The Distance Education Evolution: Issues and Case Studies

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The Distance Education Evolution: Issues and Case Studies

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Foreword

Education is the foundation upon which a free and just society is built. If continuous and concerted efforts are not made to provide quality education that is accessible to successive generations of citizens, that foundation will crumble. Although these precepts have been stated many times, they bear repeating. The editors and authors of this book believe that by sharing our insights into and experiences with distance education we can add our efforts to those who are committed to exploring and evaluating innovations in education. The predominant orientation of this book is practical, not theoretical; however, it is not meant to be a definitive “how-to” book on distance education but a heuristic guide for those involved or interested in effective distance education. Although theory is not the focus of this book, practice informed by theory is the guiding principle for a number of chapters in this volume.

Technology has been instrumental in the evolution of distance education and has resulted in modes of delivery that now enable a “virtual” multimedia learning environment. Many distance education instructors now include audio and video clips of their lectures on class websites, and students can upload their own multimedia presentations and interact synchronously with instructors and other students. Although technology plays an important role in distance education, blind adherence to its dictates is a formula for disaster. The emphasis on educational goals is a mantra oft repeated in this volume and one that must predominate in this age of rapid technological innovation. Without a pedagogical framework to guide its use, technology is nothing more than so many “bells and whistles.”

This book is an effort to provide educators, administrators, and students with a way to gain some perspective on distance education and to evaluate both its strengths and weaknesses. Distance education initiatives need to be comprehensively evaluated and fully supported by their institutions if they are to succeed. The goal of providing quality education that is accessible to all is a goal that must be emphasized and vigorously pursued, especially given an academic culture that increasingly stresses the bottom line.

Linda Greenwood
Temple University, USA
Preface

Distance education (DE) has a long, rich history of over 100 years. The beginning of DE was correspondence study. In 1892, Penn State University was one of three universities to initiate a new way of reaching out to students capitalizing on the newly developed system of Rural Free Delivery (RFD). While RFD has been credited with many outcomes, the role of RFD in establishing DE is not well known.

RFD provided a vehicle for mail to reach out to the people who were the American pioneers, the folks who moved away from the big cities in the Eastern United States to live in the heartland of America and beyond — the farmers who often lived far from schools of higher education but wanted an education just the same. Before RFD was established by the U.S. Postal System, people were required to go to an institution of higher education; after RFD was established, some institutions like Penn State recognized an opportunity to take higher education to the public.

Since the advent of RFD and paper-oriented correspondence study, newer technologies came into play to offer unique opportunities for DE: the radio (1920s), instructional television (1950s), satellite downlinks (late 1970s and early 1980s), cable TV (1970s), and videoconferencing (VDC) through interactive compressed video (1980s). Each of these delivery methods was considered to be revolutionary in reaching out to the population of people who could not afford to come to higher education institutions. The one characteristic that all of these forms of DE had in common, with the exception of VDC, was that instruction was one-way out to the student, or asynchronous. Interaction between the student and the instructor was difficult and time consuming using the U.S. Mail. VDC was the only medium for DE where the instructor and students were connected in real-time or synchronously, using T-1 telephone lines to send compressed video and audio between sites, and it was the first DE delivery mode to begin to mimic the traditional classroom interaction that was clearly missing from previous distance education delivery methods.
Today the Internet and World Wide Web have revolutionized DE once more. The biggest difference between DE online and the preceding methods is the opportunity to exploit the multimedia and interaction capabilities of the Web. While many online DE courses are asynchronous, interaction with instructors is faster with electronic mail, which can be almost instantaneous.

Most institutions of higher education in the United States have some form of an online DE program or initiative. Many of these programs were started because administrators and faculty thought they “should” include online DE options for their students or be behind the curve in higher education. Others approached online DE methodically, looking at long-standing models and taking steps to insure support for both faculty and students. This book is our attempt to provide a large case study of one institution of higher education that has moved slowly and deliberately into online DE. The audience for this book is administrators and faculty in institutions of higher education looking for guidance in developing and expanding online DE initiatives, faculty who are looking for case studies of how online DE might be useful in their disciplines, and students studying the phenomenon of distance education.

Section 1: Distance Education Issues in Higher Education

The first section of this book will take the reader through a series of discussions that describe, analyze, explain, and hypothesize about online DE programs in higher education. Each chapter will provide insight and advice for various stages of planning and development of an online DE program.

In *Creating an Online Program*, Sandy Kyrish notes that good planning is key to the development of a successful online DE. Initial planning should primarily center on two issues: identifying the educational goal of the program, and identifying the practical issues of implementation. Planners must recognize that while online learning is a technology-based activity, it must be organized around clear educational goals — and these goals must be strongly aligned with one or more key areas for the institution. She suggests common tools and strategies that can be used to help identify key goals.

In Chapter 2, *Faculty Participation in Distance Education Programs: Practices and Plans*, I present research into two questions for administrators
of online DE initiatives. Faculty must be involved for a DE program to be successful. What motivates or inhibits faculty participation in online DE on any one campus? Campus culture is one factor to be considered. One practice nationally has been to compensate faculty in some way other than regular pay, except on those campuses where participation in DE is a condition of faculty appointment. But what models of compensation are used and in what settings? Research on both of these questions is presented with suggestions on how to apply the results.

In Chapter 3, John Sorrentino asks *Can a Viable DE Program Stay Behind the Technology Wave?* He questions whether distance education programs should strive to be on the cutting edge of information technology. Using economics as a heuristic, the general perspective taken is that of the Value Net to discuss and explain the education process. Dr. Sorrentino then discusses and compares the mechanics of an online course he taught to MBA students to the same course he taught in a face-to-face format. He concludes by suggesting a cost-benefit analysis to determine whether DE programs should be behind, with or ahead of the technology wave.

An important issue in online DE is accessibility to information. Rosangela Boyd and Bonnie Moulton discuss accessibility issues related to online education in Chapter 4, *Universal Design for Online Education: Access for All*. They present an overview of the challenges faced by students with disabilities in accessing and interacting with online course materials and activities. In order to address the potential barriers to full participation, national and international guidelines are examined, with particular emphasis on their implications for specific course components. The authors provide advice for validating website accessibility and a list of resources for those interested in obtaining further information about the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and IDEA.

Stella Shields, Gisela Gil-Egui, and Concetta Stewart present a compelling case for teamwork in online DE in their chapter entitled *Certain about Uncertainty: Strategies and Practices for Virtual Teamwork in Online Classrooms*. They make the clear distinction that virtual teamwork, not virtual group work, is the goal since the team has a common purpose while the group is more amorphous. They discuss the importance of trust and community of practice within the online DE experiences and provide several provocative suggestions for those considering including virtual teams in their online DE courses.
In Chapter 6, Donald Hantula and Darleen Pawlowicz propose that *Education Mirrors Industry: On the Not-So Surprising Rise of Internet Distance Education*. Online DE is analyzed as a natural consequence of end of the century industrial transformations. From this perspective, previous distance and technologically based educational innovations are discussed, not as having failed, but as not matching prevailing economic and social conditions. Implications for adapting educational practices to new economic realities away from the industrial model of the twentieth century are presented, especially in terms of matching instructional technology to educational outcomes, virtual collaboration, and how “natural” the media effects are to the consumer.

In the chapter *Evaluating a Distance Education Program*, Dominique Monolescu and I discuss the importance of ongoing evaluation of DE programs. With a brief description of why program evaluation is important for any education program, key questions for online DE programs are identified. A case study of the Temple University Online Learning Program’s ongoing evaluation process is presented as one example of how evaluation can lead to important programmatic and institutional change.

Lastly, through some closing remarks for the issues section of this book, Gisela Gil-Egui makes the case for developing clear copyright policies within institutions wishing to embark in online education endeavors. She illustrates her point by providing a brief narrative of the challenges faced by different actors at Temple University in their attempt to generate a consensual intellectual property policy — one that considers new aspects emerging in light of new technologies for content creation and distribution.

**Section 2: Case Studies in Distance Education**

In Section 2 of this book, a series of case studies are presented from a number of different disciplines. Each chapter presents insights, issues to be considered, and suggestions for future course developments.

In Chapter 8, *Creating and Using Multiple Media in an Online Course*, Maurice Wright discusses the adaptation of a traditional, fundamentals course of the science of musical sound and the methods used to code and transform
musical sound using digital computers for online delivery. Practical choices for technology, which reflect the conflicting benefits of choosing simple versus more sophisticated technology, are outlined. He presents an anecdotal comparison between an online and a face-to-face course section, along with ideas for future development.

Karen Turner, in the chapter *Teaching a Studies-in-Race Course Online: The Challenges and the Rewards*, presents a case study of whether a course dealing with the potentially volatile issue of race can be effectively taught in an online environment. This course was developed to effectively incorporate online instruction with race studies aimed at teaching racial sensitivity to journalism students. Dr. Turner presents student evidence from her course of the success of teaching a sensitive issue online. She projects the potential impact of her approach to a course on race-related issues in the news on students’ understanding and dialogue about race.

Transformation of a traditional face-to-face course to an online DE course is the subject of Elizabeth Leebron’s chapter entitled *Media Entrepreneurship as an Online Course: A Case Study*. She discusses the importance of re-considering pedagogical issues like requirements, assessments, participation, and more. This case study, unlike the others in this book, presents a hybrid model of DE. While the majority of the course discussed in this chapter is online, the final requirement is an oral presentation. Dr. Leebron discusses the importance of retaining this requirement for this course, and how face-to-face encounters enhance the DE experience overall.

One of the most commonly used forms of interactivity in online DE courses, as well as face-to-face courses, is the academic listserv, and yet the impact of these listserv discussions is assumed to be positive without much proof. Julie-Ann McFann presents a case study of academic listservs in Chapter 11, *The Uses and Impact of Academic Listservs on University Teaching: An Exploratory Study*. While her research was not limited to online DE courses, the outcomes of her work and the overall case study are directly related to understanding the importance and purpose of online discussions through listservs by all who participate.

Based on the process of Personalized Systems of Instructions (PSI), Erica Davis Blann and Donald Hantula present a case study of a social psychology course in *Design and Evaluation of an Internet-Based Personalized Instructional System for Social Psychology*, Chapter 12. They discuss how the course was designed to capitalize on the unique advantages of the PSI system while using the Internet to overcome some of its noted administrative
drawbacks, including how the asynchronous nature of the Internet and the automated features built into Blackboard made it possible for students to attend lectures, take assessments, and communicate with the instructor and other class members from anywhere, at any time. Their case study demonstrates that the combination of PSI and the Internet produce an effective instructional.

In the Conclusion, Dominique Monolescu discusses the lessons learned through initiating and developing the Temple University Online Learning Program and how the book chapters illuminate that process and issues involved.

References


Catherine Schifter
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The creation of this book has been a stimulating and enlightening experience and we hope that it will be a useful addition to the literature on distance education.

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Section I

Distance Education
Issues in
Higher Education
Chapter I

Creating an Online Program

Sandy Kyrish
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Abstract

Good planning is key to the development of a successful online learning program. For online learning (as with any form of distance education), initial planning should primarily center on two issues: identifying the educational goal of the program, and identifying the practical issues of implementation. Planners must recognize that while online learning is a technology-based activity, it must be organized around clear educational goals that are strongly aligned with one or more key areas for the institution. Although educational goals will be different for each institution, this chapter suggests common tools and strategies that can be used to help identify key goals. Once goals (and accompanying objectives) are identified, practical issues of implementation must also be carefully considered. These include determining the initial investment, deciding on profitability goals, putting strong program leadership in place, creating an effective program, and identifying support needs for faculty and students.
Introduction

If planned correctly, an online program can expand an institution’s reach, enhance its stature, and satisfy needs for its traditional and non-traditional students. For online learning (as with any form of distance education), initial planning should primarily center on two issues: identifying the educational goal of the program, and identifying the practical issues of implementation.

This chapter makes the case that while online learning is a technological enterprise, it must be carried out with educational goals firmly at the forefront; these goals must be strongly aligned with one or more key areas specifically affecting the institution. Although such goals will be different for each institution, this chapter suggests common tools and strategies that can be used to help identify them.

Once goals are in place and objectives are derived from the goals, the distance learning program will need to address a number of practical implementation issues. As seen in case studies and retrospectives by others (cf., Bennett, 2001; Gibson & Herrera, 1999), many of the implementation issues are common among programs. This chapter suggests issues that should be considered by the planning group, including establishing the program’s leadership, determining the program’s initial budget, and identifying the program’s support needs.

Keep the Focus on the Educational Goal

Perhaps you are reading this book because someone at your institution has said, “We need to have an online program.” In that case, you may be off to a bad start.

Although your online learning program will be built on a technology infrastructure, it is not “about” the technology — it is about the ability to deliver courses via technology. An online program must always be fundamentally organized around an educational goal. While this may seem obvious, too often the initial goals for an online learning program are described through technology. When a program statement begins, “Our goal is to connect our three branch campuses
with videoconferencing connections,” this is not an educational goal; it is a technology *solution* that could be used to support an identifiable educational mission if one exists.

Listen carefully when attending your institution’s planning meetings. Do the discussions about a potential online learning program focus more on the course delivery mechanisms than the courses themselves? Do colleagues justify the need for an online learning program by talking about the proliferation of the Internet and the speed of networks? If so, the program may simply be a technology in search of a problem (Meyer & Boone, 1995).

A distance education program may suffer the same fate as many of the dot.com startups if the institution focuses too much on the technological *possibility* of technology and the Internet to enable online courses, rather than on a real, articulated need. Research on communications technologies has shown that expectations for many technologies (including videotext, cable television, broadband to the home, and the World Wide Web) have often been driven by twin assumptions about the inevitability of the technology plus the assumed desirability of the services offered on it (Kyrish, 1994).

In other words, it seems obvious that offering something as desirable as learning and education through technology would be appealing to many people. The technology offers clear benefits of convenience and asynchronous access to knowledge and learning. Yet the *product* itself (a course or set of courses) is not a simple, replicable item such as an appliance. Individuals seek learning for a variety of reasons, including career advancement, personal enjoyment, or vocational necessity. Individuals are not all in search of the “same” learning; some seek full degree programs and a university diploma, while others seek certificate programs or even single classes (whether for personal or professional interest). And individuals often do not pursue learning even when it is freely available through public television telecourses or the Web.

There are many good reasons to offer courses online; these reasons will be presented in this chapter and in other chapters in this book. The bottom line of success for an online curriculum, however, will not be that it is technologically elegant or that it can be delivered across the world as easily as across the street. Instead, simply put, an online program will be successful when the college or university identifies one or more areas of interest for an *identifiable set of learners* that can be *effectively delivered via an online medium* to a group that *finds clear value in the courses offered*.