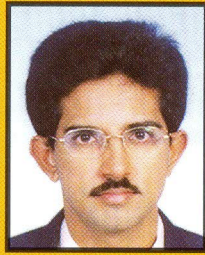


Are We Heading in the Right Direction?

Vikneswaran Nair, an ICT lecturer at Taylor's College School of Hotel Management argues that careful planning is required to take advantage of the Internet's varied but elusive qualities...



Fashion comes and fashion goes. And so does technology. But Internet related technology is definitely here to stay. In recent years, educators have witnessed the rapid development of computer networks, dramatic improvements in the processing power of personal computers, and striking advances in magnetic storage technology. These developments have made the computer a dynamic force in e-distance education, providing a new and interactive means of overcoming time and distance to reach learners. Computer literacy is no longer a take-it or leave-it option. Without basic IT skills, the students of today, let alone tomorrow, are simply not in the game.

E equals...?

The technology wave began with the introduction of computers and moved on to networked computers where Internet, Intranet and Extranet were the talk of the town. Moving one step further, we are now contending with the much hyped "E-commerce". But what is "E-commerce" or "Electronic Commerce"? How is it different from online marketing, e-marketing, e-business, and the rest?

Well, basically they all mean the same thing. In short, e-commerce is doing commercial business electronically. E-commerce is regarded as the fastest business sector in the world, and is now widely recognised as a key factor in national and regional economic growth. With e-commerce, the world is now a place where web pages are storefronts, computer networks are back offices, and the security is needed to squash hackers rather than catch shoplifters.

Commerce of ideas

How does education fit into the picture? Educommerce means the commercialising of education related industries... electronically. Education is fast becoming part and parcel of e-commerce. The role and impact of e-commerce in the education sector is reflected in the transaction and delivery of education and all forms of training through the Internet.

Funding the demand

Nevertheless, far too little is known about the computer's impact on the learning process to justify the vast sums that schools, colleges and universities are now spending. According to one estimate, the worldwide higher education market now exceeds RM2.66 trillion and the growth of e-commerce has a strong impact on its development. The mushrooming of virtual campuses with programme and course catalogues for customers

interested in distance e-education through the Internet accounts for this sudden surge in the market. This rapid growth is also driven by demands for cheaper courses and flexible training programmes for working adults.

There is no doubt that e-distance education provides substantial advantages, namely:

- **Computers** can facilitate self-paced learning. In the Computer Aided Instruction (CAI) mode, for example, computers individualise learning, while giving immediate reinforcement and feedback. Learners are able to progress at their individual pace. Therefore, excellent for students with disabilities.
- **Computers** are multimedia tools. With integrated graphic, print, audio, and video capabilities, computers can effectively link various technologies. Interactive video and CD-ROM technologies can be incorporated into computer-based instructional units, lessons, and learning environments.
- **Computers** are interactive. Microcomputer systems incorporating various software packages are extremely flexible and maximise learner control.
- **Computers** increase access. Local, regional, and national networks link resources and individuals, wherever they might be. Many institutions now offer complete undergraduate and graduate programs relying almost exclusively on computer-based resources.

While acknowledging its potential, we also need to tackle the limitations of e-distance learning:

- **Computer** networks are expensive to develop. Although individual computers are relatively cheap and the computer hardware and software market is very competitive, it is still costly to develop instructional networks and purchase the systems software to run them. Here in Malaysia, with the enforcement on illegal software, licensing can be a very pricey affair.
- **Lack** of appropriate educational software is another problem that needs to be tackled locally.
- **The** technology is changing rapidly. Computer technology evolves so quickly that the distant educator focused solely on innovation (rather than meeting tangible needs) will constantly change equipment in an effort to keep pace with the "latest" technical advancements.
- **Widespread** computer illiteracy still exists. While computers have been used since the 1960s, there are many who do not have access to computers or networks.
- **Students** must be highly motivated and proficient. Computer operations have to be mastered before individuals can successfully function in a Net-based distance-learning environment.

Intellectual property

With educommerce too, lecture notes and materials are readily available on the web. There are advertising companies who hire students to take notes of lectures, which are then posted on the web without the knowledge of the lecturer concerned. Most academics are offended by this naked commercialism and are concerned about intellectual property rights and plagiarism. Moreover, it encourages students to skip lectures altogether.

Nevertheless, students regard this as another source of reading material. They can check out the best

notes and explanations from around the globe. Lectures are not just ways to disseminate knowledge - students can get that from books. The best lectures are always in the nature of dialogues because each lecture is often amended for a particular audience. Educommerce too, introduces us to the online certification exam. You can sit for an exam from any part of the world online. Nevertheless, on commercial sites, courses are mostly intended to attract adults engaged in lifelong learning, not students studying for a paper qualification.

Cost benefits

In terms of retailing, e-commerce can be seen in the way schools and college stores and vendors are doing their business. Any decent Web browser will show the increasing number of sites selling items ranging from school supplies and books (both printed and online versions) to food and laboratory supplies. With e-commerce, savings of up to 10% can be achieved.

Such savings could be used for improving the student-teacher ratio for more effective teaching and learning. Educommerce can therefore help address the serious teacher shortage by allowing the transmission of classes over the Internet. It also introduces students from low-income families to new technologies. Hence, educommerce may be the best opportunity for these disadvantaged kids to get the IT facilities they need to be competitive in a global economy.

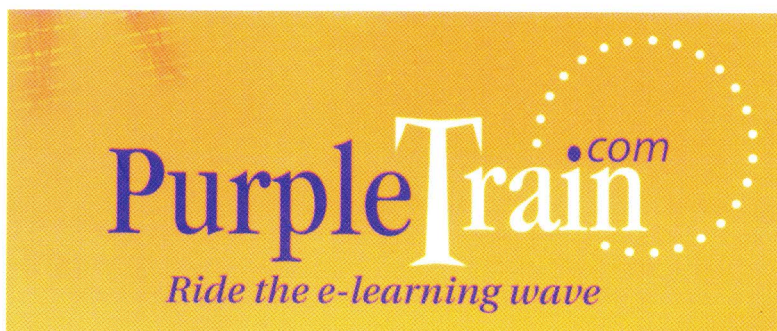
Access with quality

The world is moving towards the digital revolution and so e-commerce and e-distance education are both growing in leaps and bounds. Finding the right balance between the pros and cons may be crucial at this stage in order for e-commerce to have a significant impact in the educational sector, one that can improve and increase access to education for all, without compromising the quality and integrity of education.

Teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and "deeper" for remote students if they and their instructors share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives. Perhaps this is the challenge posed to all educators. Our response to the challenge will ultimately determine the direction e-distance education and educommerce takes. •

Purple Train Comin'

How Informatics Aims to Capture its Slice of Cyberspace



Any educational institution worth its salt is getting content online. Whether it takes the form of a fully-functional e-learning platform, a virtual resource centre or simply the facility to email a lecturer with questions (or excuses), today's student expects a certain amount of electronic access.

Universities around the world are racing to provide their own students with online resources. Others are going one step further by running courses where significant portions can be taken anywhere, anytime - provided you have a computer and a modem. Foreign universities are exploiting this market (50% of them are expected to be offering online courses by 2002) but it is not as straightforward as it seems. Maintaining quality control, providing student support and doing the actual marketing are problematic, particularly when they are being coordinated from across the globe.

E-learning Portal

The model most likely to succeed, given current attitudes and technology, is the one best able to combine effective support, flexibility of access and user-friendliness. One such regional contender is PurpleTrain.com, a new vertical e-learning portal, operated by Informatics Holdings. According to IDC, the web-based market was US\$200 million in 1997, a figure that is expected to expand to US\$5.5 billion by 2002. In terms of numbers, this means that 2.2 million students will be taking online courses compared with 753,000 in 1998.

PurpleTrain.com has evolved out of the pre-existing (but less interestingly titled) Internet Virtual Learning University (IVLU), launched in 1999, offering a Bachelors degree from Portsmouth in the UK. The growth in the number of programmes has been startling. It is now possible to register through PurpleTrain for a range of courses in IT and Business. E-learning links are available at 30 universities, with 14 cyber campuses (see below) actually awarding certificates, diplomas, degrees and MBAs.

Virtual physical presence

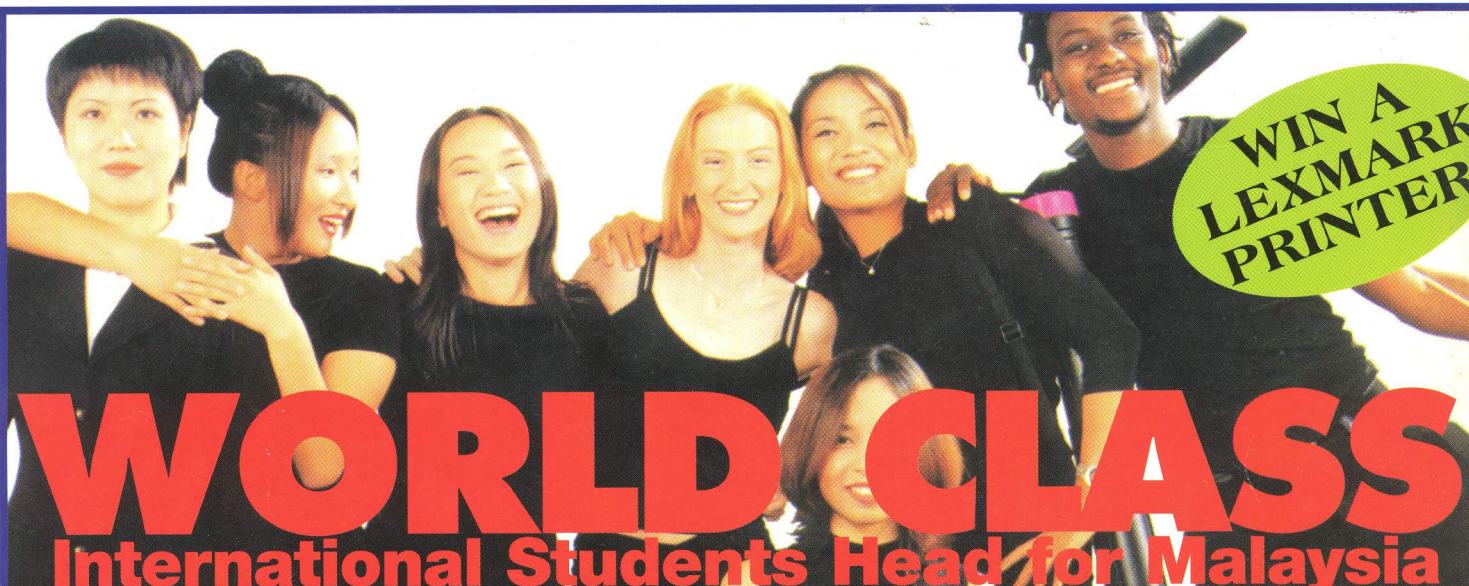
Informatics' big advantage as a purveyor of e-learning is its regional coverage. With 280 centres in 30 countries, it can leverage its foreign



Education Quarterly

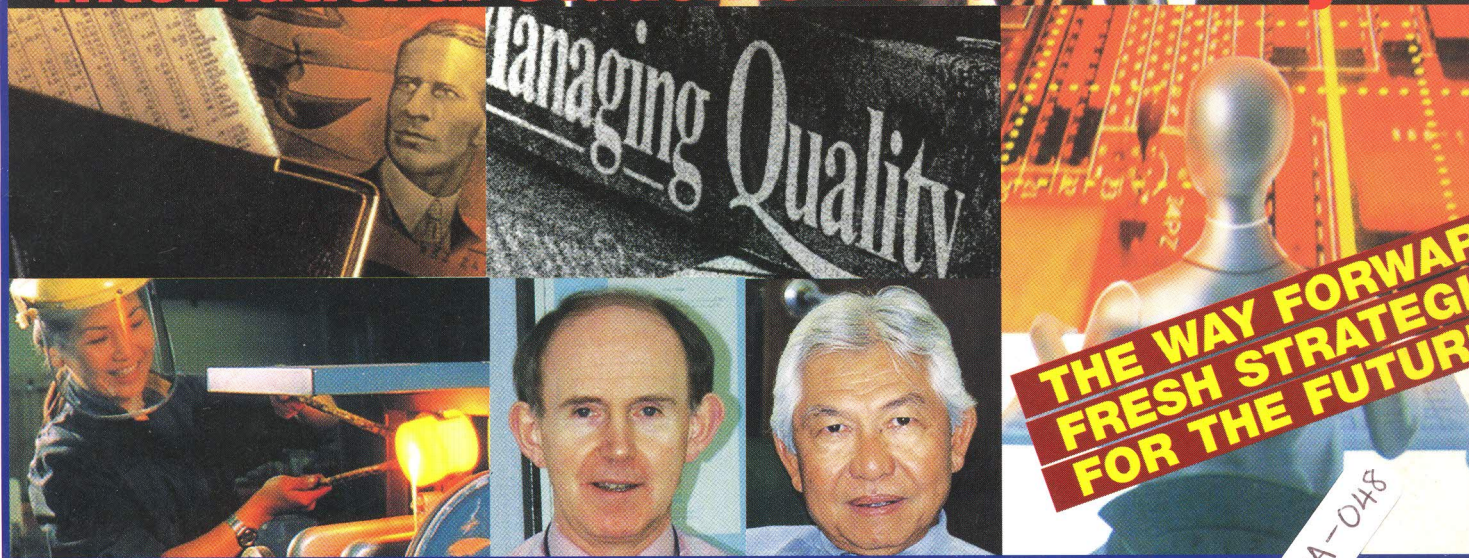
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