

Solving a Problem

Implementing an online learning program in a ministry requires expenditure of effort and resources. In order to make the implementation of an online learning program the best possible experience for the ministry and potential students, eDOT has developed a series of articles that address issues organizations or ministries should answer **prior** to implementing an online program. These articles have been based on experience with other ministries that have implemented online learning programs. In our experience, the implementation of online learning has always gone better when ministries take the time to explore the issues and answer these questions prior to starting the implementation process.

Why Consider Online Learning?

The reality of education today is that students are more often demanding education that is flexible and readily available, without the restrictions of time and place. In the past, the transfer of information was restricted to print materials housed in libraries around the world. In the past, education was restricted to brick-and-mortar schools that brought educators and students together. Today, both information and education are available to anyone anywhere with an Internet connection. More and more students are seeking educational solutions that are available at their fingertips. This is not to suggest that brick-and-mortar institutions will cease to exist. Schools will most likely need to add an online learning solution to their curriculum to reach students who are not able or willing to attend the physical campus.

What Will Online Learning Solve?

This first article addresses the issue of **intent** for adding an online component to an existing curriculum. Every ministry should consider **why** online learning makes sense in the ministry and **how** it will equip students to be followers of Christ. These questions provide a framework of issues that ministries need to examine as they consider online learning. Ultimately, only the respective ministry can determine the best answers to these questions.¹

¹ eDOT does not provide specific answers to these questions for a ministry but will suggest guidelines for a ministry to consider in their context. The local ministry will ultimately need to evaluate the local situation in order to adequately answer the questions for the ministry. Each ministry must arrive at an answer based on their understanding of the needs of the ministry and the students who would participate in an online learning program.

The first set of questions for a ministry to consider involves a clarification of ministry needs and goals:

- **What problem is the ministry attempting to solve by adding online learning?** This is unfortunately an oft-overlooked question as ministries and organizations consider the use of new technology or processes. Many organizations today default to building an “app” for customers or clients but never ask Why? or What is the purpose or goal? In the past, ministries have invested significant effort and resources in the implementation of an online learning program without defining the problem, only to discover that they created a solution to a problem no one had. It is better to start an online learning program knowing that it will meet a need both for the ministry and the students. It is possible that there are internal and/or external or competitive pressures on a ministry that force consideration of an online learning program. The reason to add online learning must be compelling enough to sustain the ministry through the implementation process of the online learning program.
- **How will online learning address/solve the ministry need defined above?** Once the problem is defined, the ministry must identify if and how the addition of online learning will meet the need or solve the problem. It would be instructive to interview other institutions, schools, or ministries currently using online learning to determine how their use of an online learning program solves problems.
- **How will an online learning solution meet student (current or prospective) needs?** Any solution needs to take into account both the institution’s instructional and developmental goals for students as well as student learning needs. It would be advisable to poll students to determine the extent of interest in online learning. Answering this question also requires careful distinction between student needs and instructor wishes. Not every instructor will be suited to teaching online. At the heart of the question, though, is the issue of student needs: Will an online learning solution meet student needs, providing the educational experience that is necessary while also providing flexibility to the students?
- **How quickly does the ministry intend to implement online learning?** Frequently ministries expect to offer online learning at the start of the next academic cycle. While that time frame may be possible, it is more likely that the ministry will need to consider a

longer time frame. In her *Countdown Guide for Planning Online/Distance Degrees*, Boettcher suggests that an organization needs from 18 to 24 months to implement an online learning program. This time frame assumes that the ministry has both adequate staff to handle the additional workload of preparing course material for an online learning experience and the ability to offer training to instructors in the area of teaching online. Boettcher's article is recommended as a guide to the implementation process of online learning.

- **Can online education meet the educational goals of the ministry?** This philosophical question needs to be addressed by instructors and administrators in order to proceed with the implementation of online learning. Failure to address this question will result in significant resistance to online learning, especially among faculty or instructors who may view online education as either inferior to classroom instruction or as an attempt to marginalize them as instructors. Online learning can be foreign and threatening to instructors who are asked to participate without having the opportunity to voice their concerns and opinions. Instructors may have concerns about the value of education delivered online and particularly about the capability of online education to address the intangibles of student development (growth in Christlikeness) in biblical and theological education. In "Adult Learning Theory and Online Learning" in the anthology *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*, edited by Maddix, Estep, and Lowe, authors/educators Heinemann and Estep discuss the theory of online education and essentials for effective online education in a Christian context. They conclude:

Whether online or offline, distance or face-to-face, the educational process looks like this: *Utilizing instructor and student input, the teacher is guided and empowered by God to devise and employ a learning space where the learning community can be led in actively and reflectively engaging with the curriculum for the purpose of bringing about lasting, truth-based, and holistically assessed change in the learners. . . .* We assume that online learning is an important development that must be responded to in a thoroughly Christian and educationally sound way. . . .

In the end, the primary task of online educators is to creatively adapt what we already know about good education to the new, virtual learning space. For Christian educators, this requires dependence on the Holy Spirit and hard work organizing the various components of the teaching-learning process to the best advantage of the virtual student. (14-15)

- **Is there a champion who will willingly advocate online learning?** Every ministry or organization will experience some resistance both internally and externally to the implementation of online learning. The ministry would do well to identify and support a champion who will encourage the implantation of online learning through to the end. This person ideally should have experience with online courses (either as a participant or as a guide) and be able to speak to all levels of the ministry impacted by the implementation of online learning: instructors, students, and administrators. This person may be the individual who originally suggested the idea of online learning within the ministry. It is best if this person is internal to the ministry—not an outsider who may be perceived as having an ulterior or self-serving motive.
- **What definition of *online learning* will the ministry use?** A range of meanings of *online learning* is available:
 - Completely asynchronous learning, such as presented in the courses on eDOT’s website (<http://demo.equiphispeople.com>)
 - Blended learning that combines some live teaching sessions (be they on campus or through video conferencing) with asynchronous components
 - Technology-enhanced lecture such as in a virtual classroom environment
 - Mobile learning that harnesses the availability and ease of use of mobile devices (tablet computers or smartphones) for learning²
- **What are the technology requirements of online learning, and will students have access to that level of technology?** Each solution of online learning places certain technology requirements on students. If video conferencing is desired, then students must have computing devices capable of video conferencing (smartphones and tablets may be sufficient) and also Internet bandwidth to support video conferencing. The ministry must determine the extent to which students already possess the technical components that will be necessary to add online learning.

² The appeal of using mobile devices in learning environments arises from many factors including the sheer penetration factor of mobile devices in the market, the relative ease of use right out of the box, and the ability of these mobile devices to offer two-way communication through voice and video conferencing capabilities that frequently come standard in mobile devices. Because these devices are so common and frequently include video conferencing capabilities as standard features, the range of possibilities for using these devices in educational settings has become popular.

- **Will the ministry accommodate the use of mobile devices (tablets and/or smartphones) in online learning?** A current trend in the workplace is the concept of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), meaning that many employers allow or expect employees to use a range of computing devices in the workplace to accomplish **work-related functions**. Employers are eager to embrace BYOD because it means that the employer no longer needs to provide a computer for the employee; the employee brings his/her own device into the workplace. In the same way students are expecting that more and more of their educational experience will be available on the computing device they have in their hands. The March 2013 survey conducted by International Data Corporation (IDC) forecasts that personal computer (PC) sales will continue to fall throughout the year as users seek the versatility and usability of tablets and smartphones over the power of PCs (viewed 29 May 2013: <http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=prUS24129913>). With the prevalence of mobile devices in the hands of students today, the ministry should ensure that students will be able to access and meaningfully interact with the online learning course using these mobile devices.

Conclusions

Implementing a successful online learning program in your ministry or organization will require investment of resources and effort. Creating an app or implanting online learning without considering the need is unwise and a waste of limited resources. Before concluding that the ministry needs to implement an online learning program, it is wise to consider several questions about the intent of adding online learning. Chief among these questions are: What problem is the ministry attempting to solve? and How will an online learning program solve the problem?

Taking the time to answer the questions presented here will give the ministry a firm foundation as the implementation project progresses. Instructors should be allowed the freedom to voice concerns and opinions about online learning. Instructors should also be encouraged to consider the potential benefits of online learning for students and to bear in mind that the goal is neither to replace them nor to minimize their role in the educational process.

With these questions answered, the ministry can develop a timeline for implementation and can move forward to consider more technical details of an online learning program. These details

will include such items as instructor development, instructional design of online courses, and selection of a Learning Management System.

Things We Did Not Say

Written communication only allows for one-way communication: from author to audience. In this section eDOT desires to clarify any possible misunderstandings about what has been mentioned above.

- eDOT does not desire to convey that online learning is a replacement for brick-and-mortar institutions. Online learning is an educational tool or method used to reach a broader group of students and to offer training to students who would not consider learning in a traditional brick-and-mortar institution. Implementation of an online learning program does not necessarily signal the end of a physical campus.
- eDOT does not desire to convey that the role of instructors or teaching faculty is in any way minimized by online learning. Although the online learning environment is different and requires some adjustment of teaching practice, we firmly believe that instructors have a vital and necessary role in online education.
- eDOT does not desire to convey that online learning will meet the educational needs of every student. Just the opposite! Not every student will make a suitable candidate for online learning. Any student applying to take online courses should be tested to determine his/her suitability to take online courses. The ideal online student will exhibit high internal motivation to complete studies, will tend to be introverted, and will possess the ability to solve problems independently. Students who do not meet the necessary study and technology requirements for an online program should be given the opportunity to take the same or equivalent educational experiences using other means.
- eDOT does not intend to say that the implementation of online learning is an impossible task. As with any major project, the implementation of online learning does require careful consideration of the issues and impact of the new program. eDOT offers this and subsequent articles to assist an organization in the negotiation of the issues and to give guidance based on experience with other ministries.

Resources to Consider

With each article, eDOT will recommend some resources for a ministry to consider as it evaluates the topics that lead to implementation of an online learning program. It is to be understood that these resources will provide fuller treatment and give greater explanation of these issues than is possible in these articles.

- Boettcher, Judith V. *Countdown Guide for Planning Online/Distance Degrees*. 11 Oct. 2006. Web. 5 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/count.htm>>.
- Freeman, Richard. *Planning and Implementing Open and Distance Learning Systems: A handbook for decision makers*. Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning, 2004. Web. 5 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.col.org/resources/publications/Pages/detail.aspx?PID=237>>.
- Levy, Suzanne. "Six Factors to Consider when Planning Online Distance Learning Programs in Higher Education." *The Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*. State University of Georgia Distance Education Center, Spring 2003. Web. 5 Mar. 2013. <<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/spring61/levy61.htm>>.
- Maddix, Mark A., James R. Estep and Mary E. Lowe, eds. *Best Practices of Online Education: A Guide for Christian Higher Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012. Print. 6 Mar. 2013. <<http://infoagepub.com/products/Best-Practices-of-Online-Education>>.