

Best Practices for Designing Distance Education and the U–M–T Approach

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education is defined by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (Schlosser & Simonson, 2006) as:

Institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors.

Distance education has two major components, distance teaching and distance learning. Distance teaching is the efforts of the educational institution to design, develop and deliver instructional experiences to the distant student so that learning may occur. Education and distance education is comprised of teaching and learning. This article focuses on distance teaching.

BACKGROUND: QUALITY INSTRUCTION FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education has been practiced for more than 150 years, passing through three phases: first, correspondence study, with its use of print-based instructional and communication media; second, the rise of the distance teaching universities and the use of analog mass media; and third, the widespread integration of distance education elements into most forms of education, and characterized by the use of digital instructional and communication technologies. Peters (2002) has suggested that “the swift, unforeseen, unexpected and unbelievable achievements of information and communication technologies” will require “the design of new formats of learning and teaching and [will cause]

powerful and far-reaching structural changes of the learning-teaching process” (p. 20). Peters’ views are well-accepted, but there is also consensus that the most fruitful way of identifying elements of quality instruction may be to re-examine “first principles” of distance education and mediated instruction.

Perhaps the first of the “first principles” is the recognition that distance education is a system, and that the creation of successful courses—and the program of which they are a part—requires a “systems” approach. Hirumi (2000) identified a number of systems approaches but noted a concept common to all: that “a system is a set of interrelated components that work together to achieve a common purpose” (p. 90). He described a system that involved the efforts of faculty, staff, administrators, and students, and consisted of eight key components: curriculum, instruction, management and logistics, academic services, strategic alignment, professional development, research and development, and program evaluation.

Bates (in Foley, 2003) proposed 12 “golden rules” for the use of technology in education. These “rules” offer guidance in the broader areas of designing and developing distance education:

1. Good teaching matters. Quality design of learning activities is important for all delivery methods.
2. Each medium has its own aesthetic. Therefore professional design is important.
3. Education technologies are flexible. They have their own unique characteristics but successful teaching can be achieved with any technology.
4. There is no “super-technology.” Each has its strengths and weaknesses; therefore they need to be combined (an integrated mix).
5. Make all four media available to teachers and learners. Print, audio, television, and computers.

6. Balance variety with economy. Using many technologies makes design more complex and expensive; therefore limit the range of technologies in a given circumstance.
7. Interaction is essential.
8. Student numbers are critical. The choice of a medium will depend greatly on the number of learners reached over the life of a course.
9. New technologies are not necessarily better than old ones.
10. Teachers need training to use technology effectively.
11. Teamwork is essential. No one person has all the skills to develop and deliver a distance-learning course, therefore, subject matter experts, instructional designers, and media specialists are essential on every team.
12. Technology is not the issue. How and what we want the learners to learn is the issue and technology is a tool. (p. 833)

Another source of best practices are the criteria used in developing the World Bank's Global Development Learning Network. When designing this network "results of more than 30 years of research on adult learning were applied to the distance learning programs" (Foley, 2003; p. 832). The criteria included:

1. They are based on clearly established learning needs and built around succinct statements of outcome.
2. They are based on a variety of teaching and learning strategies and methods that are activity based....
3. Effective distance learning materials are experiential...they address the learner's life experience....
4. Quality distance learning programs are participatory in that they emphasize the involvement of the learner in all facets of program development and delivery
5. Successful distance learning programs are interactive and allow frequent opportunities for participants to engage in a dialogue with subject matter experts and other learners.
6. Learner support systems are an integral part of any successful distance-learning program. (p. 832)

Still another source of best practices is the The Indiana Partnership for Statewide Education (IPSE; 2000) that proposed the following set of 18 "Guiding Principles for Faculty in Distance Learning:" These guidelines cover the range of system components including program planning, faculty support, assessment plans and services for learners.

- Distance learning courses will be carefully planned to meet the needs of students within unique learning contexts and environments.
- Distance learning programs are most effective when they include careful planning and consistency among courses.
- It is important for faculty who are engaged in the delivery of distance learning courses to take advantage of appropriate professional developmental experiences.
- Distance learning courses will be periodically reviewed and evaluated to ensure quality, consistency with the curriculum, currency, and advancement of the student learning outcomes.
- Faculty will work to ensure that incentives and rewards for distance learning course development and delivery are clearly defined and understood.
- An assessment plan is adapted or developed in order to achieve effectiveness, continuity and sustainability of the assessment process. Course outcome assessment activities are integrated components of the assessment plan.
- Learning activities are organized around demonstrable learning outcomes embedded in course components including; course delivery mode, pedagogy, content, organization, and evaluation.
- Content developed for distance learning courses will comply with copyright law.
- Faculty members involved in content development will be aware of their institution's policies with regard to content ownership.
- The medium/media chosen to deliver courses and/or programs will be pedagogically effectual, accessible to students, receptive to different learning styles, and sensitive to the time and place limitations of the students.
- The institution provides appropriate support services to distance students that are equivalent to services provided for its on-campus students.

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