

Distance Learning Essentials

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INTRODUCTION

Time and space no longer separate learners from their instructors. The emergence of distance-learning technologies, especially the Internet and networking technologies connect learners with their instructors. Instructional resources such as training courses, instructional job aids, reference materials, training guides, and lesson plans, as well as teachers, trainers, and other learners that were traditionally available for traditional classroom settings are now attainable via distance-learning technologies by anyone, anywhere, and anytime. As the growth of new information in the digital age accelerates (Gagne, Wager, Golas, & Keller, 2005), the debate revolving around distance-learning essentials has become even more heated among the academic circles. One side of the debate, represented by senior faculty, indicates that distance learning is inferior to traditional classroom learning because it lacks the necessary “face-to-face” interaction. The other side of the debate, representing current researchers and junior faculty, contends that distance learning is no better or no worse than traditional learning, given the fact that distance learning offers both advantages and disadvantages. The same thing is true about traditional classroom learning, which also offers benefits and disadvantages. Regardless of the debate, distance learning is revolutionizing education and training, along with so many other aspects of our lives (Gagne, et al., 2005). Open any job ads for a faculty position and there must be a description requiring a potential faculty member to be able to use distance-learning technologies. Those faculty members who cannot use distance-learning technologies are truly at a disadvantage nowadays.

Indeed, today’s academic institutions are in transition because of distance-learning technologies (Wang, 2005). As colleges continue to attract 62% of high school graduates onto their campuses immediately following graduation, larger numbers of so-called nontraditional students also are seeking degrees (Hammonds, Jackson, DeGeroge, & Morris, 1997). According to Twigg (1994), traditional undergraduates represent fewer than

one fourth of the students on college campuses. In a similar fashion, the most recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey of adult education participation indicates that the overall of participation in formal educational activities was 46% (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 56). This rate does not include those nontraditional learners who participate in informal educational activities (those that do not involve an instructor). To accommodate the learning needs of nontraditional learners, more and more institutions of higher learning have begun to use distance-learning technologies to deliver courses at a distance as well as to enhance educational programs that are delivered on campus (Wang, 2005, p. 36). Like other forms of learning, distance learning is geared toward intellectual growth and development (Merriam, 2004). Some background information regarding distance learning will assist both educators and learners in better understanding distance-learning essentials, hence strategic approaches in distance learning.

BACKGROUND

Distance learning, with its roots in correspondence education, started 150 years ago in the United States (Gibson, 2006). At about the same time, correspondence education surfaced in other parts of the world. Later, in the 1940s, 1950s, and even 1960s, radio and TV broadcasts were used to deliver courses to learners in other countries. For example, distance education has appeared in eight types of higher education in China:

- Radio/TV universities
- Correspondence departments of regular institutions
- Evening colleges attached to regular institutions
- Workers’ colleges
- Independent study examination for higher education
- In-service colleges for administrative staff

- In-service teacher-training colleges
- Peasants' colleges (Yu & Xu, 1988).

However, in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Internet grew at a rapid pace (Gagne, et al., 2005). The Internet was originally designed in the early 1960s by the U.S. Department of Defense, and the network was widely used in the 1980s by the military and universities connected through telephone lines (Gagne, et al., 2005). By 2002, the Internet had become an international platform with over 680 million users (Global Reach, 2003). Even universities in developing countries began to deliver courses via the Internet. The Internet has truly become the chief delivery mode of distance learning around the globe. It is not surprising to anyone nowadays if a university puts one third of its courses online. In response to this rapid development of distance-learning technologies, giant online universities have emerged in the United States. As noted by Bash (2003, p. 50), "in 2002, the University of Phoenix, part of the Apollo Group, saw its enrollment surpass 100,000 students—making it the largest institution of higher learning in the United States."

As distance-learning technologies continue to revolutionize education and training, researchers constantly ask what may be the strategic approaches of distance learning in order to ensure learning at a distance. The following section attempts to address distance-learning essentials. Distance-learning essentials are meant to guide both instructors' and learners' action in the distance-learning environments. Without a better understanding of distance-learning essentials, teaching and learning in the distance-learning environment will lead to mindless activism. Mindless activism will not result in active learning. To put this in plain language, mindless activism will not lead to learners' intellectual growth and development. Therefore, it is imperative that both instructors and learners familiarize themselves with distance-learning essentials and strategic approaches. In the next section, distance-learning essentials and strategic approaches are used interchangeably.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

Like traditional learning, distance learning also uses strategies such as decentralization and centralization.

Some institutions encourage their faculty to apply decentralization while other institutions encourage their faculty to apply centralization, depending on an institution's vision regarding distance learning. A vision statement addresses expectations in terms of the ideal way in which decisions will be made and how the distance-learning organization will operate (Gagne, et al., 2005). Decentralization via distance learning is characterized by syllabus-based projects, learning activities, and teaching tools that are designed to create collaborative learning environments and relevant experience for students, whereas centralization is characterized by a mostly teacher-centered, information-based and test-driven instructional format (Wang & Kreysa, 2006).

It is generally agreed that those who are involved in helping learners learn via distance-learning technologies need to develop knowledge of learning theories and instructional strategies. No two people learn in exactly the same manner, and instruction must vary in order to ensure active learning at a distance. Decentralization features student-centered learning, whereas centralization features teacher-directed learning. Other approaches that work well with decentralization are constructivism and problem-based learning (PBL) models. According to March (1995), constructivism suggests that truly comprehensive understanding of a complex topic comes from learners stitching together the facts, relationships, perspectives, variations, and non-examples from an array of contextually rich inputs. Brookfield (2000) explains the constructivist approach as focusing on helping learners realize their own experience in a collaborative but critical way. Distance learning is enhanced by problem-based learning models (PBL) that differ from lecture-based classes, and are usually predicted on a great deal of self-directed learning and collaboration. Learners are supposed to teach themselves what they need to know to solve a problem (Duch, 2005). Decentralization characterized by constructivist approaches and PBL models allows learners to take a greater responsibility for learning (Golas, 2000) by actively creating their own learning, and relating the information to real-world problems (National Research Council, 1997; Siegel & Kirkley, 1997). Decentralization will not be possible without a thorough understanding of adult learning theory, where learners are expected to voluntarily enter an educational activity with a life-centered, task-centered, or problem-centered orientation to learning (Long, 2004).

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