared for a certain aspect of my work." But about half of it is also personal. People study gardening, they study wine, they study whatever they are personally interested in. So online learning bridges both the credit side and the noncredit side.

Susan: Professor Ann Hill Duin says if you think putting a course online is easy, think again.

Ann: You have to plan more. You have to be more organized, I believe, than in the face-to-face environment. You have to plan for the interaction, what information the students will get. You have to be more of a mentor and a guide and facilitate so that the students will learn from their peers. It becomes far more work and intensive if you rely on yourself as being the sole person that all those email messages can come to; that interaction, but if it's designed well, the students have a much richer interaction with their peer and with experts from around the world.

Susan: Next week it's music, digital music. What makes it different? What's an MP3? Is there a Midi in your future? If it all sounds like a jumble of letters and numbers to you, find out what digital music is and what it's done to the consumer and your favorite radio station it's Tech Talk next week at this same time. We've talked a lot about learning online and the bottom line of all this discussion seems to be, it's here to stay. Once again, Minnesota Education Commissioner, Cheri Pierson-Yecke...

Cheri: In the future, I think technology will be more integrated into the classroom than it currently is. In some schools you already see a high level of integration of technology in teaching and learning. I believe we'll see more of that because we are heading into a more technologically-driven society as a whole, and so we simply won't be able to escape that in the classroom.

Susan: For more information about this and future Tech Talk episodes check out our website. The address is www.techtalk.umn.edu. And until next time, I'm Susan McKinnell.

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