

Distance Learning: A Student's Perspective

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Abstract

Distance Learning is an important topic for educators interested in expanding educational opportunities. Many programs and courses are now available online, via time-compressed intersession formats, employing individualized study arrangements, and through video conferencing. The attributes of a quality distance learning experience are presented by a student who is also an educator in an attempt to open a dialog on course design and delivery methods.

This paper will review options for syllabus development and organization, delivery of course material, student attributes, and testing methodologies. Outside-the-classroom topics such as the need for faculty contact and support systems that provide the underlying infrastructure of a distance learning environment are also discussed. Finally, future research recommendations that seem to flow from the distance learning literature are outlined.

The world of education and the roles of faculty and students are ever changing. While distance learning is not a new concept, it is finally coming into its own with improvements in communication made possible through the use of technology. With recent advances in technology, we have an opportunity to increase access to education. It is interesting to note that distance education has been available in the U.S. for more than 150 years, primarily in the form of correspondence courses (Peek, 2000). The purpose of this paper is to examine distance learning delivery models, to evaluate the impact that distance learning has on student learning, and to detail the successful practices of both faculty and students in distance learning environments.

Delivery of Distance Education

According to Blotzer (2000), distance learning is any learning environment in which the teacher is physically separated from the student and information transfer occurs via some communication medium. This definition is broad and all-encompassing, and it captures three readily recognized models of distance learning course delivery:

- Remote Classroom—Synchronous Verbal Communication with Technology (High Tech, a.k.a. “The Sage on the Stage”)
- Web-Based Semi-Synchronous Typed Chat (Video, Online Lecture, and Intranet)
- Individualized Study—Asynchronous Written Communication with or without Computer Technology (E-mail, Fax, Snail Mail, a.k.a. “The Guide on the Side”)

While educators are currently embracing the Internet for the delivery of distance learning, it is a misconception that the Web must be the delivery medium. At the present time, video can not be reliably streamed on the Web, and sometimes even audio delivery is problematic. The synchronous delivery models have classes that typically meet at scheduled times via satellite or real-time chat. Distance learners prefer asynchronous delivery methods because of the lack of a firm schedule. The anytime and anyplace learning option is what draws many busy people with full-time employment to distance learning in the first place.

The asynchronous individualized study method is both student-oriented and student-centered by its very design and delivery. In the traditional classroom, the instructor lectures and is the source and mechanism for disseminating information (Markel 1999). In the distance learning environment, the instructor is the source of information and serves as a mediator between the student, the material, and the technology (Inman, Kerwin, and Mayes 1999). Students note many benefits of the individualized study model, including: flexibility—any time, any place study, ability to stay in their current job; higher productivity—no commute; and higher levels of interaction with members of the faculty. For the student who fits the distance learning profile, the advantages of distance education significantly outweigh the disadvantages. Some

disadvantages reported include computer literacy requirements, technological problems, unclear syllabi and expectations, communication delays and misunderstandings, and feelings of isolation. Each of these problems can be overcome by a well-designed course with a comprehensive syllabus coupled with a motivated and knowledgeable faculty member and adequate support systems.

Impact On Student Learning

Do students in distance learning courses perform better than their traditional classroom counterparts? In a study by Sonner (1999), the students with distance learning course credit performed better in the business management capstone (delivered on campus in a traditional format) than their traditional classroom peers. According to Sonner (1999), "The results indicated that those students who had earned credit in at least one distance learning class had a significantly higher average in the capstone class than did those students who had taken only traditional courses." Obviously replication of these findings is needed to further validate them, but they do show promise for students interested in business management courses delivered in a telecourse format. Sonner (1999) speculates that greater student involvement (hands-on learning) in the earlier courses delivered via distance learning provided a better foundation for taking the largely hands-on capstone class.

Regarding the issue of hands-on activities in distance learning courses, Raphael (1999) notes that greater emphasis is placed on hands-on learning, real-world problem solving, and critical thinking skills than on rote memorization in distance learning courses. Markel (1999) finds that "asynchronous or synchronous chat can, in fact, give students a more powerful voice than they had in their teacher-centered courses."

Other studies (Ellram and Easton 1999, Cheng, Lehman, and Armstrong 1991, and Phelps, Wells, Ashworth, and Hahn 1991) show no significant differences in pre- and post-scores on tests measuring course content and learning between distance learning students and traditional students delivered at the same institution at the same time. Therefore, from a student learning and course content mastery standpoint, the distance learning and traditional environment students seem to be performing equally. The delivery mode was shown to have

little or no impact on learning outcomes. However, caution must be exercised in evaluating these results because other confounding variables may be present that were not controlled: class size, expertise of the instructors, and quality and quantity of interactions.

Student Keys To Success

For students to be successful distance learners they need to be focused and disciplined self-starters (Berkey, Personal Communication, April 3, 2000). While technical literacy is obviously an important skill for the distance learning student, the availability of cohorts may be a more important factor in determining student success. In my own experiences, the presence of other students to discuss things with and rapid and detailed feedback from the instructor were critical factors to my learning and satisfaction with the distance education experience. The ability to manage time and meet deadlines while maintaining flexibility and a positive attitude are also noted by Berkey (2000). A willingness to ask questions and maintaining control of time and resources are also frequently noted traits of successful distance learners.

Faculty Member Keys To Success

According to Berkey (Personal Communication, April 3, 2000), “the successful faculty member (in an asynchronous distance learning environment) needs to understand the increased amount of time spent on the computer reacting to students, to understand technology/software and be able to learn to use it, have the ability to explain technology to students and talking students through until they too understand, and above all to remain flexible.” Ellram and Easton (1999) concur and further indicate that “it was important to have very clear learning objectives that could be reiterated several times to the students.”

A detailed syllabus is necessary for a distance learning course (Ellram and Easton 1999). According to Kearsley and Lynch (1996), ambiguity in the syllabus will result in student anxiety which is a barrier to effective learning. They indicate that “because of the uncertainty involved in a distance learning environment, students typically want all the details of a course to be very clearly defined at the beginning—much more so

than in a traditional class.” If ambiguity is present, the result will be frequent requests for clarification and increased workload for the instructor.

The impact on faculty members is summed up nicely by John Dory, professor of management at Pace University, as interviewed by Greco (1999):

First, we can no longer emphasize individual teaching content and styles as much. We need to become a coaching team that works as one. Second, he continues, we have to move from being the center of learning to being the facilitator of learning.

Future Research Recommendations

Distance learning research is still in its infancy; much work remains to determine the long-term viability of the various delivery models. Longitudinal research designs and studies are needed to strengthen, support, or refute the findings reported to date. Most current studies report findings comparing distance models of all types with traditional classes. Future researchers will want to consider comparing the various distance learning models with each other to determine if differences in student outcomes occur. In addition, considering the variability in raters and rating mechanisms, methods other than final course grades must be considered for the post-treatment measure.

Conclusion

My experiences with distance learning mirror the findings of Inman, et al. (1999) whose study focused on both instructors and students in distance learning environments. While I have found asynchronous distance learning courses very beneficial to me as a student, I would prefer to teach my classes face-to-face. The interaction with my students and seeing learning occur are the intangible benefits that attracted me to teaching in the first place. I suspect that future video technology that enables real-time, clear, two-way face-to-face interactions through actual video or virtual reality will blur the lines between the traditional classroom and distance learning approaches. However, as there are

obviously still students who feel the pull of the traditional classroom, distance learning will remain an augmentation to traditional education rather than a replacement for it, regardless of technological advances.

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Biography

Assistant professor Jeffrey C. Bauer coordinates the Health Care Management Program at the University of Cincinnati—Clermont. Prior to joining UC—Clermont, Bauer was a founding partner and President of Bauer and Taylor Management Consulting and held a variety of management positions with a market research firm, a public utility, and a medical office. He is currently a student in the Doctor of Business Administration program at the University of Sarasota. Bauer may be reached by e-mail at jeff.bauer@uc.edu.