



Chapter VII

Alternative Delivery Mechanisms in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Technology is providing a positive impact on delivery mechanisms employed in distance education at the university level. Some institutions are incorporating distance education as a way to extend the classroom. Other institutions are investigating new delivery mechanisms that support a revised perspective on education. These latter institutions are revising their processes for interacting with students and taking a more “learner-centered” approach to the delivery of education. This chapter discusses the impact of technology on the delivery mechanisms employed in distance education. A framework is proposed here that presents a description of alternative modes of generic delivery mechanisms. It is suggested that those institutions that adopt a delivery mechanism employing an asynchronous mode can gain the most benefit from technology. This approach seems to represent the only truly innovative use of technology in distance education. The approach creates a student-oriented environment while maintaining high levels of interaction, both of which are factors that contribute to student satisfaction with their overall educational experience.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are in the information dissemination business, and computers are changing the way they work. Accordingly, "... while IT can offer new experiences and a diminished dependence on rigid University structures, the social aspect of learning remains a vital component of successful education" (Forer, Goldstone, & Tan, 1999). While technology has changed the nature of non-classroom-based education by allowing physical separation, it has also facilitated interaction, which is considered by some researchers to be the basis for successful education.

In many countries, universities are increasingly employing distance education. For instance, in 1996 the Australian government issued a policy statement about higher education, with the impact of technology rated as one of the most important issues (DEET, 1996). As a consequence of the entire policy statement, Australian universities were encouraged to rethink their approach to organization structures, delivery mechanisms, and the use of technology to support these processes. The UK's Open University, established in 1968, has led the world in distance education. It now has over 100,000 distance students in Britain and in many countries around the world. The Open University has been successful at establishing a strong, credible reputation for distance education. Elsewhere in the UK, distance education has appeared in some niche markets, particularly business education with Heriott Watt and Warwick Universities offering postgraduate business degrees. More recently, the US government has announced major funding (\$10 million) for collaborative projects between universities and the private sector to develop online education.

There is evidence, however, of some retrenchment of the ambitious plans to expand distance education into the Internet age. The British Open University cancelled its creation of the United States Open University, having struggled to gain acceptance for its distance education programs. Various privately funded distance education institutions, for example, Fathom (a consortium including Columbia University) and UNEXT, have curtailed their operations and are facing uncertain financial futures. The increase in interest and investment in online learning, combined with the struggles of many key players in this new market, suggests that there is an urgent need to improve understanding of the issues involved in making distance education an effective delivery mechanism.

The essence of distance education is the physical separation of teacher and learner (Sauve, 1993). Some institutions are incorporating distance education as a way to extend the classroom by employing delivery mechanisms that replicate the presentation of material in a manner similar to face-to-face communication. Other institutions are investigating new delivery mechanisms that support a revised perspective on education. These latter institutions are revising their processes for interacting with students and taking a more "learner-centered" approach to the delivery of education. There are many options available to universities when deciding how to employ technology to support delivery of distance education. Technology can both support and enhance distance education. Indeed, technology can be employed to change the way in which distance education is delivered.

The purpose of this investigation was to document the various modes of delivery mechanisms currently employed in distance education. It was anticipated that this documentation process would help to determine an understanding of the alternative mechanisms. It was also anticipated that an outline of all approaches, with an indication of the more innovative ones, could serve to provide guidance to institutions regarding the adoption of technology to support delivery mechanisms in distance education and to individuals researching the area.

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