

EVALUATION OF AN ONLINE MBA PLATFORM OF A TURKISH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: This paper includes recommendations of the researcher about how to improve the current "e-MBA" platform of Bilgi University one of the leading universities in Turkey. In preparing this review, the researcher principally focused on universities deemed as exemplary practices which have on-campus students, or have taken an approach to learning that is applicable in some way to Bilgi University.

Introduction

Being one of the leading private universities in Turkey Bilgi University decided to revisit its online MBA program and thus consulted a researcher to perform an evaluation of the online learning environment.

This paper includes recommendations of the researcher about how to improve the current "Bilgi e-MBA" platform based on an evaluation template provided by Cyrs (2003). In preparing this review, the researcher principally focused on universities deemed as exemplary practices which have on-campus students, or have taken an approach to learning that is applicable in some way to Bilgi University.

It should be noted that the following evaluation criteria applies only to the courses "Business Management" and "Managerial Economics" due to the access rights of the specific username that the evaluator was granted to. So, the researcher emphasized that these remarks are not exhaustive to "e-MBA" at Bilgi University in general.

1. e-MBA Platform

The following major course components have been addressed during the evaluation process: Course design, course administration, learning outcomes, use of technology, content development and flow of activity.

1.1 Course Design

Although the course is based on an appropriate systematic learning model not all the learning performance objectives (end-of-course and intermediate) have been clearly specified and sequenced from lowest to highest. The researcher suggested that the cognitive level of learning (recall, comprehension, application, and critical thinking) should be specified for each learning performance objective (Cyrs, 2003).

Moreover, although a clear and directive syllabus has been provided, not all of the tests and quizzes in both "Business Management" and "Managerial Economics" courses are based on the collaborative learning performance objectives. To overcome this issue, the following recommendations were made (Cyrs, 2003):

- Collaborative learning may be encouraged by assigning team projects. These team projects can be evaluated both collectively and individual student contributions.
- Assignment work groups can be created spontaneously by the teachers so that different materials could be assigned to different subgroups.
- A learning contract mechanism which students must agree to before starting to use the system can be facilitated in order to have an agreement between the university and the e-MBA participants.

Furthermore, only a limited range of presentation materials (graphics, images and hyperlinks) have been utilized throughout the course which makes the course visually not very much

attractive. The following elements were suggested to be included within the online learning environment:

- A series of video interviews with teachers talking through elements of the content can be created in order to utilize a variety of learning domains including cognitive, affective, and motor. In order to avoid timing constraints, one can also look for (re-)usable materials that are available in the network of other recognized institutions, and consider their usefulness (e.g.: pre-existing podcasts, video streams in major universities' open coursewares). In order to avoid any bandwidth concerns, video streams can be provided as downloadable files rather than being completely embedded within the course.
- More images, icons and colour can be integrated into the environment. This will make the materials more engaging (particularly for visual learners) and visually attractive. It will also serve to break up what can become lengthy pieces of text.
- A series of formative quizzes and activities can also be added to the CD along with other course content to help students revise modules and self-test their understanding of key concepts.
- API' (Application Programming Interface)s that enable both commercial and open source applications to integrate with the VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) can be incorporated. API's will also facilitate the connection to external tools of one's choice such as wikis and blogs.

In terms of the re-usability of the contents, the researcher suggested to add a standardised meta-description of the material to enable easy uptake in suitable repositories, and retrieval of the materials by keeping in mind the major learning content standards.

It has been observed that navigation throughout the course is easy and enables the students and teachers to communicate with each other via discussion forum, bulletin board and e-mail, yet the communication can still be improved by utilizing other communication tools such as listservs, voice mail and audio conferencing can also be and providing other functionalities such as polling/voting, chat room, submission (where students can submit work for marking/comments by the teacher).

The students can also get a view of current and completed modules; however in order to make the system more student-centered students could be able to obtain statistics on what they are spending most time on and whether their time is being evenly shared or not. Personal development planning could be enabled within the system where module-maps could be made available so that students can use them to choose modules from or sign up to new modules of their interest within the system.

Since both information and activity tracking were not adequate it was recommended to establish tracking facilities so that one can easily get information about what tools have been used and when, what group of content and grades the students receive at different times, right down to the individual student sessions.

In order to make the self-organization amongst learners easier the following recommendation were made (Cyrs, 2003):

- Students should have their own file-space in order to be able to search for and manage their own resources as well as to store a draft portfolio for their own work.
- Students can be enabled to define their own calendar, which can also be integrated with a campus-wide calendar so that they can see how far through the content they are compared to the group as a whole.
- A "notebook" can be embedded within the system that allows for private text area which may contain URL links, etc.

- A 'people links' should be made available so that the learners can send each others e-mails easily. Besides, profiling information along with the participants' expertise areas can also be made available.

Features such as "Who else is online?" and "Who is in the same module?" could also be added.

Learning Outcomes

The course is primarily based on cognitive learning performance objectives although these objectives have not explicitly been stated for every course lesson. Yet, the learning performance objectives could be rated as recall, comprehension, application, and critical thinking. Each of these levels could also be explained to students with samples provided. These objectives could also be logically sequenced (Cyrs, 2003).

Delivery Technologies

Since there exists no toll-free line for technical support it was suggested to provide a student hotline for technical questions. Students can also be given adequate time and training to familiarize themselves with the delivery software.

Due to the lack of synchronous sessions, one can consider integrating synchronous sessions via utilizing virtual classrooms in order to balance them with the asynchronous sessions. Adequate real time instruction could be provided to give the "human touch"- not making participants feel distanced- available in the learning environment by incorporating other web-based tools such as white-boarding (the ability to write and draw on an electronic board in an online environment) or audio chat (Cyrs, 2003).

Content Development

The course uses various methodologies for delivery of content. The primary delivery methods are text and graphics. The lesson has a primary content path that can be browsed through without any next and back arrow icons. A threaded discussion board allowing participants to post comments and questions that would normally be discussed in an actual face-to-face classroom also exists. All comments pertaining to a particular lesson are visible to all students throughout the course excluding the winter break. Students are provided numerous links within the course material to access additional information or more in-depth information regarding the subject content.

Despite the advanced level of content, not a variety of different teaching strategies were included in e-MBA. So, the researcher made the following recommendations to improve the course content (Cyrs, 2003):

- Some teaching strategies that can be included in order to avoid the "book on screen" approach are:
 - Case studies as video streams or podcasts
 - Role playing via chats
 - Simulations
- The following collaborative tools can be embedded within e-MBA where appropriate:
 - Online presentation tools (slide show software, conferencing tools)
 - Brainstorming tools
 - Application sharing
- Elaborate multimedia should be avoided when a simple diagram would be suitable as is the case with the Flash animation in "Supply" lesson, module "Week 1" within the course "Managerial Economics".

To integrate all these elements, interdisciplinary teams including content specialists, pedagogical and technical experts should be used where possible and appropriate. Peer reviewing of the materials should be undertaken to ensure quality of content and presentation (Cyrs, 2003).

No download time of large files has been mentioned throughout the course. To exemplify, the "Supply" and "Market Equilibrium" lessons in module "Week 1" within the course "Managerial Economics" included some simulations which may take more than 10 seconds to be downloaded. Due to unavailability of sufficient bandwidth, download time of large files can be quite considerable. Since learners tend to be highly sensitive to system response time, the effectiveness of instruction may be obstructed when any download requires more than a 10-second wait. So, learners should be informed about any lag time in order for their attention to be maintained.

Flow of Activity

The students are invited to an on-campus meeting at the middle of the term in order to get to know each other. However, no starter and virtual meetings in which the learners and teachers participate online have been held at the beginning of the term. In order to get information about "who is who", learners can be invited to an online learning community to express their expectations about the course as well as form learner groups for collaborative projects via use of structured chat rooms (e.g.: Microsoft's NetMeeting ®) or even video-conferencing if possible (Cyrs, 2003). Besides, the evaluator has been informed that students are only allowed to view the content according to the schedule rather than to view all the course materials. So, it has been suggested that in order to provide independent learning, learners should be allowed choices over topics since they already have related prior knowledge and skills and/or good self-regulatory learning skills as part of the admission criteria.

Conclusions

To assist the university to fulfill its commitment to student-centered flexible learning numerous suggestions have been made by the researcher. The main points include to make audio and/or video of the offline lectures available via the Internet for students either in real time or available for download shortly after the end of the lecture and establishing an interdisciplinary development and support team.

In general, each aspect of the course appears to have been considered in the light of the career path of the students, and the pedagogy necessary for them to learn how best to function in this career. After the evaluation report, Bilgi University also decided to encourage their students to develop a learning community, and to make them get connected to their future career through live interaction with professionals.

For pedagogical reasons, it has been decided to use a combination of face to face and Internet based components, as well as synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Finally, students' connection to the campus will be more encouraged through the availability of recordings of on-campus lectures, and they are supported through regular meetings with the Dean.

REFERENCES

Cyrs, T. E. (2003) Evaluating Distance Learning Programs and Courses. Educational Development Associates [Online]. Available from http://www.zianet.com/edacyrs/tips/evaluate_dl.htm [Accessed 13/01/08]