Chapter 17
Acknowledging the Distance Learner:
The Role of the Student Voice in Enhancing the Quality of the Distance Learner's E–Learning Experience

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ABSTRACT

The growth of e-learning, particularly distance learning via e-learning, is widely recognised as a significant factor influencing higher education in the 21st century. The rapid and ongoing uptake of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for teaching and learning, along with the recognition that increased student engagement can lead to more effective learning, is changing the way in which teaching and learning occurs in universities. This chapter suggests that the distance learner is frequently overlooked in the current climate when it comes to consideration of student needs and that current applications of ICT for distance learning raises questions about the quality of their learning experience. The chapter discusses the role of the student voice in understanding and addressing students' needs in relation to the quality of their learning experience and suggests that greater attention needs to be paid to the distinct voice of the distance education student. The chapter provides some methodologies for collecting the student's voice and gives consideration to how addressing the distance learners' voice to enhance their learning experience might be most effectively accomplished.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a considerable expansion of distance education in the last two decades fuelled by growth in online distance learning supported by the rapid adoption of ICT across the higher education sector. A recent IBIS (2009) report forecast 15 per cent growth in distance learners in Australia in the next five years. Growth in distance learning is also reported in other countries with distance learning enrolments growing in the US at a steady rate of 19 per cent a year since 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2010) and all indications suggest that this growth will continue.

Prior to the rapid and widespread adoption of ICT that has occurred over the last two decades, distance education was the province of designated distance education providers who considered themselves as offering a very different learning experience to that provided by traditional on-campus institutions. Additionally, these distance education institutions were large publishing houses of quality content and the traditional distance education programs offered by these institutions were built on many years of evidenced-based research of what works and what does not (Guri-Rozenblit, 2005).

However, the rapid and widespread adoption of ICT across the higher education sector has led to a blurring of boundaries between different modes of learning (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009; 2005; Kim, 2007) and many traditional distance education providers have struggled to maintain their distinctive mission in an increasingly competitive and globalising higher education market, with possible implications for the quality of the distance learning experience. Participation in distance learning by a much broader range of institutions other than traditional distance education providers has also impacted significantly on the nature and quality of the distance learning experience (Forsyth, Pizzica, Laxton, & Mahoney, 2010). As a consequence of a move to online delivery for distance learning in traditional on-campus institutions the special needs of distance learners are not always recognised (Forsyth et al., 2010). The carefully designed learning materials and support processes that characterised more traditional distance education programs and courses are not necessarily provided to today's distance learner (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009).

Given the high attrition rates amongst online distance learners (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Paterson & McFadden, 2009) this raises urgent questions about the quality of the learning experience for distance learners where e-learning, in particular online learning, is the major mode of delivery.

E-LEARNING AND DISTANCE LEARNING

There is extensive debate in the literature in relation to the definitions of e-learning and distance learning and in many cases these terms are used interchangeably (Guri-Rozenblit, 2009; 2005; Kim, 2007), resulting in confusion and a lack of clarity around their meaning and use. For the purposes of this chapter we will use the broad definition of e-learning as put forward by Kim (2007, p. 1) who describes e-learning as being constituted of a combination of "Technological advances and wide availability of personal computers, CDs, the Internet, the Web, broadband access to the Internet, etc." Distance learning, on the other hand, can be described as learning that takes place where teachers and learners are separated by time and distance and where the learning is mediated by technology (Eastmond 1998; Keegan, 2008). While there are undoubted overlaps between e-learning and distance learning, the separation of teachers and students in distance learning is a key difference.

Using this definition, distance learning can be viewed as utilising a broad range of technology-based teaching and learning approaches and may be synchronous, asynchronous or both.

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