Technology breeds anti-technology. Consider the following tale about a cave-dweller named Thok.

Thok was an elder among the cave-dwellers. His neighbors came regularly to hear his tales and listen to his advice about outfoxing the winds of change. These cave-dwellers gathered in a grove near Thok’s cave. But as their numbers grew and as Thok’s aging voice weakened in volume nearly to a whisper, the audience could no longer hear the sage. So Thok turned to a nearby banana tree, tore off a leaf, and rolled it into what he called a “megaphone,” which he used to project his voice. Although most of Thok’s neighbors were awed by this invention, his detractors were suspicious of the new-fangled “megaphonology.” To disprove its utility, they cut banana leaves and placed the leaves on their heads and shoulders. Moving farther and farther away from Thok, these critics could not hear him, even with the “megaphones” on their heads. They thus concluded that megaphonology was a useless tool.¹

¹ Herman D. Lujan is Vice President for Academic Affairs, California State University, Los Angeles. Before taking this position in 2001, he served as Chief Academic Officer for the Connecticut State University System.
Today, technology-assisted teaching and learning likewise has its antimegaphonologists. Many of them narrowly define “good” teaching and learning as something that occurs in a time-bound, synchronous classroom setting. They are suspicious of today’s fastest-growing form of megaphonology—asynchronous, online instruction—which they see as a kind of sophistry that cannot replicate traditional classroom teaching and learning. Believing the myths that surround online instruction, they conclude that it is an expensive and useless tool.

But some of us today continued to listen to Thok. We learned how best to use the new tool. We are online survivors.

**Becoming Flexible and Going Global**

The Internet and its corollary—online instruction—form the key innovation in teaching and learning in the early twenty-first century. This emerging technology is a tool that can help take the knowledge explosion of the information age from a kind of random, cafeteria style of learning to a library model of organized, structured materials. In *Strategic Choices for the Academy*, Daniel Rowley, Michael Dolence, and I explained the challenge to higher education institutions in this new age: “The academy must become a learning organization, not an organization of learners. It must also be a knowledge-generating organization. A learning organization transforms as it scans, evaluates, and uses information. The new age with its rapid generation of ideas, information, and processes requires an intelligent flexibility not found in standard organization.”

This makes online instruction a linchpin between (1) the intelligently flexible strategies and structures required to address the volume and variety of new learning styles and (2) the globalization of human life. Today’s advanced technology is accompanied by the new global economy. As the world’s leading provider of higher education, the United States cannot turn its back on the forces of global change. One-fourth of the U.S. GDP (more than $1 trillion) depends on foreign trade. Most U.S. businesses are globally interconnected, as is much of higher education, with growing numbers of international graduate students in U.S. colleges and universities. Libraries in the United States are likewise increasingly global in their roles as information providers. Finally, immigrants are internationalizing the country. In California, the population grows by 1.25 million a year; immigrants make up over 500,000 of that growth, annually adding a population the size of the state of Vermont. Traditional higher education cannot serve the nation’s global learning needs only with traditional approaches, no matter how good those approaches are.°

**Debunking Myths**

Many myths surround technology and its role in teaching and learning. One myth is that online instruction requires big bucks. It does not. The University of California System spent $2 million and failed to launch a course. The Connecticut State University System spent $200,000 and launched nearly two hundred courses and at least one degree (a master’s in library science) in two years. The key is less about having money than about having the flexibility and focus to ensure that an institution’s ambitions do not exceed its grasp.

Several articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* have stated that many colleges and universities greatly underestimate the cost of development and main—

institutions are state and local. Some critics ask, “How can we justify spending public money to educate nonresidents, especially foreigners?” The question is, how can we not? International students have always enriched American education, bringing into the learning place perspectives and information not readily available to U.S. students. The antipathy toward a “low-cost ride” for foreigners is both anachronistic and antithetical to learning in a global society.

Another myth concerns the view that online instruction is great for the preacademic experience and for such things as certificates and continuing education credits but that online instruction cannot serve “real education” well. The success of online courses, especially at the graduate level, puts the truth of this myth to test. In Connecticut, a master of library sciences degree is offered online, and its quality and the demand for that quality are significant. The reality is that content and substance can be delivered in more
than one venue. The key to good instruction is design and control of content by skilled faculty.

The leading criticism of asynchronous instruction is that learning must be synchronous and interactive to be effective. Given present technology, online instruction is largely asynchronous, although synchronous elements can be built in, such as required chats that occur at a certain time. Threaded discussions offer the ability to talk with faculty and other students while also providing students with the personal attention that they may need and that instructors build into their courses. Hybridized courses are another approach for enhancing interaction between faculty and students, and as wireless develops, other forms of interaction may be possible. The truth about online instruction is that faculty can build in features that socialize the learning experience in the online classroom to encourage interaction between students and between the students and the instructor. Finally, participation online is associated with active learning and more in-depth discussion.6

The last myth worth mentioning is that “big names” draw. Well, that depends. Wharton Direct offered Web-based nondegree courses from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. The program failed to sustain itself. Top names alone might seduce initially, but the product must be good and the accessibility convenient for a program to last.

Facing Reality
What some of us who are online survivors have learned is that the myths overstate the obstacles to success. Perhaps this is because simple theories may mislead and there is no quick fix in the world of quick technology.

Focus matters. Trying the shotgun approach with a smattering of courses or certificates will more likely fail than succeed over the long run. Trying to be all things to all possible student cohorts will serve none well. Focusing on existing quality or distinction will increase the chances for standing out in the marketplace. When respected faculty members are the core source of design and delivery, the course looks and feels substantive, and students know the education is not second-rate.

Cost is clearly a factor. But it must be calculated in relation to what is being offered, what is being displaced, and the quality of the market analysis and business plan. First, an institution must know both its direct (vendor assistance) and its indirect (use of existing course-design programs) costs. And an institution must know its fixed (equipment) and its variable (faculty salaries) costs. In addition, maintenance costs are often hidden but relevant; these include both course maintenance and such things as PC and equipment replacement. In short, the higher education institution must calculate—as precisely as possible—the true cost of ownership.

It is also worth remembering that assessing the real costs of education can be very complex. Costs vary from desktop to software, required materials, library support, book requirements, class size, faculty time spent in online preparation and instruction, and number of vendors, type of portals, and online vendor support. Finally, an institution must decide whether it will mount and sustain online instruction in-house.

Because of this requisite infrastructure, a college or university must have a clear motive for getting into the online instruction business in the first place. Dow Jones University went online backed by the Wall Street Journal. From the beginning, the motive was to make money. Staff and professors were paid well, driving costs above the revenue that the market was willing to provide. What the market wanted was degree-related education. Dow Jones University did not provide this, and it failed. The lesson here is to remember what the public wants. Students enroll in online programs to get quality education that leads somewhere, and that somewhere is most often a degree.

Choices and Commonsense Ideas
Institutions face two polar choices in launching online instruction. First is the “comprehensive virtual university” approach:

- Spend several million dollars to begin.
- Have faculty teach courses.
- Offer 300 or more courses.
- Serve 10,000 or more students.
- Provide library, computer, and advising services.
- Have design teams put together courses.
- Partner where you can.
- Devise a revenue-sharing plan.
- Own the copyright and intellectual content.
- Contract with faculty for a set fee plus royalties.

The other choice is the “focused niche” approach:

- Focus on existing strengths and distinctions.
- Begin with an affordable goal.
- Use faculty initiative to get started.
- Provide incentives, including salary, for faculty to design courses and to
own the intellectual property that results.
- Pilot a few courses to test the water.
- Identify markets.
- Identify degree programs to serve those markets.
- Try to assess real costs and determine a pricing scheme and level.
- Avoid using per-credit charges as the only approach to pricing.
- Where degree programs are involved, consider program pricing, charging a flat fee at levels that the market will bear and using revenue to develop new courses.
- Make an early decision about intellectual property ownership; consider letting faculty own the scholarly content of their courses.
- Make a deliberate choice, based on clear criteria, about whether to own or lease the platform and courseware; if in doubt, use a vendor to get started.
- Determine support-cost issues such as on whose servers the program will reside and who will provide 24/7 assistance.

Remember that online instruction is an educational decision first, not a technology decision. Know why you are in the game.
Be clear about the role of quality. Some vendors let an institution start a program for free, but the costs kick in as the program develops. Others store programs on the institution’s server, with the institution being responsible for backup. And many portals let faculty “start” online instruction, with varying results.

Both the comprehensive virtual university approach and the focused niche approach have a few basic requirements: (1) carefully assessing an institution’s strengths and areas of distinction, coupled with a responsiveness to faculty initiative in these distinctive programs; (2) providing faculty with the tools and training for online teaching; (3) putting together a business plan based on real costs; and (4) making quality-based, educationally sound decisions.

Whichever approach is chosen, here are some additional guidelines: establish quality standards, have reliable software, offer help-desk functions to faculty and students, create an online identity, and provide courseware that is reliable, convenient, and easy to use. Contract out or build a consortium for things that are not core competencies. If you contract out, know what you need and write tight specifications. Start building a real-cost business plan as soon as a pilot is under way. Remember that start-up costs are high and occur before the revenue stream develops. Pay attention to reliable and scalable platforms and look for vendors that invest in e-learning research and development. Develop a strategy that matches strengths to opportunities. Keep faculty the drivers of content. Invest continuously in the faculty members to enhance their expertise. Know what you need (not want) and write tight specifications for vendors. Remember that online instruction is an educational decision first, not a technology decision. Know why you are in the game. Lastly, find the point where the richness of content and the reach of academic quality coincide: this will be your niche.

Most of these are commonsense ideas, but they are necessary for survival in the online environment. They are the keys to the proper use of today’s megaphonology—the new tool of online instruction.

Notes

6. Diana Oblinger, Putting Students at the Center: A Planning Guide to Distributed Learning, EDUCAUSE Monograph Series no. 1 (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE, 1999), 26