

STANDARDS OF e- LEARNING BASED DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The term distance education is commonly used to describe courses in which nearly all the interaction between the teacher and student takes place electronically. Electronic communication may take the form of audio, video, e-mail, chat, teleconferencing, and, increasingly, the Internet. Distance education courses range from short term training workshops to undergraduate and graduate programs for college credit. Distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities. Proponents of distance education point out that the practice may allow learning to reach thousands or even millions more people on an "anytime anywhere" basis. This applies especially to potential students who are homebound or physically remote from a college campus, as well as students who find it extremely difficult to fit their family and work responsibilities into a traditional academic schedule. This paper proposes a method and modeling framework and proof-of-concept standards that will attempt to fill the gap between alternative processes for distance education.

INTRODUCTION

The term distance education is commonly used to describe courses in which all the interaction between the teacher and student takes place electronically. Electronic communication may take the form of audio, video, e-mail, chat, teleconferencing, and, increasingly, the Internet. Distance education courses range from short term training workshops to undergraduate and graduate programs for college credit. Distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities. Proponents of distance education point out that the practice may allow learning to reach thousands or even millions more people on an "anytime anywhere" basis. Observers point to numerous case studies indicating comparable student performance in distance education courses. Proponents maintain that distance education is able to foster independent study-that it is preferable to move the faculty member, as they often say, from a "sage on the stage" to a

"guide on the side." Still, a good number of educators remain skeptical. Believing that teaching and learning are inherently social processes, these educators consider "same-time same-place" interaction, central of guidelines for good practice in distance education. These guidelines drawn from what we know today amid a constantly changing landscape are not in any way designed to be the "last word" on the subject.

But the important question is, What specific things need to be done what do we need to put into place to have what we're willing to call a "high level of interchange"? And what are we willing to do about a course if we do not have the appropriate level of interchange? Frankly, we are concerned about good practice guidelines being applauded at their inception and then ignore whenever it becomes inconvenient to stick on. If these guidelines have validity, administrators and faculty members must be willing to say "no" to the practices that violate a good practice. I hope that the following guidelines will assist

faculty members in teaching or preparing to teach distance education courses, as well as higher education. It is believed that the guidelines will be useful to college administrators and public officials who want to put quality at the center of their technology programs, as well as other organizations around the country who are attempting to shape new media of instruction in constructive ways.

Most practitioners believe they are successful in their distance education classes when they are provided with proper time, tools and training, and they have matured into highly motivated students with appropriate equipment and training. At the same time, the responses pointed to circumstances under which distance education seemed problematic. My standards embody both these themes.

My primary focus encompassing the special expertise of our higher education membership-is on distance education in college, credit-bearing degree programs: two year, four-year, and graduate.

Finally, these standards apply equally to public, private, non-profit, and for-profit educational providers. In my view, for-profit providers warrant a higher level of scrutiny because the commercial market place creates special incentives to cater to the consumer's desire for ease and convenience rather than academic rigor. For-profit enterprises that meet the guidelines of good practice, however, deserve their place at the table.

In order to improve distance education some basics and standards are discussed below:

1. Faculty Must Retain Academic Control

? To receive college credit, distance learning courses offered by the institution should be reviewed and approved in advance by the faculty. Review is necessary even when changing a course from a classroom mode to a distance learning mode.

Faculties do not always make perfect decisions, but their choices are much likelier to be based primarily on educational concerns aimed at student learning rather than market incentives that elevate convenience, attractiveness and digestibility above all else.

- ? Decisions about particular courses should be made at the departmental or interdepartmental level, including the decision to award credit for distance courses generated by transfer from another institution or provider.
- ? Faculty appointed and evaluated through traditional processes involving the faculty and the department should teach distance education courses for credit.
- ? Teaching and research faculty, not just "curriculum specialists," must be involved in developing the curriculum.

2. Faculty Must Be Prepared To Meet The Special Requirements Of Teaching At A Distance Basis

Faculty teaching distance education courses must become proficient in the communications technology employed in their distance education courses. They must be prepared either on their own or working in teams with other specialists to design courses that take full advantage of the potential of the medium in which they are operating. Faculty teaching Web based courses must possess strategies and skills to communicate with their students electronically in the absence of visual and oral cues. As a result, faculty teaching distance education should be prepared to spend a good deal more time preparing for distance courses than traditional ones. Almost uniformly, practitioners responding to the survey emphasized that the preparation time for distance learning courses is much greater than for a classroom-based course.

Similarly, once the course is under way, faculty must be

prepared to be available to students on an extended basis electronically. Again and again, practitioners report that it takes considerably more time to communicate with students electronically. In addition, faculty members must keep up with the odd hours as many distance education students have to devote to their coursework at such times.

3. Required Support

To handle these responsibilities effectively:

- ? Faculty must be provided with adequate training and technical support in terms of hardware, software and of trouble shooting. Faculty in the field should emphasize the importance of adequate technical support repeatedly. Support should include special assistance in instructional design. The institution must enable faculty members to work with knowledgeable instructional and technical design specialists, in designing courses until the faculty member has grown to be confident about the presentation.
- ? Additional compensation should be provided to faculty to meet the extensive time commitments of distance education. Despite, the demand for extra preparation time and the increased time commitment of e-mail, only half of the respondents reported that they had not received any compensation for the additional time required. Compensation can be provided in the form of credit toward load assignment, which means that the additional time counts toward the faculty member's required work load for the term.
- ? Institutional reward systems for faculty including policies regarding promotion, tenure and special funding for faculty projects should be according to the recognition of the creative work in formulating distance programs.
- ? Because distance education calls on a specialized set

of skills, teaching in distance education courses should be a matter of faculty choice.

4. Course Design Should Be Shaped To The Potentials Of The Medium Basics

Live theatre is a special experience that delivers a unique brand of emotional impact. In most cases, however, live theatre looks claustrophobic and strangely inert when it is recorded "straight on," without the camera moving around different locations, doing close-ups and engaging in its own special tricks. This tells us that one can't "do" film in the same way as it in a live performance. Each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses and can deliver different kinds of dramatic experiences.

The literature on distance education suggests a similar relationship between same-time, same-place instruction and distance education. It may not always be effective to simply transfer a live lecture and accompanying course materials into an electronic course on the same subject.

Similarly, faculty members who try to literally "match" traditional classroom interaction with the kind of interaction available in a distance education course may be resulted in frustration and disappointment.

Standards

- ? Faculty members developing distance education courses should approach course design curriculum planning, class projects, visual aids, library materials and student interaction not in terms of replicating the traditional classroom, but in terms of maximizing the potential of the medium that will be employed. This drover back the importance of substantial technical support.

5. Students Must Fully Understand Course Requirements And Be Prepared To Succeed Standards

In the light of these findings, every institution, as a matter of

good practice, should have procedures in place to ensure, to the possible extent, that new distance education students have the ability to perform successfully.

- ? All the distance education students should be given a clear statement of course requirements in advance. This should include: (1) all course requirements; (2) the weekly time commitment and specific computer skills required by the course; and (3) a presentation of the practical difficulties of working at a distance and what is needed to manage those challenges successfully. This information must be provided either in written form or through a same-time same-place video or Internet-based orientation program.
- ? In response, before the course begins, students should be required to submit a written statement to the institution delivered electronically. The statement would explain briefly about the student's aims. The statement would be designed to demonstrate: (1) that the student possesses proper equipment and knows how to make it work; (2) that the student has the skills needed to perform effectively in a writing-based medium; and (3) that the student has motivation and sensible outlook. Based on the student's response, training in advance for the course must be provided to those who have the appropriate equipment but do not know how to use it properly, and advice should be offered to students, who appear to be having problems with written communication skills or those who lack motivation.
- ? Students require reliable, extended, time and technical support throughout the course. In all course materials, institutions should specify the nature and degree of technical support that can be provided. A telephone contact number for technical support is

essential, with the feasible availability of the maximum hours.

- ? Since distance education will not suit every student, states and localities are obligated to ensure that no student is being offered distance education, when his or her only option is to obtain a on-campus-education. There could be no worse result than a two-tier system, directing less affluent students to distance education, while the socializing and networking benefits of on-campus education remain largely a safe-guard to the affluent.

Anyone who meets institutional admissions standards should not be barred from obtaining campus education.

6. Close Personal Interaction Must Be Maintained Basics

Almost everyone agrees that the most important challenge for distance education is the need to develop a rich level of personal interchange between professor and student and among students themselves.

Practitioners using interactive TV, frequently cited problems in maintaining interaction with students, often based on the limitations of the technology that was available for them. On the other hand, Web based courses received generally higher remarks from those who taught them. Many practitioners maintain that in-depth interaction with students over the Web is actually stronger than in traditional classrooms. However, others felt that the loss of immediate visual and verbal interaction have undermined advantages of Web based coursework.

Salient Features cited by respondents: Web based communication provokes more thoughtful answers from the part of students. Some students feel more immediacy of feedback. Some faculty members believe that less aggressive students can perform better in a Web based setting;

Often-cited negatives: There is a high learning curve for

both teachers and students in getting cues right when there is no eye contact. It is harder to tell whether students understand or not, when you can't see "the light bulb go on." Distance education is too dependent on the proper functioning of equipment. It is harder to catch cheating. It may not be as effective for students with written communication deficits.

Standards

- ? To maximize communication electronically, distance learning courses should, incorporate both: real-time electronic interchange through devices such as chat rooms and discussion groups; and: asynchronous forms of communication such as e-mail and computer bulletin boards.
- ? Wherever it is feasible, opportunities for same-time same-place interchange between the teacher and student, or among students, should be built into credit courses taught at a distance. Many distance education students are not too far from the college campus to visit from time to time, and it is not uncommon for their instructors to arrange group meetings once or twice in a term. Teachers also arrange meetings of some students in remote sites such as another campus, library or community center. Evening and weekend time can be employed for this. Homebound, or truly isolated students and for the students those who don't have the facility to seek the faculty guidance within the boundaries of their area, can be an exception from following this time schedule.

7. Class Size Should Be Set Through Normal Faculty Channels Basics

The practitioners opinion about the need of extensive preparation time in distance education courses has been discussed. It implies that most distance education courses

require more time for personal interaction. The size of the class in distance education courses also can be seen in that light.

Standards

- ? Class size should be established through normal faculty channels to ensure that educational rather than bureaucratic or financial considerations to drive the process.
- ? Class size should encourage a high degree of interactivity. Smaller class size should be considered, for teaching through distance education particularly at the inception of a new course.

8. Courses Should Cover All Material Basics

It is difficult to cover as much material, including laboratories and practical, within the allotted time through distance education, compared with traditional classroom. Factors such as, the slowness of interactive TV transmission and the need to rely on written communication in web based courses, can be employed to reduce this limitation.

Standards

- ? The amount of material covered in a distance education course, and the depth with which it is covered, should equal to that of a classroom-based course.

9. Experimentation With A Broad Variety Of Subjects Should be Encouraged Basics

Some faculty members have more difficulty in teaching certain subjects in distance education course.

Standards

- ? Thus, introducing a variety of subjects through distance education should be encouraged. Some faculty members report success in supervising real or virtual laboratory activities, and even practical, in a distance education course. However, the

department faculty prior to approval should review “hands-on” activities of this nature very carefully.

- ? Institutions should not continue to offer courses that have been unsuccessful. If attrition rates are high or test scores are low, or if the teacher reports disappointing results, the faculty should declare a “time out” during which a careful evaluation is conducted, along with an exploration of successful learning techniques employed elsewhere. If the faculty determines that problems have been overcome, the course can be re-instituted.

10. Equivalent Research Opportunities Must Be Provided Basics

All the degree programs must provide numerous and varied opportunities for students to conduct independent research. Students need to have access to a broad spectrum of research materials in all formats and to learn how to evaluate such material critically. This requires a partnership between faculty and librarians, working together, to develop “information literacy competencies” in students, that allow individuals to recognize when information is needed and to locate and use effectively the needed information. As it has been reported often, the ability to critically evaluate material is especially important in the light of the authoritative mass, but sometimes bogus material are seen on the Internet. In general, the distance education practitioners responding to the survey felt that their students had adequate access to informational materials. Many of them worked hard to prepare packages of materials for all students, and some offered students extensive information about online materials.

Standards

- ? Opportunities for distance education students to conduct independent course-related research must be substantially the same, as the opportunities provided to other students.

- ? Distance education students should be given access to all possible electronic research material. Students must be shown how to connect with online articles, books and catalogues at the college library or cooperating libraries. Students should be given the names, e-mail addresses and phone numbers of librarians for the purpose of electronic requests for materials.
- ? For any course requiring independent research, as long as it is feasible, distance education students are expected to visit a campus or public library at least once to confer with professional librarians and employ the variety of informational materials and professional resources available there.
- ? If there is difficulty for students to obtain a hard copy of a research, and there is no online source for them to access the material, the college should arrange some alternative ways to deliver books and materials to students through overnight mail, either for sale or loan. This is known as document delivery, although in many locations a quick turnover time cannot be expected.

Conclusion

Clearly, every faculty union should become deeply involved in technology decision-making. Faculty should negotiate with management on a variety of technology-related subjects, such as workload (including e-mail and prep time), compensation, training, jurisdiction, staffing levels, class size, acceptance of credits from other institutions, travel to other sites and grading responsibilities. Unions must also attempt to negotiate protection of intellectual property rights in cyberspace for their members. The potential benefits of distance education, coupled with its successful application in many forums, clearly warrant a continuing effort to develop quality programs. Plenty of room should be left for

experimentation, and we should not be defeatist when we encounter problems. But as we move forward, we must insist on the high standards outlined here that, we believe, are not impossible to meet and are worth sticking to, point by point. When problems arise, we must make every effort to surmount obstacles, but we must also be prepared to say about distance education, "not us, not now" when the required level of quality cannot be achieved. Some believe that distance education erects too many impediments to faculty-student interaction and therefore should be abandoned or severely restricted. Others say that the "market" will demand convenience and a flashy presentation style above all other values and that higher education had better adapt or lose out to competitors. It is indisputable that colleges and universities should develop courses that are as attractive as possible and no more

onerous than necessary. But credit-bearing coursework must produce education that lasts, and to achieve that, we must develop and stick to high standards of good practice.

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