OVERVIEW OF ON-LINE EDUCATION
And Suggestions for Implementation

By

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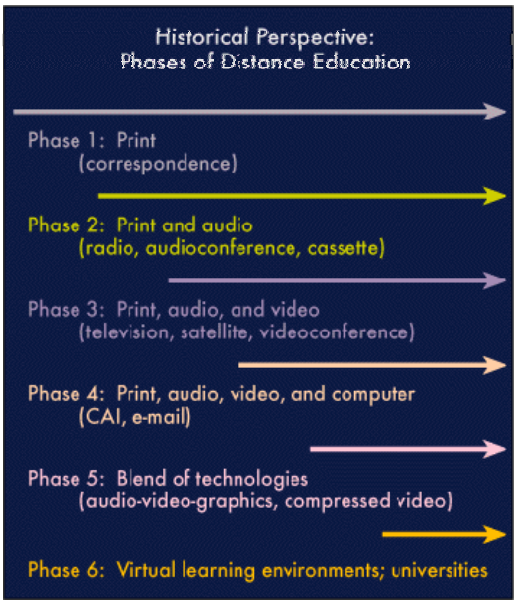
Distance education can trace its roots back, in one form or another, close to two hundred years. In the nineteenth century correspondence schools functioned to provide educational opportunity for learners unable to attend classes. They provided a systematic dialogue between instructor and student mediated by the postal service. Today, advancement in technology and the cognitive sciences have led to revolutionary change in educational program delivery. Modern educators are moving from employing the written word and lecture to utilizing audio and visual mediums of ever increasing sophistication. In addition to this desire to employ technologies of increased efficiency educational institutions like Herzing College are committed to expanding student access to learning tools. This phenomenon also requires that instructors employ innovative methods to increase student/teacher interactivity.

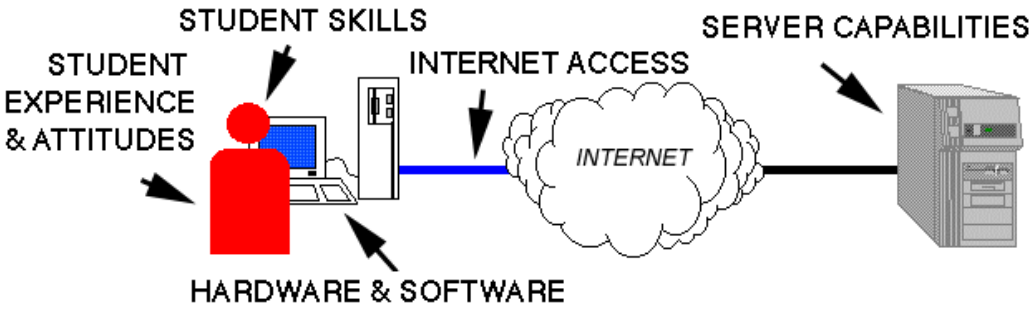
With the advent of the personal computer in the late 1970s and the emergence of the Internet in the 1980s, distance education now has emerged as a system of technologies and methods commensurate with complex learning levels only associated with high quality face-to-face education. Finally, it is important to note that as instructional technology advances and its capabilities are better exploited by innovative instructors, distance education and learning technology will become fully integrated into the mix of educational tools daily utilized in program delivery. In this respect, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan "the media is the message".



(*From the University of Texas Distance Education Primer*)

LEARNING VARIABLES IMPACTING EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

It is important that instructors keep in mind the variables of learning that impact the success of on-line education. As one can see from the following diagram, there are a number of factors directly impacting successful on-line programming. One needs to remember that individual instructors have limited impact on each factor. One also needs to be constantly aware of the following phenomenon…instructing at a distance tends to create a situation in which systemic inadequacies constantly emerge. These include: lack of student computing skills; inadequate or incompatible hardware and software; limitation of Internet access and/or bandwidth; and/or myriad other unforeseen problems make distance education a challenging venue for learning.



(From the Center for Virtual Learning, Parkland Community College)

STATEMENT REGARDING ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT TEACHERS AND LEARNERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Institutions must believe in the value of distance education to meet student needs. The value of DE is directly related to assumptions we hold about teachers and learners:

Assumptions about DE Instructors:

1. DE educators are competent teachers who are not hiding behind the technology.
2. DE cannot replace the experience of a live instructor.
3. Students learn as well and as much from distance learning classes as from traditional classes.
4. Instructors cannot simply "can" their existing courses. The Normal face2face Course Outline and design must be modified to make the DE experience meaningful.
5. Distance learning courses do not create less work for instructors than traditional courses.

Assumptions about DE Students DE:

1. Students do not learn from the technology. They learn from the correct use of technology as tools for helping competent instructors build learning experiences.
2. Students do not take DE courses to try to "cheat" the system, but rather to increase their ability to learn within a framework that meets their needs.
3. Students that enroll in DE courses may not know what to expect and may not know what kind of technological competence they need to be successful
4. Students that enroll in DE courses may not be familiar with the services, requirements, and policies of institutions providing this service.

(Adapted from the Center for Virtual Learning, Parkland Community College)

OBSERVATIONS ON LEARNING

In order to foster on-line learning instructors must keep in mind the following observations:

- ✓ Learning, no matter the form it takes or the format used to facilitate it, is a process of pursuing meaning. Concise, well thought out goals enhance student learning and facilitate meaning making.

- ✓ On-line educators should foster an open climate of communications. Freely stated expressions by students and their teaching faculty exchanged without judgment or punishment creates an environment of learning conductive to change.

- ✓ Sufficient feedback promotes self-evaluation of individual progress and the level of quality students must achieve to be successful.

- ✓ Robust interaction between instructor and student provides the rich cognitive environment necessary for new information to become integrated into student learning behaviors.

- ✓ The greater the level of student self-awareness (of their strengths, limitations and affective states of mind) the greater the internal motivation to learn. Instructors need to facilitate a learning environment that critically challenges students to recognize themselves as learners within a dynamic educational environment.

- ✓ Feed student curiosity. Create an environment where cross-fertilization of ideas stimulates new and novel ideas to emerge.

- ✓ Work to summarize on-line discussions in ways that solidify student understanding. A useful method is to periodically paraphrase student discourse in ways that reposition the dialogue back onto expected learning outcomes.

- ✓ Finally, constantly assess and evaluate student learning in order to continuously improve course methodologies and outcomes.

LEVEL OF INSTRUCTOR COMPETENCE

Overview the Expected Knowledge an Instructor should possess for On-line Education

Instructors desirous of developing and teaching on-line courses need to acquire the technological proficiency to allow them to:

- ✓ Develop and modify web pages

- ✓ Work with a variety of word-processing software and remain aware of the impact of its use on its learning platform.

- ✓ Transfer/zip/manipulate files

- ✓ Troubleshoot student problems with the assistance of the platform Helpdesk.

- ✓ Work with video and audio files, as necessary
- ✓ Stay current with the newest developments in educational technology

STAGES OF COURSE DEVELOPMENT

The Pre-Term Stage

This stage finalizes course content. Details specific to course are set and its place in the program cycle checked. This stage may overlap the development stage, and possibly the term experience stage; it begins when you start finalizing details about course for a specific semester.

1. Review all course materials for accuracy and currency.
2. Campus administration should schedule a student orientation session, including date, time, and location.
   - ✓ Orientations have been shown to increase retention and success of students enrolled.
   - ✓ Schedule the orientation before the drop/add deadline.
     This allows students the opportunity to switch to an on-campus course if they realize distance learning is not for them.
3. Create the syllabus for the course
   - ✓ The learning system provides faculty with both training and the necessary manual and support information to aid in redesigning the Corporate Course Outline.
   - ✓ The final syllabus must include, at a minimum, scheduled chat / discussion requirements, orientation and testing schedule, textbook information, study guide (if used), homework assignments, and any other information deemed necessary by the faculty member.
4. Design and develop testing materials.
   - ✓ Determine the number of required written tests per course.
   - ✓ Test all data (URLs etc.) from the text, study guide, and any other course components required in syllabus.

The Term Experience Stage

This stage involves the use of the course during one semester/term/unit. It begins the first day of class (the orientation day, if you have one). During this stage, you should expect to spend at least as much time running the course as you would a traditional classroom based course (and probably more for new classes or newly adapted classes).

- ✓ Hold the orientation session.
- ✓ Communicate regularly with students.

- ✓ Refer all requests from disabled students for special services to 17447.
- ✓ Give students access to you via the telephone, fax number, and E-mail.
- ✓ A useful option to maintain contact with students is to keep the regular telephone hours and publish them in syllabus.
    - ❖ Use the 150 minutes per week you would have spent in the classroom to phone, correspond via email, and otherwise communicate with students.
    - ❖ Spread the time out over multiple days and portions of the day. (For example, try not to schedule all time during mornings.)
    - ❖ Return telephone calls promptly. Telephone tag may seem to be a nuisance but even a voice message lets students know you are interested or concerned. That contact can really make a difference.
    - ❖ If you are using the college voice-mail system or an answering machine at home, change message to include a request that all distance learners leave a name, number, and best time to call.
- ✓ Be proactive.
    - ❖ Contact students who haven't called you or taken a test.
    - ❖ Sometimes a show of concern from an instructor is all it takes to motivate a distance learner.
    - ❖ Research has shown that faculty interaction with distance learners promotes course completion and student success. Stay in touch with students.
- ✓ Be a patient and active listener. Students may have difficulty explaining their problems on the telephone, or may be embarrassed asking a question of an instructor they haven't met.
- ✓ Give students the same advantages in the distance learning courses as those in the on-campus courses (i.e. practice tests, study tips, etc.).
- ✓ Provide feedback to students.
    - ❖ Grade all tests and return test results to students within ten working days of test date.
    - ❖ Grade/review all assignments and send prompt feedback to students.
- ✓ Achieve consensus between stakeholders (students and campus administrators) on any activity that crosses campus boundaries.
- ✓ When using interviews or class activities that involve students contacting individuals for information use the Herzing College Consent Form (p. 9) that is included in this manual. It will ensure compliance to Herzing College protocols for research involving human subjects.

- ✓ Maintain accurate records. Keep track of contacts with students as well as test and assignment grades.
- ✓ Implement assessment plan to evaluate course for improvements in the future.

ASSESSMENT

Summative vs. Formative Evaluation

Summative evaluation is used to evaluate an entire course upon completion. An example is the standard end-of-course survey. Another form of summative evaluation of student performance is the comprehensive final exam. These evaluative forms are useful to gather student's impressions of the course as a whole, or to evaluate student's general performance with the entire course's materials.

Formative evaluation is used to evaluate the course while it is in progress. Examples of formative evaluation are end-of-chapter exercises. Formative evaluation is useful to gather information regarding specific sections of course; specific aspects that may change over time, or aspects you adjust in response to the feedback.

Institutions usually require that various forms of summative evaluation be filled out at the end of the course. Institutions expect that instructors regularly question students throughout course to see evaluate the course and its associated materials. This will provide valuable material for later revisions of course.

(The Stages of Course Development are directly adapted from "A Template for Converting Classroom Courses to Distributed, Asynchronous Courses" (http://www.iat.unc.edu/publications/roberts/template.html), by Lowell H. Roberts at the Institute for Academic Technology (http://www.unc.edu/cit/).

STUDENT CONCERNS

Learning Environment

It is essential that from the beginning of course to its end you have a coherent approach to teaching and a fully fleshed out set of behavioral norms that you expect from on-line students. Regardless of approach to teaching (teacher-centered, learner-centered, group or community-centered, or technology-centered) you should make clear in both syllabus and lessons the environment of discourse that will drive learning. The literature of on-line education clearly notes that the key to success in facilitating on-line instruction hinges on all stakeholders (teachers, students and administrators) achieving a high level of clarity in defining learning expectations. Nurturing this environment requires:

1. A rich and diverse level of interaction between teacher to learner and student to student;
2. A commitment on the part of all participants to maintain an open and trustful relationship between each other; and
3. A high level of commitment by all stakeholders to think of themselves as learners dedicated to maintaining a stimulating and diverse environment of inquiry.

On-line teaching is a unique and challenging learning environment. Ability to communicate with students will be challenged constantly so eliminating barriers to communication and the innate variables of behavior that block learning will be made difficult because of the distance between you and learners.

Characteristics of Successful Distance Learners
Research in on-line education that successful students exhibit the following characteristics:

1. They are highly motivated to learn.
2. They possess excellent time management skills
3. They are not passive learners. If they have questions or concerns that impact their success they assert themselves.
4. Along with being assertive, successful students also tend to be independent. They blossom if left alone.
5. They are flexible and can handle change easily.

Retention
On-line education has historically high levels of attrition. The reasons vary from a perception that on-line students, being older with more family responsibilities then traditional students find themselves over their heads and forced to drop their course. Another school of thought contends that life change (divorce, job change, etc.) force people to leave their on-line class. Others contend that students get "lost in cyberspace". http://chronicle.com/free/v46/i23/23a00101.htm

The main concern that we, as on-line educators need to have is to personalize our interactions with students so that the feel that they are an integral and important part of their class. Some useful techniques include: phone contact with students to talk with them about their needs and concerns; pictures of self and class members embedded in the course; and information that re-creates some of the intimacy you find most appealing about classroom based, face-to-face learning.

In the end make on-line learning FUN!