

Online Education – Experiences and Aspirations

An interview with Morten Flate Paulsen about current issues he is contemplating before traveling to a conference in Akureyri, Iceland on May 31, 2002.

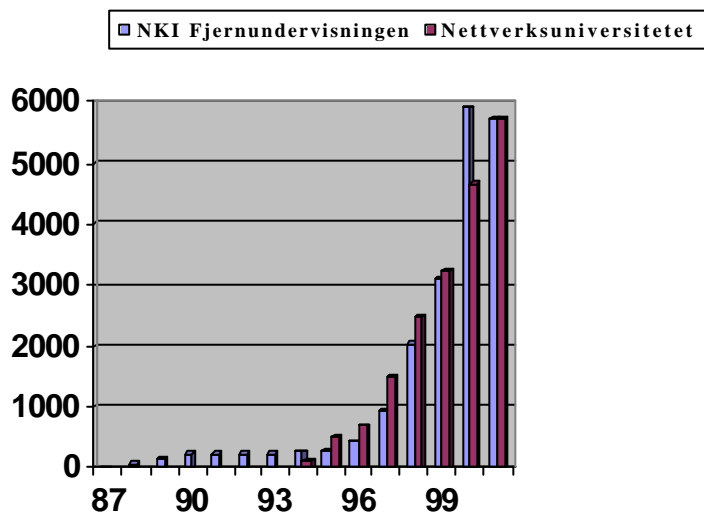
What is the most important trend in online education now?

Much of the discussion today is focused on Learning Management Systems (LMS). In my opinion, however, there are other and more important issues online educators must concentrate on.

Online education has increased considerably during the last years. Five years ago, a typical educational institution piloted a few online courses on a limited number of students. Today, many institutions are implementing online education services to all their students.

The figure below illustrates this development with regard to enrollment in online courses at two major Norwegian providers of online education.

Kurspåmeldinger ved NKI og NVU 1987 - 2001



What is the most important challenge online educators face today?

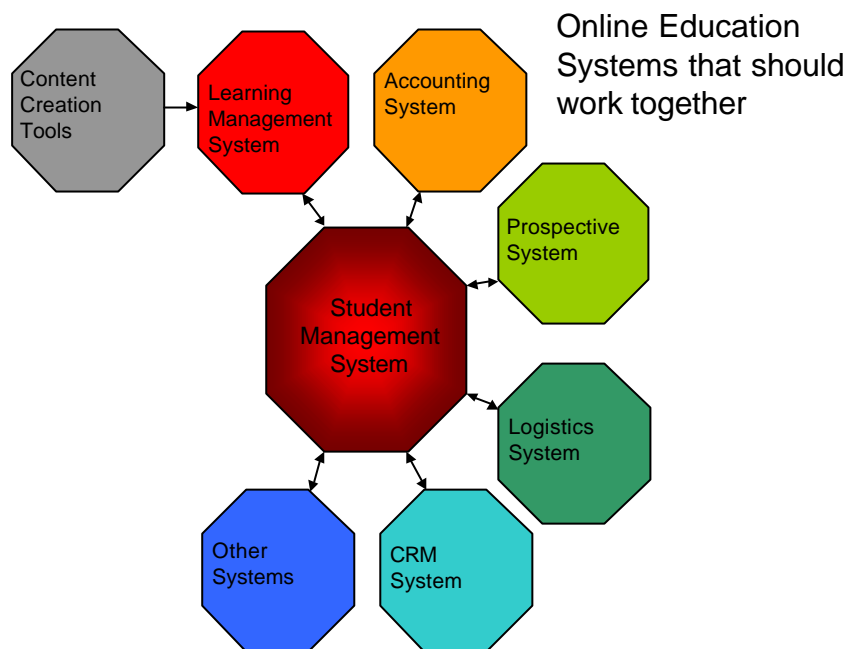
The current trend shows clearly that online education is shifting from small scale to large scale. We also know that few institutions can claim that the provision of web-based courses has been an economic success.

This development entails that it is increasingly important that the institutions establish an *efficient and cost-effective infrastructure* that supports online education. This includes systems and routines for course development, customer relation management, course enrolment, student support, technical support, teacher training and support, examinations, payments, and logistics.

All of this requires people with responsibilities, competences, and resources to handle the challenges. It also requires that the institutions establish strategies, routines, and systems to support the work. And finally, it is important to implement computer systems that support the

activities. The figure below shows a model for some computer systems that should work together to support large-scale online education.

The figure's main intention is to show that the *Student Management System* is the central system for many educational institutions. The two most used systems in Norway are MSTAS (<http://www.enet.no>) and FS (<http://www.fs.usit.uio.no/>). The Swedish universities use a system called LADOK and the Danish universities apply STADS. These systems are far more important for the universities than the LMS systems. When an institution introduces large-scale online



education, it is important that these systems are well integrated.

So far, it seems that the integration is very primitive and that most institutions have an important job to do with the systems integration. My conclusion is therefore that the institutions face a major challenge when they enter large-scale online education.

What is the most important challenge for online teachers?

Online education offers students excellent opportunities to individual communication with their tutors. They can be contacted via e-mail 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Few learning environments provide equal opportunities for individual access to teachers. It is obvious that online students appreciate to always have a personal tutor available. It is the students' dream, but it could soon become a nightmare for the tutors.

As you understand, I'm really concerned about the heavy workload reported by online teachers. Online education will never become a real success until we are able to limit the teacher workload. Therefore it is extremely important to consider teacher workload, especially during development of course assignments.

What recommendations do you have on course development?

One of the most obvious misapprehensions about online courses is that they should take place in front of the PC. Most online students spend much more time studying textbooks and preparing assignments than surfing the Internet. Even though both text and video can be presented online, paper is often a better medium for text and television is better for presenting video. Still, there is

a tendency among online educators to substitute excellent textbooks with mediocre web material and superb videocassettes with a tiny, degenerated PC-version of the video.

My point is that we should combine the best from each medium and not present everything on the Internet. But this is hard for many traditional universities because they do not have the logistic systems and technological competence to handle the mix of media.

Do you teach online? If so, what do you feel is your most difficult dilemma?

I taught my first online course in 1987. At the moment, I teach the course *Design and Development of Online Courses* which is one of 5 courses in our Specialization Program in International Online Education (www.nettskolen.com/spice).

In online education there is a conflict of interest between many students who prefer individual learning and educators who promote collaborative learning. Many students choose to study online because they want or need individual flexibility. They have full-time jobs and family responsibilities, and many are reluctant to participate if it means relinquishing high-quality family life and job achievements. They need flexible education: education that allows them to combine job, family, and education in a manageable way.

My point is that it is a dilemma, but I believe it is possible to develop online learning environments that support both individual learning and collaborative learning.