

Case: Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning

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Company Facts and Figures

Industry: Higher education

2008 Revenues: US\$37 million

Scope of Services and Products: Providing post-university education, 16 programs, and 134 courses of study in six disciplines

Estimated Number of Students: 200,000 distance learning students

Year the Initiative was Introduced: 2001

Offices and Locations: Three school locations in India, with a fourth opening in Delhi in 2010

Website: <http://www.scdl.net/>

Introduction

In 2001, a small group of educational visionaries started a small private educational institute called the *Symbiosis Centre for Distance Learning (SCDL)*. The vision was simple; provide quality education through distant learning in a broad spectrum of programs and disciplines that could provide post-graduate working students with an opportunity to further increase their knowledge in a subject area leading to new opportunities for personal growth and job enhancement.

Yes we began with 8000 students in 2001. By 2003 we had 15,000 students & by 2006 we had 100,000 students. The exponential growth happened between 2003 & 2006 from 15,000 to 100,000 students each year during that period we enrolling about 50,000 students thus active students strength become 100,000 by 2006. The Institute was also confronted with the fact that technology was quickly gaining strength as a strategic learning tool and could not be ignored. With the realization that e-learning could be an excellent way to attract and educate young working adults, it was clear that there was an opportunity for the future expansion and growth of this

Why Technology-based Learning?

- Need to supplement printed self-learning material with interactive e-learning course modules
- Provide teaching to a broader base of students
- Cost-effective solution to teaching large numbers of students
- Scalable solution at any time
- Richer and deeper teaching opportunity
- Reduce need for frequent faculty interaction

private university. Today SCDL has over 200,000 students from all corners of India and 42 countries.

Beginning in 2004, SCDL has strategically focused on implementing technology solutions that would increase student access to education, improve program quality and delivery, provide a quicker response time to student questions and to improve student support services. Today, adult learners at SCDL have access to e-learning, virtual classrooms, podcasts, faculty chat sessions, exam booking, and academic test results all delivered through a sophisticated Web portal, thus creating a large virtual campus. Prior to the e-learning initiative at SCDL in 2004, SCDL only provided its distant adult learners with hard copy, self-directed learning materials, which were supplemented with occasional faculty-led classroom-based programs.

How was the Initiative Aligned with the Business?

Thomas Friedman recently wrote *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, and e-learning is one of the proofs of that because it can reach learners anytime and anywhere. But just because students can access e-learning, doesn't mean it can successfully teach everyone. You must take into account such differences as cultural, language, organizational, and how one learns. Done properly, e-learning can be a powerful tool to promote effective adult learning in a country as large and diverse as India.

Since its beginnings, SCDL offered only traditional printed learning material to its adult students. In 2006 the Institute active student enrollment attendance was approaching 100,000 students. The major challenge that existed at the time was that the students were spread across long distances in remote areas and across many countries (as many as 30 different countries). Understandably, it was difficult and challenging to organize face-to-face, faculty-led classes that added tremendous value to the students' learning experiences. The dynamics of geography, time zones, and diverse student population was an immense challenge towards implementing a universal, one-for-all solution in the learning pedagogy. At the same time, it was important to enhance learning experiences of students by providing technology-based solutions that would ease the operational difficulties that existed at SCDL. Therefore, e-learning emerged as a suitable and lucrative possible solution. Implementing this kind of a solution was far more cost effective than arranging multi-location, faculty-led classroom lectures. Faculty was considered a very expensive operational expense, so the Institute decided to use faculty only when and as needed. The e-learning initiative goes well with the Institute's vision and mission of providing self-paced, self-styled learning.

After further investigation, the SCDL Institute took the initiative of introducing e-learning course modules to supplement the self-guided, paper-based, learning materials. The customized e-learning course modules covered key concepts, used case studies, and real-life situational examples to explain various concepts. However, when designing any e-learning course, a great deal of effort was made in not reiterating information already available through existing faculty lectures or the paper-based learning materials, therefore ensuring that the e-learning was an effective supplement to the existing self-guided learning materials.

Utilizing e-learning for teaching was selected as an appropriate learning strategy because it would enable the Institute to address key concepts of the curriculum in an interactive, interesting manner via custom built e-learning modules. Furthermore, the Institute decided to use real-life examples, case studies, and scenarios in the treatment of e-learning, thereby making the e-learning courses more application-based. This was only possible through customized e-learning modules, which would be based on the self-paced learning material that the Institute already had.

The Institute's leadership considered that e-learning could also provide a cost-effective learning model to support the Institute's tremendous growth. In order to accommodate new, larger numbers of students enrolled in the Institute, the cost related to hiring more faculty members and building more schools was not necessarily the right approach to growing the school. E-learning was scalable. More students take courses without increasing the faculty size and it allowed students to learn at their own pace and in their homes. So considering these factors, SCDL could increase student numbers, expand its reach, and maintain costs.

The Institute wanted to improve the richness of the learning experience it was delivering to its students. Through the integration of technology, teaching, and e-learning SCDL could mix these important ingredients together to create a far more personalized learning experience to the end user. The Institute leveraged its highly recognized faculty in providing real-time learning with insight into the e-learning experience that other traditional schools in India could not match.

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Key Business Drivers

- Improve and enhance the quality and richness of the learning programs
- Integrate learning technologies into existing programs
- Reduce faculty-led classes
- Expand the reach of the Institute outside of India

How was the Initiative Designed?

Ms. Swati Mujumdar, Director of SCDL in Pune, India was an integral role player in the establishment of e-learning within the Institute. "Clearly, to leverage learning technologies into any academic environment, one must consider all options and then develop a concise strategic plan that can be operationalized to co-exist with our traditional teaching approaches," Mujumdar said. Through a team of faculty and e-learning experts, SCDL built their strategic plan and took the numerous steps in their goal to build an effective e-learning program that would enhance their existing distant learning program.

The first step taken by management at the Institute was to create a team from existing internal departments, where one team was organized to provide the course content, subject matter expertise, and design and development expertise. The different academic departments, the media department, and e-learning department were all primarily involved in the planning and implementation of the e-

learning initiative. The academic departments provided content and subject matter expertise. The media department did the scheduling and logistics management. The e-learning department coordinated with all involved departments, vendors, and faculty in actual design and development of the e-learning courses and services. All e-learning courses were created in the English language only as it is the language of business used in India and most other world countries.

Another aspect of the school's approach was the use of external vendors to develop the e-learning courses as the school had limited resources to do this. The internal e-learning team then created guidelines and standards that external vendors would use in meeting SCDL's development requirements. The design approach was to keep each e-learning course to one hour of student seat time and keep the development cost to approximately US\$3,500 to US\$4,000 per e-learning course. History has shown that on average, it takes the internal e-learning team about two months to design and develop each course using both the Macromedia™ Flash and Dreamweaver course development application tools. All the courses were in English as the medium of instruction is English for all educational programs offered by SCDL.

The second step that followed in the plan was to create e-learning courses for a limited number of classes. These courses were created to be delivered through the Internet and remote students without the Internet would receive the course on a disk in the form of a DVD.

< Insert PPM E-Learning Screen shot .TIF >

Figure 12-1: Example of Online Learning User Interface we would like to continue to use the word 'Interface'

Instructor-led courses delivered in a classroom by faculty members were videotaped and again offered via the Internet or by DVD. This third important step now provided students with even greater flexibility of not having to be physically present in a class and still have access to what the faculty member was teaching.

Following step three, the SCDL team designed and built a robust learning portal so students could have on-line access to courses, grades, videotapes lectures, career paths, and support services.

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Media and Tools

- Content and subject matter expertise provided from the faculty to support their existing courses
- Macromedia Flash and Dreamweaver
- External e-learning vendors to supplement development
- Internet student portal developed as the primary access point for students to get to e-learning courses, class lectures that were videotaped, career paths, grades, and support
- Virtual classrooms used so foreign students could take classes without having to be on-site

How was the Initiative Deployed?

The deployment of the e-learning initiative began with the development and launching of several e-learning course modules to support the most difficult courses that were being offered at the Institute. The SCDL's management and academics department decided that the e-learning modules should be integrated into existing faculty-led and distance learning courses, which in turn would provide the participating students with deeper learning opportunities, particularly with difficult concepts and therefore improve the intrinsic value of the course.

Future releases of e-learning modules and on-line learning was deployed in a phased rollout with the annual goal of releasing between 10 to 15 new e-learning courses in future years. The actual deployment number could vary on the higher side depending upon program requirements. A variety of e-learning is presently used by over 200,000 students from all states of India and 42 countries.

One of the most challenging early decisions that needed to be made by the SCDL's executive management team was what to do regarding the purchase/lease of a learning management system (LMS). The E-Learning Department thoroughly investigated different learning management systems, but their findings indicated that the systems were either too large, difficult to implement and manage, and/or very costly to purchase. The decision was made not to have an LMS, but rather they would sacrifice some of the benefits of an LMS, such as tracking students, and simply allow students to launch courses, videos, and recordings from the school's website portal.

SCDL has recently decided to introduce virtual classrooms. At present SCDL is exploring various virtual classroom software, such as Wimba. This model will be used on an experimental basis for 1–2 courses, especially to judge student response considering SCDL has a very large student population. **This model will help SCDL students to get flexibility of attending classes from the convenience of their home or office without coming to our campus. We can also offer many more courses through the virtual classrooms as physical infrastructure requirement is minimal in this model. This will help further our vision of creating a 'virtual campus' to provide self-based learning environment to our students.**

Marketing Approach

- Both the Institute and faculty internally promoted e-learning as part of the improved curriculum to existing students through course catalogs and their website.
- Advertisements were placed in large newspapers such as the "India Times" promoting the expanded learning opportunities.
- Sample demo e-learning courses were uploaded to the Institute's website to promote and train students on the approach and use of e-learning courses in their learning.

What was the Business Impact of the Initiative?

The use of e-learning began to take shape in 2004 when it was deployed to approximately 60,000 students. Today there are more than 200,000 students using the e-learning courses for various programs in their studies. The Institute presently offers 16 programs in 134 courses of study in 6 disciplines, primarily in Management, Information Technology, Education, Humanities, and Law. From this, sixty-

four e-learning courses are in use today at the Institute with the goal of adding 10 more courses per year. This equates to over 60% of the curriculum for all programs being offered with supporting e-learning modes.

The e-learning initiative has yielded excellent responses for the student population. This supplementary learning approach has helped students to understand key course concepts better. Due to this response, in-class, face-to-face, faculty-based learning has been reduced in terms of a “learning need” and the Institute has been able to manage costs **associated with requirements of additional faculty to meet growing students enrollment numbers.** The faculty was initially reluctant and hesitant. There was a feeling of insecurity as to whether e-learning would take away jobs! However, SCDL trained faculty on the entire process of e-learning content development and then the important role as subject matter experts. These training programs and workshops for faculty created interest and cleared doubts. It also helped to set their buy-in.

Distance learning students were not very enthusiastic to attend and participate in face-to-face, pre-scheduled classes with faculty. As such, SCDL incurred huge logistics costs to arrange contact classes with poor student attendance. After e-learning was introduced, the student feedback suggested that e-learning became an excellent alternative source of learning and the overall need for face-to-face faculty interaction was reduced.

More importantly, SCDL has been able to reach beyond the boundaries of India itself. Students are distributed all over the world and all across India. The e-learning aspect of course delivery allows the Institute to reach a student population now from all age groups, nationalities, cultural, and educational backgrounds.

During a recent electronic survey of over 16,000 students, more than half the students representing both urban and rural backgrounds acknowledged a “very satisfied” rating of the e-learning modules; its content; its relevance to their daily lives; and its coverage of case studies, examples, and scenarios. Students rated the interactivity within e-learning as a favorable feature, but suggested incorporating more examples. SCDL has already implemented this feedback in all e-learning courses newly developed in 2009. The feedback obtained was provided to the professors so that they could improve areas within the e-learning modules in future releases.

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Business and Learner Perspectives

Number of Students Surveyed: 16,645 (Rural=15,853 + Urban=792)

Key results of survey with respect to e-learning courses and quality of content:

- Number of students who rated e-learning quality as excellent/good: 12,065
- Number of students who rated e-learning quality as interactive/case study-based: 14,437
- Number of students who rated examples in e-learning content as applicable to real life/relevant: 10,980

Student Quotes from Survey:

"The e-content was very easy to understand and follow."—Housewife

"The examples and case studies covered in the e-learning course were very relevant and applicable to my job environment."—Working Professional

"The e-learning course was quite interactive and overall it was an enjoyable learning experience!"—Student

SUMMARY

Purpose: With SCDL Institute's goals of improved quality of curriculum, expanded reach to new students, and controlling costs the integration of e-learning into the Institute beginning in 2003, it has worked extremely well in making SCDL a leader of private higher-level education in India.

Initiative Structure: More than 60% of total curriculum supported with the use of e-learning that includes:

- Online Internet and classroom-based training courses, pre-recorded lectures on DVDs
- Synchronous learning through virtual classes
- An educational portal for e-learning courses, assessments, career paths, and student support

Number of Learning Hours per Professional: Approximately 10

Number of Learners: Over 200,000 students actively using some form of e-learning as part of their courses

Completion Requirements: Students are required to complete about 96–98 credits to acquire a post-graduate diploma (2-year program)

Average Length of Time a Student is at SCDL: Two to four years

Media and Tools: Macromedia Flash and Dreamweaver

Deployment Mechanisms: Through the Institute's website, also delivered to remote students through DVDs

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Lessons Learned

- It is a long and arduous journey, so build a strategy and make sure it is aligned with the business.

- Make sure you get faculty support and train teachers on the effective use of e-learning within the existing courses they teach.
- Build internal capability and expertise with the design team in order to develop engaging e-learning programs.
- Use a phased roll-out approach to deploy an e-learning program.
- Find the “right” vendor who can partner with you over the long term and who has the necessary expertise to build e-learning courses.