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Let's Look Back: Why We Failed Online Learning in the Early 2000s

April 4, 2016 | By Jessie Kong
Instructional Design
Educational Technology

Online learning is not a new concept anymore, and many organizations in the United States have increased to implement online learning over decades. However, I recently realized that some of us as curriculum developers still make the same mistakes we did in the early 2000s when designing and developing online courses. Therefore, it's good for us to think back on why we failed online learning in the past and reflect on what we learned from it.



The failure of early online learning can be divided into five main reasons: 1) poor quality of course design, 2) lack of organizational management, 3) technological limits, 4) lack of learner acceptance, and 5) lack of instructor acceptance.

1. Poor quality of course design:



Source: kianafitzgerald.com

Interactivity.

- The main barriers of online learning primarily lie not in the technology currently available, but in the misunderstanding of teaching and learning principles. Instruction should be designed, integrating three learning domains including cognitive, affective, and psychomotor activities to support permanent changes in knowledge, attitude, and behavior. This is especially true in a self-paced learning or distance education for successful learning (Lewin & Grabbe, 1945; Morrison, Ross, & Kemp, 2004). However, early online learning focused too much on the cognitive domain only (e.g., comprehension, application, analysis, and synthesis of facts and concepts). While it is critical for learners to learn cognitively, it is also important for them to learn affectively (e.g., appreciating, responding to, collaborating on, and valuing about the topics). Learners learn more effectively, when they get involved actively and emotionally in the learning process. Nonetheless, early online learning put all information in every content area and delivered reading through the Web. Many early online courses were self-navigated, with learners clicking page to page without any interactive learning activity.
- **Assessment.** Pre-assessment was very often not focused on the needs of the learner. Non-individualized learning experiences resulted in poor quality of online courses. Ongoing assessment (e.g., instructor feedback) was another missing part in early online course design (Yilmaz and Tuzun, 2001).
- **Multimedia/Graphics.** Early online courses frequently forgot to mix up the text with multimedia/graphics (e.g., drawings, charts, photos, animation, and/or video). The result was text-based courses that were very static for learners. However, also keep in mind that less text and more graphics is not always associated with more effective learning; irrelevant and decorative graphics are not a powerful way to help learners engage in active

learning (Reiber, 1994).

- **Customization & Maintenance.** A variety of template-driven courses were missing in early online learning. A generic template was used to create different types of online courses (Nantel, 2001). Even though customized templates were used, they had a lack of maintenance to update the content for quality assurance and to meet the needs of the learner (Woodill, 2004).
- **Oversimplification.** A large part of the reason for the failure of online learning was simplistic and reductionistic content. Complex content was often oversimplified (Rosenberg, 2002). Content was also incorrectly directed towards only one audience. Every learner isn't the same. It is imperative to diversify learning and teaching styles and tools to be adaptive and individualized as much as possible.



Source: FinancesOnline.com

2. Lack of organizational management:

- **Decisions to build or purchase LMS.** Unfortunately, many organizations were confused about how to build or buy their learning management system (LMS). For example, some organizations just built their LMS as a content library on their intranet and did nothing to manage it. Some others bought larger collections of courses that can be based on "all you can learn" from a professional vendor, paying for access and believing it would lead successful learning (Masie, 2002). Many organizations lacked understanding about how to build or purchase well-targeted online courses and e-learning system to meet their goals. (Rosenberg, 2002; Paynich, 2003).
 - **Supportive learning environment.** One of the key challenges in online learning is how to motivate learners to complete their online courses. Online learners may have insufficient time, too many interruptions, technological problems, or lack of support from their managers. Of course, some learners may be simply not interested in learning with well-designed courses in a supportive learning environment. In early 2000s, many organizations failed to establish a supportive online learning environment to motivate learners to learn. More specifically, they didn't provide the learners with clear guidelines or directions for what to support and how to sustain the supportive learning environment, for example, coaching and support from instructors or managers; time for online learning at work; and/ or recognition for applying learning experience to the work (Rossett & Schafer, 2003).
3. **Technological limits:** Most early online learning failed to provide learners with social interaction. Learners were often isolated and have little individual flexibility in an online learning environment. The most obvious impediment to online learning was that technology still had insufficient bandwidth and high-speed web connections, thus, produced a lack of communication, feedback, and support between an instructor and learners and between learners (Yilmaz and Tuzun, 2001).
 4. **Lack of learner acceptance:** Learners need new special skills in an online learning environment such as self-directed learning skills, computer literacy, and capability of searching useful resources on the Web, and so on. However, early online learners didn't know how to be effective self-learners. Most learners felt more comfortable in instructor-led classrooms. Accordingly, they felt easily isolated and frustrated in self-paced learning with technology (Rossett & Schafer, 2003).
 5. **Lack of instructor acceptance:** Online instruction needs more labor intensive interaction than face-to-face instruction does. Many online instructors in early 2000s didn't know how to control large amounts of instructional time to interact with every learner. Lack of instructors' technical skills also hindered interaction between an instructor and learners. Many instructors refused to use technology in their instruction if they didn't know how to interact with their students in a new technology environment (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003).



In conclusion, the main reasons for the failure of early online learning stem from instructional design, while taking into account lack of organization management and technology related problems which also influenced the failure. Many organizations didn't know how to apply sound instructional design theories and establish supportive LMS and online learning environment in the past. I hope these findings keep us to remind complex instruction and instructional context in an online learning environment and reflect to better design, develop, and implement online courses in organizations. In my next post, I will further discuss the elements of successful online learning should be elaborated, reflecting on these reasons for failure of early online learning.

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