



Technology in Trucking

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The informal side of online education

Last month we started looking at online education, in particular the formal programs offered by colleges and private sector organizations. I said right off the top that I think “online education” happens any time you use the Internet to learn, and this month we’re going to explore that by looking at some informal online education options. None of these programs offer diplomas or formal accreditation, but they offer tremendous learning opportunities and they’re free, which is pretty hard to beat.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that’s written, edited, and compiled entirely by the general public. It currently has over 2.4 million different articles – more than 30 times as many as the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Because Wikipedia has no expert editors monitoring the accuracy of the content, you need to take it with a grain of salt. However, Wikipedia has proven to be remarkably accurate overall, and just as important, when mistakes are discovered they’re corrected very quickly by the community of volunteers.

Wikipedia is an example of extremely informal online education, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t valuable. In fact, because of the number of people contributing content, you generally get much more balanced and diverse information than you get through other sources. To me, that makes it far more valuable than many for-

mal education offerings.

Wikipedia also takes advantage of the interconnectedness of the web – including links to further sources of information, related content and topics of similar interest. It’s very easy to lose yourself for hours in Wikipedia when you stumble on a topic that interests you.

iTunes

iTunes is not something you normally see in a list of online education options, but I think it’s a great one to look at. iTunes offers two things that provide excellent education options – podcasts, and iTunes U.

Podcasts

Podcasts, for anyone unfamiliar who hasn’t experienced them before, are basically recorded radio shows, lectures, or documentaries available for free through iTunes and other sites. When you find a podcast on a topic you like, you subscribe to it. Then, whenever you connect your iPod to your computer, the newest edition of the podcast is automatically downloaded onto your iPod. You can take the latest edition of your favorite show with you wherever you go.

Some people will argue that listening to a podcast isn’t “online education,” but I think it’s an excellent example of how the Internet is shaping education. For any auditory listeners, this is the best way to learn. Since most podcasts have a narrow topic focus, you can get very detailed information about specific subjects, leading to a much

deeper understanding of a topic than you’d get otherwise.

A popular category of podcasts right now is language instruction – something for which podcasts are perfectly suited. You can learn French, Spanish, Italian, Japanese, English-as-Second-Language, and many more completely free just by subscribing to the podcast.

iTunes U

iTunes U is one of the coolest things I’ve come across in a long time. Building on the podcast model described above, iTunes U has lectures from dozens of universities available completely free. What’s cool is that these are name brand schools like MIT, Cornell, and Stanford and the lectures are regular classroom lectures. Audio, video, lecture notes, and other resources are provided, and in some cases, entire programs are available. For all of us that are never going to have a chance to attend one of those schools, this is the next best thing. I’m probably never going to attend the Yale business school, but it’s really cool being able to download the content onto my iPod and take it with me. What’s even better is that I can mix and match courses from other schools as well – a course on the future of the Internet from Stanford, a lecture on money management from Griffith University, and conversational Spanish from Open University.

Experiencing these lectures through iTunes U doesn’t lead to for-

mal accreditation – you don’t get a Yale degree by listening to a few podcasts – but I don’t think that’s the point. Taking advantage of the Internet (and in this case an iPod) to learn something useful and interesting, without having to sacrifice precious working time and a bundle of money while doing it. I think that’s the point and one more reason why I love technology.

What kinds of things are you learning

about on the Internet? Let me know.

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