

# Distance Learning Specialists

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## INTRODUCTION

As Rhoda (2005) notes, “advances in technology have transformed the way in which the academy offers its curricula” (p. 149). Further, the proliferation of advanced technologies for teaching and learning has been said to help provide better access, convenience, and flexibility as a way to support learners’ educational opportunities (Conceicao, 2006). Nowadays, simple physical separation between the teacher and learner is no longer an effective way of describing distance education. Scholars try to define distance education from every imaginable angle they can think of due to the nature of innovative technology. For example, King (2006, p. 16) defines distance education as any of the following:

- The working mother in rural Nebraska completing her bachelor’s degree online through her local state university while her children sleep at night.
- The single young man in New York City studying for the GED exam via public television and telephone tutoring.
- The midcareer business woman executive pursuing her doctorate in education via a hybrid online and residency program in order to change careers.
- The retired bus driver engaged in a collaborative Webinar for his class through a University of Beijing class on the Eastern perspective of global issues.

Although distance education has successfully increased higher education opportunities, an ongoing research question in this field has been whether advances in technology can result in quality distance education programs. Some of the easy solutions point to such factors as course design, support services, and interactions, as well as administrative practices that can encourage students to fulfill their educational goals. Much of the research related to distance education has focused on the changing role of the instructor, teaching

tasks, faculty planning, design, and delivery. However, research on what has contributed to the changing role of the distance learning specialist is limited. Behind the changing role of the distance learning specialist lies a plethora of pedagogical and andragogical issues associated with the quality distance education programs. Yet one line of scholars are familiar with pedagogy, the art and science of teaching children; the other line of scholars are well versed in andragogy, the art and science of helping adults. Very few researchers realize that it is these pedagogical and andragogical principles that define the changing role of the distance learning specialist. And the changing role of the distance learning educators ultimately leads to quality distance education programs. Technologies alone can only enhance quality instruction. It is the distance learning specialists that are the deciding factors of quality distance learning programs.

## BACKGROUND

Critics assert that online learning and even classroom-based technology-enhanced instruction either misses or somehow compromises essential human interaction (Brown, 2006, p. 97). It is true that it is in relationship with teachers (others) that we learn. However, both critics and scholars pay less attention to either pedagogical or andragogical principles that are the driving forces behind the teaching of distance education specialists. Although assumptions about teaching children (pedagogy) evolved between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries in the monastic and cathedral schools of Europe out of teachers’ experience in teaching basic skills to young boys (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), it is adult learners that have enjoyed distance education since its early inception in the 1800s. Therefore, principles regarding how adults learn and how they should be taught over the information highway need to be investigated. Most Western scholars seem to buy into Rogers’ (1951) hypothesis in that we cannot teach an adult learner directly; we can only facilitate his/her learning. Rog-

ers based this hypothesis on his personality theory that “every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he/she is the center” and “the organism (the adult learner) reacts to the field as it is experienced and perceived.” This hypothesis requires a shift in focus from what the teacher does to what is happening in the student. In its modern sense, scholars have translated this paradigm shift into “distance learning specialist moving from the *sage on the stage* to the *guide on the side*” (Brown, 2006, p. 102). In the contemporary literature of distance education, the term “facilitator” instead of the “guide on the side” is found, no matter what type of technology is used (as cited in Conceicao, 2006, p. 27). At any rate, this is the actual application of Rogers’ (1951) hypothesis derived from his personality theory.

Other scholars took Rogers’ hypothesis one step further by using analogies. It is true in this information age, technology provides multiple access points to knowledge. Scholars’ use of analogies is greatly justified. For example, Jarvis (2002) argued that teachers including distance learning specialists are not the “fount of all wisdom” (p. 20). Based on his application of Rogers’ hypothesis, distance learning specialists no longer:

- Have a monopoly on transmitting knowledge;
- Determine or legislate on matters of knowledge but they may be interpreters of different systems of knowledge;
- Deal with truth but they certainly teach truths;
- Teach with unchanging knowledge, but now they deal with scientific knowledge that is transient;
- Are confined to the classroom, but like the ancient teachers, they may have to function where their learners are;
- Teach only theoretical knowledge but now they also help learners acquire practical knowledge;
- Can assume that their learners know nothing about the subjects that they teach, but must learn to build on knowledge acquired by their learners from a wide variety of sources.

This analysis of Rogers’ (1951) hypothesis seems to have addressed critics’ concern regarding human interaction. A closer examination of Jarvis’ (2002) analogy reveals a different kind of human interaction between distance learning specialists and adult learners other than the kind of interaction critics have expected.

## DEFINING THE ROLE OF DISTANCE LEARNING SPECIALISTS

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Numerous scholars (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Conceicao-Runlee & Reilly, 1999; Easton, 2003) have tried to define the role of distance learning specialists from different angles. None of their definitions deviate too much from Rogers’ (1951) hypothesis derived from his personality theory. Conceicao-Runlee and Reilly’s (1999) study describes the role of distance learning specialists as facilitators who move from the center of instruction to the sidelines. Anderson et al. (2001) described the role of distance learning specialists as designer of the educational experience, facilitator, and cocreator of a social environment, and subject matter expert. Upon the basis of how scholars define the role of distance learning specialists, the literature on distance education characterizes teaching as learner-centered, that is, the teaching activity focuses on the learner and learning. Brown (2006) calls this a focus on moving from teacher and content-centered to learning-centered instruction.

It was Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2002) who identified three faculty roles: cognitive, affective, and managerial. The cognitive role is connected with the mental processes of learning, information storage, and thinking. The affective role is influenced by the relationships between students, faculty, and the classroom environment. The managerial role relates to class and course management. Evidently, this was the first time the relationship between students and faculty was discussed. However, Wang’s (2005) study took one step further this teacher-learner relationship. He argues that it is either the helping relationship (andragogical principles) or the directing relationship (pedagogical principles) in the context of distance learning settings that leads, in Mezirow’s (1990, 1991, 2000) terms, to adult learners’ critical reflection. Wang’s (2005) research indicated that the roles of distance learning specialists must correspond with Grow’s (1991) stages in learning autonomy. It must be pointed out that the order of learners’ stages of learning may not be sequential: some adult learners may not necessarily go through stage 1 and stage 2 before they reach stage 4. Some may not even go through all four stages. Table 1 illustrates the corresponding roles of distance learning specialists as determined by learners’ stages in learning autonomy.

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