

A Picture of Online Education

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This article presents both a historical picture of online education and a colorful diagram of its essential concepts for brainstorming. First there is a brief recounting of developments leading to the improbable formation of the World Association for Online Education by an EFL teacher in the Japanese countryside. Then follows a rare opportunity to teach an intensive course on online education to TEFL majors at the University of Tsukuba Graduate School of Education, where the brainstorming chart was utilized.

At the time of that invitation to Tsukuba in northeastern Japan in February of 2004, it was a national university and the author was a professor at Kagawa Junior College on the island of Shikoku in southwestern Japan. At this writing in September of the same year, the national universities have been somewhat denationalized and the author has moved to a college for women in the city of Osaka that has been very successful in English education.

Almost from the moment of going online, since late 1995 the author has been active in international collaboration utilizing the Internet for faculty development, starting with academic discussion lists and academic conferences conducted wholly online. Computer-assisted instruction and language learning (CAI and CALL) software had been prohibitively expensive, but network installation allowed for Internet-based language learning as an economical and attractive alternative.

The elimination of geographical isolation from peers abroad also made various academic exchanges and virtual experiences possible. Through the Web most of the author's publications were made available, reaching learners worldwide with perspectives from Japan. By 1997 the Bilingualism and Japanology Intersection <http://www.kagawa-jc.ac.jp/~steve_mc/epublist.html> had received a 4-star rating from the Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library based at the Australian National University, and was later linked from universities such as Duke (Japanese linguistics), Harvard (Edwin O. Reischauer Center), and Stanford (Japan WWW Virtual Library).

The Internet thus leveled the playing field, offering an explosion of learning opportunities and potential exchanges, which was highly motivating. So the author followed the nascent field of online education daily through the Web, discussion forums, MOO and Web-based chat rooms. The trend was centered in North America and other native-English speaking countries, so this author was one of the first people in Japan to use the Learning Management System WebCT, also its Japanese version as it developed, and other Virtual Learning Environments.

Thus in 1998 it was a sign of internationalization that the author was invited to deliver the opening Keynote Address to the Teaching in the Community Colleges Online Conference based at the University of Hawaii. The synchronous online session with

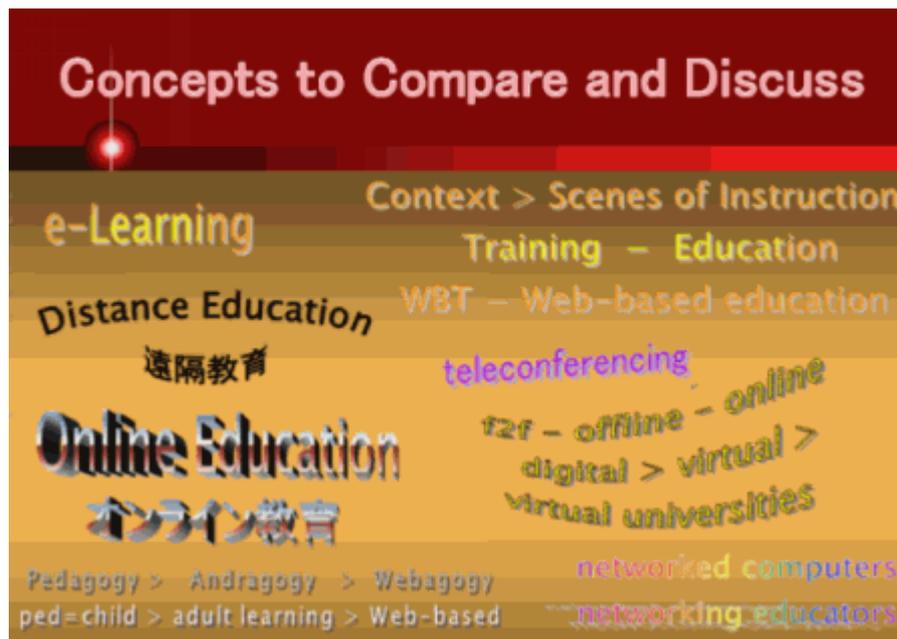
conference participants was held around 3 a.m. in Japan time, however, a predicament that has not changed much in the ensuing years for residents of Asia. In any event the keynote address proposed forming an organization for year-round networking and to turn online education into an academic discipline. The online conference continued in effect for months and resulted in the formation of a non-profit public benefit corporation, the World Association for Online Education (WAOE) <<http://www.waoe.org>>.

In the pedagogical arena the shared experiences of practitioners in a frontier of new technologies seemed at least as significant as what was documented with a paper trail. That is, no one could be the innovator, organizer, scribe and compiler at the same time, but the roles could possibly be approached through an academic association. Colleagues' pedagogies and values are infused in their actions. The WAOE community of practice drew from current student-centered and constructivist pedagogies, applying new technologies with that understanding, and expanding that paradigm based in Western thought towards a more multicultural, multilingual and global outlook. Archives of the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS-L) at Pennsylvania State University show that ethical concerns of distance education (DE) have been raised more by WAOE than by larger DE associations. The above aims and values were codified in the 22 Objectives and Purposes in WAOE's Bylaws see: (<http://www.waoe.org/organization/bylaw.htm#a2>). WAOE basically advocated that online education be driven by pedagogy rather than by economics or even technology.

The enthusiasm of the late 1990s led to an explosion and global expansion of research on online education, while turning the field into an academic discipline still called for a wider perspective. While WAOE does not take credit for the trend, as one of the first global virtual organizations, WAOE could focus on online education and move quickly with no paper-based baggage. WAOE has been a decidedly decentralized and distributed organization to avoid cultural bias. WAOE has been called a virtual learning environment itself, an open source learning organization, and a model of collaboration. When the author went to teach at Tsukuba, WAOE officers in several countries with expert knowledge of online education, and sharing the ethics outlined above, could be called upon to reliably serve as mentors via audioconferencing, chat, and a voice BBS.

Meanwhile, the institutional culture for EFL practitioners in Japan if not most non-Western countries, which delimits the scope of pedagogical practices, seems to have lagged even behind what the infrastructure would have allowed. So it was not until 2004 that this author had the opportunity to teach online education *per se* as content-based English education for TEFL majors and aim for the ultimate goal of actualizing the global classroom.

The Tsukuba course is presented in forthcoming papers elsewhere, providing new data to back up the online education paradigm and test its universality in a non-Western culture. Below see just a chart made from several programs and used in the intensive course for brainstorming key concepts in the online education field.



First online education is distinguished from surrounding concepts. E-Learning, where the “e” means electronic, is a broad field that covers learning with computers and other, mostly digital, appliances, whether online or offline with CD-ROMs and so forth. Recently m-learning is also used to refer to ubiquitous learning by mobile phones. The biggest confusion is with distance education, which stems from a long tradition of correspondence education. While online education can be at a distance, the key condition is not distance but connectivity to worldwide information and to other people through Internet access. Online education works better if teachers or others more experienced are present with students in a hands-on computer lab. So hybrid courses that are partly f2f in real time and partly at a distance whenever participants have time and Internet access are considered more pedagogically sound than either f2f or distance education alone.

In recent years “one size fits all” approaches have been criticized in e-learning as elsewhere, because the context changes according to the students’ culture and other factors. Moving to the upper right in the above brainstorming chart, the term “scenes of instruction” thus arose to express the diversity and uniqueness of each educational encounter. Next, training is distinguished from education, which comes from the Latin meaning “to bring out.” The vocationalization of higher education to the neglect of the liberal arts has been criticized in the U.S. and Japan alike. Web-based training (WBT) differs from Web-based education (WBE) not in technology but in pedagogy, purpose or context. Thus WBT appears mostly in companies while WBE is more suitable for schools.

Moving to the left bottom corner of the chart, lifelong education has become necessary for everyone, so the term “pedagogy” is somewhat confining since “ped” means children. The term “andragogy” thus includes adult education, while some American professors have started using the term “Webagogy” to describe the changing context or scenes of instruction in new media when teaching online.

Videoconferencing, which also appears in the chart, has two types. Internet videoconferencing is not well established yet because the infrastructure needs to be

near broadband capacity for all the users. During the Tsukuba course audioconferences, colleagues in Brazil and Malaysia could access the text chat function but not the much greater data of people's voices. The videoconferencing referred to here contrasts with online education because it does not use the Internet. TV-type studios are needed with the same equipment for all participants, which has been useful for multinational companies. The World Bank has used a satellite-based system for global seminars, but the expense of such systems confines its beneficiaries to the already privileged, which contradicts the mission of the World Bank to alleviate poverty. When this author worked on a World Bank distance education project for Asia in Tokyo, more economical Internet-based approaches were just added to the videoconferencing. Provision of networked computers is progressing in developing countries, but personnel who could travel there for WBT are also needed, which would cost much less in total and would reach more people.

Continuing on the brainstorming chart, f2f tends to refer to face-to-face classroom teaching that is offline. But offline has the additional meaning of using materials downloaded online. The "line" in online and offline is Internet connectivity, yet the line can be partly wireless, such as with Internet-enabled mobile phones. Next, digital technologies have led to the creation of virtual learning environments and virtual universities. But online education should serve to provide virtual classes as optional additions to f2f classes, not to replace so-called brick-and-mortar institutions where people have the luxury of meeting at the same time and place. The greatest scope for online education, however, is actually to provide learning opportunities over the Internet for most of the people in the world who cannot go to school or continue their education.

Lastly in the bottom right corner are the key elements in the experience of this author, networked computers and networking educators. For example, WAOE officers in three countries will meet for the first time in person by presenting at a conference this month at the University of Sussex in England. Contrary to the stereotype of the solitary nerd, Internet use can expand the social network of individuals and empower them to be more successful in work and to have more of an impact on society.