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Online Education in Era of 'Social Web'

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Contributing Writer

Online education has a long and winding history. Initially regarded by many institutes as a very interesting option to lower costs and offer students a way to learn with interactive materials, it evolved into something that could be described as ``education on steroids'' — in a regular classroom, time with the professor is limited.

Prof. Enrique Dans

Once a student raises ones hand, the professor can either notice or not. In many cases, the number of people raising their hands can be quite high and it's just impossible to allocate time for all of them. The student can ask a question or talk for only two to three minutes as the classmates may start to get nervous.

The professor has a split second to think about the question, and is forced to reply immediately — no real time connection from the brain to the Web has been invented yet. Finally, when it comes to grading, the professor may or may not recall that brilliant intervention from the student, and may or may not introduce it in the grade.

Now compare that to online education. At IE Business School (IE) a student sends a message to the online forum. The professor can either reply right away or send the question back to the forum for other students to build on it.

The dialogue can be much richer, diverse, involve more participants and one can build more knowledge and perhaps generate questions or lessons that could create new threads. In the end, when it comes to grading, everything is there, in the forum or digital drop box, waiting to be evaluated. The difference, is the richness of the digital medium — something that can really make a difference given the special characteristics of executive education, where students generally don't have to memorize formulas or equations.

This type of education has been working amazingly well at IE for a number of years. However, we recently realized it wasn't enough. With the advent of the so-called ``Web 2.0'' — ``the Web of the people'' or ``the social web,'' students find powerful tools to enrich their educational experience. And whilst it's probably unnecessary for the school to provide such tools — we are, in most cases, dealing with free tools where anyone can open accounts with just a valid e-mail address — it is required to understand their powers and possibilities.

These tools are basically collaborative and communicative. What happens, for instance, when students can see each other online? Besides being a challenge for schools like ours, where each member of the team can be anywhere in the world, when it comes to finding good timing for a meeting, it generates the need to respond. Some sessions, particularly those with guest speakers from companies, become interactive, in real time, via Breeze and similar tools.

Many professors use Skype actively, give their username to students so they can ask questions anytime if they see the professor online, or use Gtalk or other instant messaging tools to interact.

Besides that, they encourage the use of social bookmarks, del.icio.us being the most popular, where the students or the professor can collect links, tag them and make them available to document sessions, provide additional documentation, etc. and even see what's more popular or what type of references other users have saved in connection to a certain topic.

Also, imagine the potential of something like Google Docs: instead of using the old, fat Office, Google Docs provides students with a true collaboration suite, where several users can be connected concurrently in the same document or spreadsheet, and watch what other users are typing in real time whilst talking or instant messaging at the same time in a separate window. That pretty much conveys the meaning of online collaboration.

We are still only scratching the surface with such tools on the social web. Think about blogs: now every student can create a blog, post their assignments or reflect, and ask her professor to go there to check it out.

And while doing so, they can also build their online presence, generating ``Google juice,'' achieving visibility or even buying keywords for the companies they would like

to work for as soon as they get in the job market! Imagine a page where a student can introduce herself, put videos on YouTube, photos on Flickr, presentations in SlideShare, and season it with the proper, formal curricular info, and so on. A killer resume 2.0!

Then, imagine the power of ping-based or RSS-based search engines like Technorati or Google BlogSearch when it comes to research companies or materials, and the whole plethora of RSS readers — Google Reader, Bloglines, Netvibes and many others — when it comes to organizing sources of information, newspapers, magazines and their favorite gurus' blogs.

There are many tools out there, many possibilities, students have their preferences, and that's the way it should be: preparing our students for an extremely diverse web, with plenty of tools, where information can flow, independently of its format constraints, across tools of all kinds.

Right now, as a professor, I feel I'm giving the most of myself and I am able to cover more material and topics in the online masters versus on site ones.

I still enjoy in-class interaction very much, and that's why I tend to prefer blended courses versus pure online ones, and most of all, I think we are in a new, exciting frontier, where theories are yet to be written.

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