E-Learning in Organizations vs. Universities: Competition or Cooperation?

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Abstract. The main focus of this article is online education, or commonly referred to as e-Learning activities and the high potential that partnerships between organizations and academia can bring. Online learning is revolutionizing the world. Since its introduction, the educational system has been evolving rapidly. E-learning has several benefits when it comes to both organizations and universities. There is an increase in utilizing e-Learning as a tool not only in academia but also in organizations or corporations. What we would like to propose and elaborate in the following article is the advantage that both organizations and academia will have if the number of partnerships would increase in producing online training and establishing the level of existing collaboration or competition in the online courses industry.

Keywords: Online Education, e-Learning, Online Courses, Online Learning, Virtual Learning, Distributed Learning, Network, Web Based Learning, Online Learning Platforms.

1. Introduction

The online learning is revolutionizing the world and since its introduction in 1998, e-Learning has continued its rapid evolution and radically changed the training industry [1]. By introducing flexible and simple training programs, learning technologies, such as e-Learning, help organizations to adapt more quickly to changes and also contribute significantly with reducing organizational operational costs. There is concrete evidence that this trend is growing. Many studies show that 77 percent of American organization were using e-Learning in 2011 as compared to 2004 when only 4 percent were using this king of training. According to Global Industry Analysts, corporate training represents a $200 billion business industry and e-Learning is expected to grow to $107 billion market by 2015. Taking this into account, we can conclude that corporate e-Learning is a very fast growing market, and probably one of the most promising markets in the education industry [2].

More than 70 percent of global e-Learning industry is represented in Europe and the US. The biggest potential for e-Learning now is in Asia Pacific, where e-Learning revenues are expected to grow with 20 percent annually. By 2016, e-Learning industry in Asia is expected to grow to $11.5 billion [3].

According to Babson Survey Research Group [4], back in 2011 more than 6 million students within United States had taken at least one course online. Today more than one third of university’s enrolled students are taking courses online. Many other studies reveal that the trend of enrollment numbers to online training far exceeds the one for traditional methods of studying. Sixty-five percent of educational institutions admit that e-Learning is an important factor to take into account for their long term strategy. Academic leaders acknowledge that the level of satisfaction among students is similar when comparing online training with the in-class one.

Considering all the above, it is obvious that the rate of adopting e-Learning will increase significantly in the following years and that it represents an important part of future education. This is why we strongly

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believe that there is an important potential when it comes to partnerships in creating e-Learning training. In
the following chapters we will try to establish if there is competition or is there room for collaboration for
Organizations and Universities when it comes to online courses. Moreover, we will present the benefits of
collaboration between the two industries when it comes to online training courses.

2. Literature Review

Oxford dictionary defines e-Learning as “learning conducted via electronic media, typically on the
Internet” [5]. In other words e-Learning is a computer based type of educational tool that enables individuals
to have learning activities anytime and anywhere, as long as there is an internet connection. There are many
terms used to describe this type of learning and teaching, all referring to the same process that makes use of
information and communications technology to mediate learning and teaching activities using computers or
other electronic devices [6].

There are two main types of e-Learning, synchronous and asynchronous. When having synchronous
online courses, students and teachers are required to be online at a given specific time. All interactions
happen at that specific time and date and if students want to participate in the online training they have to
respect this schedule.

Asynchronous is more flexible in terms of timing, and best suits students that have busy schedules. All
training materials, quizzes and assignments are provided already on platforms, and students can access them
at any time. Students may have deadlines for submitting the assignments or completing the quizzes.

There are benefits and disadvantages for both, some like one type of e-Learning or the other, whereas
some others like both methodologies. Students that prefer synchronous online courses are the ones who value
having real-time interactions in receiving answers to a specific question or providing with answers questions
raised by others. This type of online training provides the student with a sentiment or direct involvement and
connection to the class and course environment. Students that prefer asynchronous appreciate the flexibility
of completing all course material and tasks/quizzes at a time of their individual convenience. These students
might be affected by other students that have a fast delivery of course completion.[6]

In assessing the quality of e-Learning courses, an international quality standard for e-learning
programmes – “Open ECBCheck” – was officially created. ECBCheck is an accreditation and quality
improvement scheme for e-Learning programmes which assists organizations in determining the success of
their programmes and supports continuous improvement through peer collaboration. It was created thanks to
partnership of more than 40 international, regional and national capacity-development organizations.
ECBCheck makes available a set of quality standards to evaluate e-Learning programme design,
development, management, delivery and evaluation, as well as the quality of learning materials,
methodology, media, technology and tutoring [23].

Universities as well as organizations offer online learning in a variety of ways using several e-Learning
tools (e.g. Coursera, Mooc, Edx, and Moodle). E-Learning provides the ability to share teaching materials in
any formats which include videos, slideshows, word documents or PDFs. Activities relating to attending
webinars (live online sessions) or connecting with professors/other students via chats and forums are also
widely experienced by users [7].

3. Benefits and advantages of e-Learning

Corporate managers are continuously seeking for cost effective ways to provide training to their
employees. E-Learning is a better choice when it comes to costs compared with traditional classroom based
training, particularly for large organizations. Moreover, many expenses – booking training facilities, travel
costs for employees or trainers and employees time away from the job – are greatly reduced.

According to Clive Shepherd [8], Dow Chemical reduced its average spending of $95 per
attendant/course on classroom training to $11 per attendant/course using e-Learning, reaching an annual
saving of $34 million.

Hall and LeCavalier [9] analyzed several firms in terms of economic savings as a result of adopting
online learning instead of the traditional delivery method (face to face in-class education). Ernst & Young
managed to reduce its training costs by 35% adopting online learning and additionally improved its scalability and consistency. The company reduced their 2900 hours of in-class training to 700 hours of online based training for their staff, reaching a 52% time reduction. Another case is represented by IBM who in 1999 saved $200 million and provided five times more training at one-third cost compared to previous method costs. Rockwell Collins reduced 40 percent of its training costs by converting 25 percent of its training activities to web based learning.

Additionally, the cost of developing an e-Learning course is all in the production. There is no marginal cost of delivery as delivering e-Learning training to 100 or 10,000 learners will costs the same.

Another advantage of adopting e-Learning is represented by a reduction of time invested in the training, also known as time compression:

- Learners can study at their own pace, not at the pace of the group;
- Time in an in-class training environment can be spent on questions/topics initiated by other attendants that may be irrelevant for a specific individual;
- The social interaction is limited;
- The setting up of the session is shorter;
- Travel time to and from a training event is reduced;
- Learners can pick and choose what they need to lean or what to further explore.

Brandon Hall [10] considers that all these factors contribute to saving of 35-45 percent of learning time, when a course is taken out of the classroom and provided as e-Learning. Moreover, according to Rosenberg [11], e-Learning activities can take between 25 to 60 percent less time to cover the same amount of training as compared to in-class training. Overall, compressed e-Learning needs less logistics and, consequently, will be less expensive, as the biggest cost of any training is represented by the time spent in training.

Fletcher and Tobias research “Training and retraining” [12], published in 2000, concluded that: “Learners learn more using computer-based instruction than they do with conventional ways of teaching, as measured by higher post-treatment test scores”. Furthermore, many studies done by Fletcher, Kulik [13] and Willett, Yamashita & Anderson, strengthen the idea that students learn more using computer based training as compared with training acquired through traditional classroom methods.

Brandon Hall [14] through its study, concluded that e-Learning is very successful when it comes to: the attitudes of students toward the e-Learning structure and training, scores on tests, certifications or other evaluations; the number of students who completes and pass exams and assignments; the level at which students apply at work their new knowledge acquired during the online course; long-term preservation of information among e-Learning students.

In 2005, Britain Open University established that the creation and delivery of distance learning courses used around 90 percent less energy and generated 85 percent fewer CO2 emissions per student as compared to traditional in class based university courses [15]. Among the main savings I would mention reduction of student travel, economies of scale in the use of the university classrooms, and significant reduction of energy consumption of students’ housing. In a nutshell, studying online is far more energy efficient and it can be noted that is a smart choice in reducing the carbon footprint.

E-Learning contributes to environment sustainability by saving paper, therefore, saving trees. The majority of e-Learning courses are presenting their learning content online, or through alternatives tools such as email, PDF manuals, synchronous classrooms, and other web based tools.

Among the advantages that e-Learning bring, we would like to focus on flexibility. Students have flexibility in scheduling their class around work and family, in selecting learning materials in conformity with their direct needs, level of knowledge or interest. As students are learning at their own pace, they can skip parts from the course that they already master and concentrate on new information and development of new skills. Furthermore, students are encouraged to take responsibility over their studies and build up their self-confidence and knowledge through successfully completing the course.
Another main advantage is the increased interaction. As students might come from different geographical locations, they all can contribute to forum discussions. Actually, both students and teachers report a higher interaction in virtual discussion as compared to in-class ones as e-Learning brings together many learning styles and activities. Besides studying, e-Learning activities promote internet and computer skills that will guide students in their future lives and careers.

Finally, an important benefit is the wide audience and the big amount of content that can be delivered to a high number of students. The only mandatory requirements are the need of a computer, internet connection and basic internet skills [7].

4. E-Learning: Organizations vs. Academia

E-Learning courses are offered equally by both academia and organizations. There are several private, public institutions or universities that offer the same online courses in terms of topic, but some differences are encountered at the level of price, quality, accreditation and design. These factors generate an increased competition among institutions that provide e-Learning training. E-Learning ensures both students and business executives to learn anywhere and at any time. However, when it comes to e-Learning activities there is more than convenience took into account, and there are essential differences between the corporate sector and academic e-Learning.

4.1. Comparison between corporate and academia training

The role of corporate training is to increase employees’ knowledge and skills while enabling an organization to continue to operate efficiently. Conferences and workshops are an essential part of business, yet expensive, however e-Learning makes it affordable and efficient. E-Learning can be rendered to lower costs by delivering trainings in a shorter period of time, especially when employees are traveling. There are several key features of corporate learning [24]. Firstly, these are fast-paced and when it comes to enterprises, they are very focused on time efficiency. Moreover, "time is money" in the corporate world. Training needs to be delivered in a short time with maximum results. Secondly, the trainings are career-related as it helps employees gain new skills to advance their careers inside the company. Third, corporate learning is characterized by benefits to the organization as it manly focuses on pragmatic issues with immediate benefits rather than just individual benefits. Ultimately, training is required for the organization to function correctly, to develop and evolve.

In comparison with corporate learning, the education learning focuses essentially on knowledge transfer and not on training. Academia education is concentrated on items with global scope whilst corporate learning is more focused on business needs. The word “education” entails theoretical knowledge without necessarily involving learning how to do any specific practical work, tasks or skills. While education institutions are mostly focused on learning though "igniting curiosity", the enterprises are mostly focused on training.

4.2. Convergence

Corporate e-Learning can learn from academic e-Learning initiatives and vice versa, and we are presently noticing a convergence of academic and corporate e-Learning needs. One example is that the academic area is starting to integrate corporate methods on how certain topics are taught. On the other side, the corporate side is shifting in utilizing technologies in a way that supports the traditional academics field. Another example is related to mobile learning becoming increasingly popular as mobile devices are present at both school and work. Learners have now access to the internet and social networks via mobile devices, creating an environment of conducive learning. Learners have the ability to quickly gather information, create content and communicate with other people.

However, both the education and corporate sectors are struggling to answer the exact same questions: how do we use the computers for optimal learning? How do instructional design, and teaching methodologies and theories apply to delivering content via e-Learning?

4.3. Competition or collaboration

The big recognized and already popular online courses providers charge higher fees, while many of the new startups or public universities charge smaller prices. For example, for the year 2012-2013, Pennsylvania
State University offered an online bachelor's program with a tuition reaching $60,480/year as compared to North Carolina's Winston-Salem State University which offered a bachelor program with a cost of $11,400 for the complete programme [16]. Universities offering online bachelors are registering a trend of lowering prices as competition grows very fast, and more and more universities offer now very competitive programs.

University of the People [17] is the first nonprofit, tuition free, accredited online academic institution that offers students online courses and programmes free of charge. The only payments that students need to make are a 50$ tax for enrollment and a 100$ examination processing fee [18].

It is important for e-Learning providers to recognize that competition is necessary and it can bring up results that can be good or bad, desirable or undesirable. Increased competition can work in the benefit of the student, as this way they will have more options on the market that will better suit their needs.

The United Nation Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) is offering a large range of e-Learning courses covering topics such as Environment, Governance, Peace, Security, Diplomacy, Public Finance, Trade, etc. UNITAR operates by itself or through partnerships with different institutions and implement various e-Learning courses. Through these partnerships, all resources such as materials and expertise are put together to:

- develop new courses in terms of content, design and the choice of software;
- improve the level of cognition and quality of the already existing courses;
- joint development of specialized courses.

The institute is making important steps towards certificating a number of its courses, by Open ECBCheck [19], a quality improvement scheme for E-Learning programs. UNITAR has active partnerships with organizations and academicals institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Co-operation (CTA), the International Federation of Multimedia Associations (FIAM), and the University Fernando Pessoa (UFP).

The International Air Transport Association [20] (IATA) which is the trade association for the world’s airlines is another example of an organization offering e-Learning courses. The organization is providing not only specialized but also general online courses. It has already established partnerships with many prestigious academies such as Nanyang University, University of Geneva, Stanford University and Harvard University. Most of their online courses are provided through Harvard Manage Mentor (HMM) for Aviation which is an e-Learning programme that incorporates “state-of-the-art, media-rich content furnished by Harvard Business School faculty, global business leaders and the foremost practitioners in business today” [21].

Recently University of Geneva has adopted a new teaching method by using Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC’s) programs, available through Coursera platform. There are 5 courses of MOOC type available at University of Geneva: International Organizations Management (English), Global Health: An Interdisciplinary Overview (English), Calvin – Histoire et réception d'une Réforme (French with English subtitle), Introduction aux droits de l’homme (French) and The Diversity of Exoplanets (English).

The MOOC [22] methodology entered the educational industry in 2008 and started to become more popular in 2012 when Stanford University offered the first of what later became a series of MOOC courses. MOOC is “massive” because it is designed to enroll a big number of learners, it is “open,” as anyone that has access to Internet can enroll, it is “online” because all of the course content and interactions take place online and finally, MOOC’s are “courses” as they have start and end dates established, student assessments, online tests and quizzes, and proctored exams. Upon completion, some may offer an accredited certificate in exchange of a fee. The main providers of MOOC include Coursera, Udacity and edX.

At university of Geneva MOOC courses include one to two hours of video per week (divided into 10 to 20 minute subtitled), thematic discussion forums and evaluations in the form of quizzes or peers. Participants can receive a certificate of participation at the end of the MOOC. To add academic value to this certificate, students must pay a fee.

5. Partnership for e-Learning
As computer possession grows across the globe, e-Learning becomes increasingly viable and accessible. Internet connection speeds are increasing, and with that, opportunities for more multimedia training methods arise. Technologies such as social media are also improving education constantly. As presented in previous chapter, there are several interactions between organizations and educational institutions. The advantages and benefits of such partnerships are significant and noteworthy. Based on the SWOT analysis in Table 1, we present several of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of these relations. Beside the clear advantages these will bring to both parties, the increase of online learning is a clear trend that is currently taking off and will attract more students.

Even though the benefits are exceeding the disadvantages in the case of organization/corporation – university partnerships, we fail to notice more of these collaborations. The affiliations are only done on sporadic basis and mainly for the in-class training.

What we are suggesting and strongly proposing is an increase of these relationships in the e-Learning industry. This will allow the theoretical part from the academic world to blend more with the pragmatic side that the organizations are offering.

**Table 1: SWOT Analysis – E-Learning Partnerships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to find funds and participants</td>
<td>If one of the parties withdraw, the project of creating that course will collapse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost are split between the parties</td>
<td>Everything has to be negotiated and discussed among the two, no decisions individually can be taken</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wider pool of knowledge, skills and contact</td>
<td>Revenue split between the parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The production of content is distributed between the two, taking into account the level of resources and expertise that each entity can offer.</td>
<td>For universities: international exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputational gain and better advertising</td>
<td>For organizations: academics recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-Learning industry is growing and represents a future trend</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improve the quality of existing online courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflicts management</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cannibalization of other existing online courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Courses prestige may be influenced based on the failure or unfortunate events of one of the parties involved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

E-Learning is not aiming to change education as we traditionally know it. It is here to complement it with new opportunities and features. E-Learning is focused on new ideas, places and markets, widening the traditional students’ age range of 18 to 24. It also aims to meet the demands of those people that are looking for a new type of education, which is innovative and fun, and can be done at any age, from anywhere, and meet their professional needs, career pathways or curiosity and willingness to develop new skills sometimes even unrelated to their careers. It sounds as the perfect choice when thinking about expanding education at a global level.
One of the most important advantages when it comes to investing in and creating e-Learning courses is the easiness of exploiting new markets. It can not only be a significant source of revenue but also can fulfill the requirements of many organizations today: promoting easy access to education and enlarging students’ participation.

Broadening the access to education can be considered social responsibility. Moreover, it can be considered even more than this, the global economy cannot waste talent just because of geographical boundaries.

The majority of universities and organizations feel accountable for developing global citizens through their learning courses, who are prepared to have a positive contribution and influence towards tomorrow’s world. Global citizens demonstrate significant responsibility when it comes to what is happening in the world. These goes beyond the willingness to write a check and give it to charity. E-Learning courses can be very useful in inspiring such awareness. People that have very limited access due to geographical boundaries, to superior education, can fell now integrated on a network with thousands of other students around the world, and this way transform themselves into global citizens.

Superior education should not be ignorant when it comes to globalization. Universities should be the initiators to the contribution of global processes. More often universities are contacted by big and famous corporations in requesting to develop trainings, and this should not create discordancy when it comes to e-Learning courses. This way both organizations can involve more talented employees and academics in developing high quality e-Learning courses.

E-Learning is not just about getting a degree, is more about the impact such courses can have over companies. By providing education to their employees constantly they position themselves on a higher stage in the competitive knowledge economy. Universities can be responsible too for these positioning (if they partner with the companies in creating the e-Learning courses) and can have an important commercial impact in having partnerships with companies in producing e-Learning materials. Instead of going in competition, through partnership the situation can be switched to a win-win position.

The important factors when thinking about being successful in the global village are numerous, and to name one of the most important is communication. How efficiently institutions interact among each other and with the students, and such efficiency can be achieved through e-Learning very easily. A strong point of e-Learning is being able to connect local and global communities, rather than approaching them as segregated dimensions. Through an online platform, a group of facilitators/professors and students from India, can be connected to another one is Australia or Europe. Universities can contribute significantly to the global village, linking corporate partners with communities all over the world and creating extremely precious networks of global knowledge and expertise. Knowledge should not remain only in the area of universities. The future of universities might be one mixture that includes society, recognizing that learning and development is in the interest of all, not only concentrating on the next generation of academics, but also on helpful graduates who can add real value to society.

Creating e-Learning courses and especially the platforms where these courses are uploaded is not a cheap procedure. Superior e-Learning requires investment in a platform that is very adaptable, to any device and that is complex enough in providing support, interactivity and accessibility easily to its users. A crucial challenge is represented by scalability. The provider must be able to reach students at a global scale. We believe that through partnerships, the expenses can be divided and this way the chances of having more performant platforms and superior courses increase.

Expanding the e-Learning business can be very profitable for industries, businesses and academia. Global Industry Analysts forecast [26] predicts that global e-Learning market will reach $107.3-billion by 2015. This signifies an important potential of revenue for both industries. Moreover, for universities the first positive financial impact is the number of applications and therefore will lead to an increased number of students. Second great benefit that can come from better selling online courses is that universities this way will have the chance to stand out in the global education market. There are around 30,000 universities in the world, and to make your university brand stand out among so many, it is important to be recognized worldwide for something, and e-Learning courses of good quality can be a good choice. A good example can
be represented by the introduction of massive open online courses, or MOOCs [27], targeting to reach large-scale participation and open access, which represents a great success. By partnering with companies to create MOOC courses, universities have the opportunity to reach new audiences, promote their study programmes and offer students a glance of what is the benefit of studying with them.

6. Conclusion

In general terms, learning is expensive, takes a long time and the results can vary. E-Learning has been trying constantly to complement the way we learn and to make it more effective and measurable. The outcomes generated a number of tools that help create interactive courses, standardize the learning process and make them more informal and fun. The e-Learning future seems bright. However, there are also numerous improvements to be taken into consideration.

There are various advantages for both organizations and academia if the number of partnerships would increase in producing online trainings and enforcing the collaboration between the two parties. For universities and the academia sector, the international exposure will expand, whilst for the organizations it will amplify the academicals and theoretical recognitions. The funds will be better coordinated and allocated and the pool of knowledge, skills and contact will be widened. The reputation of the e-Learning segment will strengthen and, with that, the number of students will increase.

In conclusion, the increase of partnerships between the theory and practice will create an optimal environment for learning, a proper background that will bring teaching and learning to the next level and better prepared people for future careers.

Having more partnerships between the two sectors, academic and business, improve visibility, reputation and also promote the academic health of an institution. The academic quality and financial well-being go hand in hand in our present days.

E-Learning has a significant contribution and will add a new dimension to higher education, especially if partnerships between the business and the academia sector grow. If higher education becomes more accessible, this will encourage further growth of knowledge economy and will increase the reputation and financial well-being of both industries.

E-Learning, does not represent a treat to conventional education but definitely represent one of the most exciting way of learning and training in the past centuries.

7. References


[17] University of the People website, Tuition free online university, http://uopeople.edu/.


