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ABSTRACT

Distance education can solve many educational problems; however, it creates two challenges as well. Effective interaction and feedback become particularly important in ensuring that the distance education course is rewarding for both the teacher and the students. Students may feel isolated due to geographical distances, cultural diversities, competing obligations among school and family, unfamiliar technology, and lack of support systems. In order to promote interaction, teachers should study such characteristics of their students as age, employment status, and family situation. Teachers may also discover why students enrolled in their courses, their educational experience, and their content-related interests. The role of the teacher as facilitator becomes more important in the creation of an atmosphere conducive to student interaction. Teachers can send letters of welcome to students, emphasize the need for focused discussion, and provide opportunities for students to participate. In order to provide adequate feedback teachers should be prepared to contact each student weekly and return assignments without delay. Feedback from students is necessary for course improvement and modification. Finally, teachers can help students become aware of and make adjustments to new communication and learning patterns. This brief guide begins by pointing out differences between distant and traditional classrooms. It then provides: (1) suggestions for ways to learn about students; (2) an outline of the instructor/facilitator's role; (3) guidelines for obtaining feedback to and from students; and (4) some suggestions for ways to meet student needs. (DB)

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DISTANCE EDUCATION INTERACTION & FEEDBACK AT A GLANCE

STATEWIDE DISTANCE EDUCATION
UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA SYSTEM

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Interaction and Feedback

Distance delivered instruction can solve many problems, but it can create a few challenges of its own. Two of these challenges are interaction and feedback. Effective interaction and feedback are the best ways to ensure that your distance delivered course is mutually rewarding for you and your students.

What is Different about a Distant "Classroom?"

Distance education takes place whenever the teacher and students are separated. Interaction and feedback are of critical importance to the distance education enterprise. In addition to content knowledge, **teaching effectively at a distance requires:**

- New skills to enhance interaction and provide feedback.
- An understanding of your "classroom"
 - Multiple sites across the state
 - Diverse student backgrounds
 - Often no personal contact with students
 - Limited time with your students
- Utilization of new technology.
- Reliance on auditory clues to determine student understanding and required pacing.
- Help for students who are also adapting to a new teaching/learning environment.

Remember: Students often feel isolated due to:

- √ Geographical distances
- √ Cultural diversities
- √ Limited or non-existent support systems (such as a library, tutoring, instructor conferences, peer discussions, counseling)
- √ Family-job-community obligations competing with studies for time and energy
- √ The need for extensive independent study and self-starting
- √ Sporadically unfriendly technology
- √ Slow mail and the resulting lag in assignment feedback

Learn About Your Students

•• Distance learners are often:

- Older
- More likely to have significant gaps in their educational careers
- Employed full-time
- Returning to school as part-time students
- Highly motivated
- Raising families

•• Find out what you can about the students likely to enroll in the course.

- Ask for information from office staff or instructors who have had contact with distance students.
 - √ Geographical areas
 - √ Number of students at each site
 - √ Ages
 - √ Goals
 - √ Ethnic and educational backgrounds
 - √ Employment experience
- Learn about their cultural backgrounds.
 - √ Will anyone have trouble relating to what is said or read because of cultural or experiential differences?
 - √ What is your student's usual pace of speaking? Degree of formality?
- Call students prior to the course and introduce yourself. Get to know students through inquiries:
 - √ Have the materials arrived?
 - √ Is this their first distance delivered course?
 - √ Are there special concerns?
 - √ Is the student familiar with the technology to be used?
- What are their educational experiences? What previous course work will complement this course?
- What are their content-related experiences and interests?
- What motivated them to enroll in the course? Do they have a system of support for their educational endeavors? (Family, school, tutoring, community resources.)

Supportive First Impressions for the Distant Student:

- √ The welcome letter
- √ Clearly written and complete syllabus
- √ Course materials in student hands on time
- √ Friendly, prepared, and organized instructor
- √ Supportive audioconference atmosphere
- √ Quick return of corrected homework
- √ Useful comments on written assignments
- √ A willing and obvious desire to meet student needs

Instructor/Facilitator Role

Your traditional role as instructor was probably that of "content provider." Your new role expands to that of "content facilitator," emphasizing group interaction and content-focused discussion.

- **The goal of interaction is to create an atmosphere conducive to students comfortably asking questions and participating in discussions. For example:**
 - Send students a welcome letter; include a brief biographical sketch or audio tape, as well as a photo, if possible.
 - **Early on, explain the need for critical thinking: making statements with supporting reasons and facts as the basis for focused discussion.**
 - Consider using "active" participation as a course requirement.
 - Expect all students to read, write, ask questions, and participate in the class using study questions/problems to stimulate thought and discussion.
 - Emphasize punctuality if audioconferencing or using interactive video. Ask students to be on line five minutes prior to the start of class.
 - State your name and location when speaking; have students do the same.
 - Insist students be prepared for discussions by keeping up with reading and written assignments.
 - Develop study questions for each session and use them.
 - Keep track of who is responding and the home site. **Get everyone to respond, not just the vocal ones.**
 - Make sure each student has many chances to participate successfully.
 - If your class includes face-to-face and distant students simultaneously, treat all with equal interest.
 - Involve students—avoid one-way lectures dominated by the instructor.
 - Consider building content presentations around student interaction.
 - Become familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of the technical system.
 - Keep your sense of humor!
- **Provide advance organizers to assist students in planning their time.**
 - Develop an expanded course syllabus for each session including:
 - √ Objectives √ Readings √ Assignments
 - √ Study questions √ Delivery methods to be used
 - Have all materials on-site before the course begins; allow 3-4 weeks for rural delivery.

Feedback To and From Students

- **Feedback to and from students on their progress in the course and assignments is essential if effective instruction is to occur.** This feedback takes many forms including individual phone calls, conference calls, computer conferencing, mail, personal visits, and facsimile.

- Contact each student (or site) each week if possible.
- Call students who do not participate the first week.
- **Return assignments without delay!!**

Remember: Slow mail service may add weeks to students getting responses back on their work. Try to grade and return papers within a few days of receiving them. Use the FAX machine, if necessary.

- Make detailed and insightful comments on written assignments, referring to other sources if appropriate.
- Arrange telephone office hours using an "800" number so students can call with questions, comments, clarifications.

Remember: Your workday may coincide with a time when your students are not able to call. Consider additional times for calling as well as giving your home phone number and the times you'll be available to talk.

- **Feedback from students is necessary for course improvement and modification.**

- Use short writing assignments in class and have student discussions during audioconferences to determine their understanding.
- Ask students to summarize the main points of the audioconference class in a journal and respond in class or regularly by mail.
- Use postcards and phone conferences for input on class content and interaction, relevancy, pace, problems in delivery, or any concerns regarding instruction.
- Build study questions into your discussions to ensure full participation by all sites and students.
- Use an on-site facilitator to "bridge" the distance gap. A facilitator can be your on-site "eyes and ears" and offer strategies to improve your teaching effectiveness and content relevancy.

Meeting Student Needs

Some Final Thoughts

- **Help students become aware of and make adjustments to new communication and learning patterns.**
 - Students must understand that the course will not be taught in the traditional, in-class style.
 - A more active role in interaction and feedback is needed in distance courses: **students must learn to become more verbal in asking questions and offering responses.**
 - Students need to become familiar and comfortable with the new technology.
 - They need to be prepared to deal with technological problems.
 - Students need to assume greater responsibility for their own learning; more independent activity is required in distance courses.

- **Assist students in learning about fellow students. Remember: The instructor sets the tone!**
 - Help students become familiar with and respectful of the cultural backgrounds of their classmates.
 - Student biographies with pictures, names, sites, and other voluntary information help build a sense of class cohesiveness.
 - Be aware of culturally different speech patterns.
 - Communication styles may vary: some students may seem more direct or abrupt.
 - Pauses between sentences may vary.
 - Some students may think and talk at a slower, more deliberate pace.
 - To counteract isolation, make assignments that involve student-to-student communication through phone, audioconference, or computer.

•• **Meet students face-to-face whenever possible!** Getting to know them personally will facilitate all subsequent interaction and feedback. If they pass through your city on professional or personal business, try to arrange to meet with them.



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