

## Chapter 15

# Methodologies for Assessing the Distance Learner

**Learning Objectives.** Traditional evaluations methodologies are not always sufficient to properly assess effective online instruction. There is a need for student evaluations specifically designed to provide online instructors with feedback about the effectiveness of their technology-based teaching practices. As more instructors move their courses into the online environment, the one consistent question remains, “How do I know that my distance students are learning?”

Techniques to assess learner mastery of content material are as diverse as the various formats of distance courses. The traditional assessment strategies (e.g., multiple choice, true/false, essays, etc.) continue to remain an option in a virtual learning environment. They are easily administered through the various learning management systems (LMS) and nearly every LMS has a test module that supports online examinations. Once created, these objective tests can incorporate multimedia (i.e., video, audio) for a more visual assessment. Other assessment strategies commonly used in the traditional classroom can also be easily converted to the online environment such as online discussions (i.e., chat rooms and discussion boards) and submission of written papers, essays, or reports (via drop boxes). Additionally, more advanced distance educators are able to include simulations, activities, group projects, virtual case studies, collaborative presentations or reports, and role-playing. The possibilities for assessing distance learning are limited only by the imagination (and sometimes by the wallet).

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Distance learners often overlap with adult learners since they often prefer to be involved in their own assessment using strategies that emulate real-world situations or are clearly relevant to their personal situation. So, in effect as well as in practice, the combination of techniques discussed in previous chapters will be considered here as well to expand our understanding of assessment techniques for the distance learner. This chapter will introduce many of these advanced assessment strategies. And, as a result, readers should become familiar with:

- The fundamentals of virtual assessment for the distance learner.
- Technology tools for assessing the distance learner.
- The fundamentals of the virtual learning outcome form with respect to text-based, visual-based, and web-based materials.

**Lesson Plan Template.** Refer to **Appendix C, Distance Learner Lesson Plan Template** as the chapter discusses **Focus on Outcomes** as depicted in Figure 1.

## INTRODUCTION

More than 73 percent of adults in the United States and 79 percent of college students reported that Internet use has had a positive impact on their learning experience (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2002 and 2006). As a direct result, more universities are turning to distance-based instruction in response to the changing demands and expanding needs of their students for variety in instructional delivery. In addition to offering online courses, higher education is faced with students who also expect to use the Internet to participate in other kinds of learning opportunities (e.g., service learning, coop and internship experiences, and leadership). Online technologies also contribute to face-to-face desktop video collaborations, provide stock market (class-related and otherwise) updates, offer a forum for purchasing goods and services online (e.g., books, airline tickets, etc.), supply current weather information, sort through available health information, and conduct online research.

As a result of such rising expectations on the part of students and teachers, distance learning has matured rapidly (some say exponentially) from its experimental beginnings to a brand of instructional teaching strategy in its own right. Nearly all colleges and universities offer some form of distance or distributed learning and those who are yet unable have joined consortia of online providers who offer available seats in their courses to partner institutions whose students need the flexible and increased range of options to pursue their academic dreams (OCICU, 2008).

Today's college students have literally grown up expecting everything to be available online and, indeed, the number and quality of online options has grown. Many institutions are developing fully online programs designed to meet student demand and, simultaneously, strategic goals and social responsibilities (e.g., consider the impact of gasoline prices on online enrollment). The debate whether online education is as good as face-to-face instruction has long since been answered by educators and researchers. The focus now is on how to better prepare and support students and faculty in the online environment and how to measure learning outcomes when instructing or learning at a distance.

Distance learning combines many of the characteristics of good assessment found in both traditional and adult learning as mentioned in the previous two chapters. For example, validity and reliability are stable attributes regardless of the instructional modality. Good assessment always has a clear purpose,

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