Chapter 17
Digital Connectionsand Learning Styles

Julie Davis
Clarkson University and Texas Tech University, USA

Letitia Harding
University of the Incarnate Word and Texas Tech University, USA

Deanna Mascle
Morehead State University and Texas Tech University, USA

ABSTRACT

Online or e-learning is increasingly becoming an integral part of education and training programs both in the academic world and in industry. This chapter includes a study which examines the ways in which faculty and students in an online Ph.D. program plan, adapt, and correlate coursework, teaching, study habits, and networking practices to accommodate all types of learning styles and to ensure that students feel part of a community of learners. The findings indicate that distance education should incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous instruction, personal and individual contact, a proper balance between the specific demands of the material to be covered and the learning styles of the students, and a willingness to adjust and modify delivery methods in order to obtain course or training objectives.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of distance education is not new. Indeed, many institutions in myriad countries boast programs of distant learning that go back decades and, in some instances, more than a century. And, until very recently, the distance student was exactly that—more often than not studying alone, enjoying little or no contact with fellow learners. The Open University in the United Kingdom, for example, which admitted its first students in 1971, delivered its early courses through television and radio broadcasts, home experiment kits, set textbooks, and carefully produced study booklets and audiotapes. Students typed assignments (using typewriters and carbon paper), posted them to tutors for grading, and waited for their return. Face-to-face tutorials were occasionally available and some courses mandated attendance at a summer school, but for the most part, students remained isolated. As communications technology has developed, however, distance education has morphed into online or e-learning, and

today's distance student has an arsenal of tools to aid both learning and communication with faculty and other students.

In the May 2002 editorial of *T.H.E. Journal*, Dr. Sylvia Charp quoted the International Data Corporation's (IDC's) findings that "e-learning will overtake classroom-based instruction as the primary method by 2004" (p. 1). And while IDC's figures have yet to be realized, educational and professional training programs, both in the United States and abroad, are increasingly utilizing online environments to support and deliver classes and programs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 56% of all two-year and four-year Title IV-eligible, degree-granting institutions during the 12-month period of 2000-2001 offered distance education courses in various capacities (Tabs 2003). For the 2006-2007 period, that number had increased to 66%. (U.S. Department of Education. Fast Facts). Students enrolled in these programs come from many walks of life and backgrounds, providing challenges to teaching outside the traditional face-to-face environment. In order to provide the best possible educational experience for this disparate body of students, educators must understand and maximize the benefits of the teaching tools available to them. Equally important is the need for students to recognize the innate differences between distance education programs and those offered in a face-to-face environment, and then to assess their own ability to adapt accordingly. Students must also learn to recognize that not all distance education programs are the same – not only do the instructors and content vary but so do the instructional format and technology.

New technologies and the ability to provide programs online are also providing new markets for distance education. Consequently, we are seeing a rise in the number and type of institutions offering students opportunities to participate in programs from remote locations, including war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. And while this can be extremely alluring to both institutions and students, as the former can reach new markets and the latter have more convenient and often cheaper choices, the danger is that some schools will rush to adopt the concept without due planning and preparation. The provision of online programs does not mean that everyone is suited to them. Equally, not every program is suited to every individual. Research has proven conclusively, and not surprisingly, that not all students are the same; their life experiences are different, as are their needs and learning styles. It is understood that, as in face-to-face programs, students' learning styles play a significant role in their level of success, but when instructors and students are in the same physical location, problems may be more apparent and, therefore, easier to identify and rectify. And while it is true that it is the students themselves who must assess their own needs and learning styles, and connect with programs whose style, or diversity of styles, fits those needs, little is really known about the relationship between virtual delivery methods of professional and social communication and student learning styles.

In the corporate world, distance education methods and technologies can also be employed to provide cost effective and efficient media for employee education and training. But while students in an education scenario can choose programs that are suited to their learning styles, corporate employees may not be afforded that luxury. Thus it is imperative that employers are cognizant of the diversity of training program formats available to them, and of the various learning styles of their employees.

When people think about using virtual environments for educational purposes, it is often the case that they immediately turn their thoughts to Second Life with its avatars operating in their virtual world. Virtual communities comprise, however, all types of people using a diversity of virtual environments to learn and to network with others. Rheingold (2000) offers a broad overview of the variety of tools that can be utilized for professional and personal education and network-

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