Analysis of Challenges of Distance Education

Dr. Sunitti Ahuja
Associate Professor,
Department of English,
D.A.V Centenary College, Faridabad, Haryana, India

Abstract: Since old days, traditional education learning system is considered good for the learners as it has a number of advantages like daily lecturers, face-to-face interaction with the teacher, social interaction. All these also help the students to be disciplined and punctual. But with times, distance learning system come in existence which has no similar advantages like traditional learning system but advantages at its own pace. Although traditional educational curriculum is on peak but distance education is no less in demand. There are mainly three categories of challenges i.e. challenges faced by students, teachers/trainers as well as educational institution. In this study, suggestions are made to optimize the fault-finding situations faced by them.

Keywords: distance education, distance learners, challenges, methods, strategies, elements of distance education

I. Introduction

Distance learning usually means students engaging with learning materials at home or work. These materials are produced by the university, college or learning provider and are either sent directly to the student or more usually today accessed via the internet. Tutorial support is provided via a virtual learning environment, telephone, email or other electronic means. There may be occasional face-to-face encounters with tutors and attendance at week-long summer schools. Distance learning is a way of learning remotely without being in regular face-to-face contact with a teacher in the classroom. More than 270,000 undergraduate students are taking their first degrees via distance learning, together with some 108,000 postgraduate students.

II. Methods and Strategies

Guided practice
The more familiar teachers are with the instructional design and delivery process, the more effective their presentations will be. But practically they need training in instructional message design, strategies for delivering instruction on-camera, methods of diversifying types of presentation, selecting various mixes of student-teacher activities and interactions, choosing situations and examples which are relevant to their students, and assessing the level of learning by distant students. They also need plenty of guided, hands-on practice developing and delivering courseware using audio, full-motion video, graphics, and text, in front of a live audience, yet still in a non-threatening situation. Strategies such as using fewer overheads and more moving video, interspersing “talking heads” with videos of sites, using hands-on experiments, incorporating text and graphic art, and other guidelines for effective video production are also important.

Media-based challenges
There is lack of immediate 2-way interaction that characterizes many distance education programs, but also because of the loss of visual detail in videoconferences due to signal compression especially detailed lip movements. This can be overcome by providing students with oral practice and feedback through telephone conversations with the instructor, and by instructional strategies that encourage frequent student-teacher and teacher-student dialogue.

Inquiry learning
Inquiry learning is a new technique to many teachers. No longer is the teacher “the sage on the stage,” i.e., the deliverer of a fixed body of information; she becomes the facilitator of discovery learning for her students, through progressive discourse. Thus, even if a teacher is well-practiced and at ease with the equipment in the classroom, she still requires training in order to integrate new teaching strategies with the technology.

Teamwork
Progressive teachers who are early adapters of technology can support other teachers by planning ahead as a group, and by working with the learning modules and equipment before using them in the classroom.
Facilitators can try out learning modules as videotapes, building in interactivity as it suits the learning styles of their particular students, and then integrate real-time satellite programs into their schedule later on.

### III. Elements of Distance Learning

This saves students time and money in terms of traffic, gas, parking and public transportation fees. With distance learning, submitting assignments, listening to lectures and participating in class can be as simple as logging in to the campus website. The flexibility of this learning model is particularly beneficial for non-traditional students who work full-time or have children at home. Deadlines for online coursework are often weekly rather than daily, allowing students to set their own schedules for school.

- **Self-Discipline**
  Working online offers online distractions such as social media, web browsing, email, chatting and video sites. Working at home offers distractions such as chores, errands, family responsibilities and the telephone. Therefore, students who participate in distance learning need self-discipline.

- **Time Management**
  In order to succeed in distance learning programs, students must properly manage their time, devoting a specific amount of time each day or a few times a week to schoolwork only. Creating a daily schedule allows students to monitor the time spent on distractions and can provide students with a study schedule to prevent them from falling behind.

- **Technology**
  A key element of distance learning is consistent access to functioning technology. To participate properly in online classes, students must have access to a computer and a fast internet connection, and they must have the ability to type. Most schools, however, provide manuals and technical guidance and support for students struggling with software related issues.

### IV. Different Types of Distance Learning

There are two types of distance learning:

- **Synchronous**
- **Asynchronous Distance Learning**

**Synchronous Distance Learning:** Synchronous literally means “at the same time”. Synchronous distance learning involves live communication either through sitting in a classroom, chatting online, or teleconferencing. Synchronous learning is less flexible and disrupts the student’s life to a greater extent. It is, however, the most popular form of college distance learning and continuing education programs, as it facilitates a greater amount of interaction between students and professors. Some classes that do well in a synchronous format include those degree programs that highlight communication, such as general psychology, nursing, general education, and counseling psychology. Those programs that weigh more heavily on projects and assignments thrive in an asynchronous format because they provide the students with more time to focus on their work. A few degrees that work well in this format include marketing, healthcare administration, legal assistant or paralegal, educational/instructional media design and advertising.

- **Asynchronous Distance Learning**
  Asynchronous means “not at the same time”. Asynchronous distance learning usually has a set of weekly deadlines, but otherwise allows students to work at their own pace. Students have more interaction with their peers and deliver correspondence through online bulletin boards. This type of learning might get tedious for some because they are usually only receiving the information through text medium, however some asynchronous classes involve video or audio supplements.

- **Open Schedule Online Courses**
  With open schedule online courses, students are allotted the greatest amount of freedom. This is an asynchronous form of learning in which students are provided Internet-based textbooks, mailing lists, Email and bulletin boards to complete their coursework. At the beginning of classes, the student is provided a set of deadlines, but is allowed to work at their own pace as long as the work is turned in by the deadline. This type of learning is great for students who work well independently and those who do not procrastinate.

- **Hybrid Distance Learning**
  Hybrid courses combine synchronous and asynchronous learning to create a structure in which the student is required to meet at a specific time in a classroom or Internet chat room. However, they are allowed to complete assignments on their own time and may pass them in through an online forum. This option is sometimes offered when a university lacks adequate space to accommodate all their course loads.

- **Fixed Time Online Courses**
  The most common type of distance learning today is fixed time courses. As the title states, these courses are strictly online, but students are required to log-in to their online learning site at a specific time. Although they are completely online, the format remains synchronous because mandatory live chats are often required.
A major drawback of asynchronous learning is the lack of real-time interaction, which tends to reduce the chance of just-in-time answers and team collaboration. Intelligent software systems may improve asynchronized learning. For instance, a student monitoring system may review individual performance via some norm-referenced evaluation strategies and advise them of their performance. On the other hand, synchronized distance learning requires an advanced network infrastructure for video conferencing.

V. Challenges Faced in Different Scenario

A. Challenges faced by students

- Generally distance learners have insecurities about learning due to reasons like disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers.
- There is no face to face contact with teachers and students have trouble in self-evaluation.
- Isolated feeling reported by distance students. They miss the collaboration of larger school community, and an important part of their social lives.
- Lack of support and services such as reach to tutors, academic planners and schedulers. This added to the isolation in the distance learning process complicate things.
- Students find that design of the study materials provided do not cater to the special needs of students undertaking distance education for the first time. The course content affects student persistence and poorly designed course materials contribute to student attrition rates.

When we try to introduce technology based learning, one needs to recognize the fact though mobile is available with students, they have used mobile only for making phone calls and entertainment and not for learning earlier. If mobile based distance learning is to be successful, technical barriers must be made a non-issue and the solutions should be easy to use and adopt.

B. Challenges faced by teacher

- Faculty might perceive distance learning as threat to service tenure and human resource staffing.
- A lot of upfront effort is needed to design distance learning material. This increases the workload on teachers who already have material for traditional classrooms.
- Faculty must meet the needs of distance students without face-to-face contact. Teachers primarily teach 18 to 22-year-olds students. When majority of distance learners are adults, teachers may need to change their teaching style and is not easy task.
- Teachers have less respect for the academics of distance courses. This can be enhanced by making distance programs have similar admission process as on-campus courses.
- Some teachers might not like the idea of distance learning, nor want to participate. interest and motivation are not success factors reserved only for the student, even the teachers need the same.

So long as college faculty feels there is a burden associated the distance education program currently in place, there will be little support for expanding distance education opportunities.

C. Challenges faced by university/institution

Though universities understand some of the challenges faced by students, they have challenges of themselves which hinder them from solving the problems of students and teachers.

- Technology needs investment and funds to setup toll-free lines and computers and pay ongoing costs of telecom and internet connectivity costs. In addition, the student also incur ongoing technology costs and possibly capital costs to purchase PC. Students might decide not to join the course and the problem continues.
- There is reliable internet connectivity/network to carry large amount of learning content. This would make browser based education delivery little tricky. In addition, the perceived anonymity of the Internet can give raise to abusive behavior and this is a new challenge that needs proper care and regulation.
- People believe distance courses are inferior to traditional courses and this reduces the motivation of teachers and students. To prove the belief wrong, universities need to ensure the quality in content and delivery of distance learning courses, matches with the regular campus classroom learning.
- Assessing student performance is a problem area in distance learning. How to do assessments? who and where to administer assessments? Who would value and give feedback on the assessments? Should we recruit separate staff for distance learning compared to classroom learning? What is the best way to go forward?

VI. Study done to optimize the situation

- Multi-media technologies are used during PCPs. Also Multisensory instructions are very useful to provide concrete experiences to distance learners.
Insecurities about learning are found in personal and school related issues such as financial costs of study, disruption of family life, perceived irrelevance of their studies and lack of support from employers. These pressures often result in higher dropout rates than among traditional students. For this proper planning and cooperation on the part of all those are associated with distant learners.

Lack of feedback or contact with the teacher. Because there is no daily or weekly face to face contact with teachers, students may have trouble in self-evaluation. The separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital link of communication between these two parties. The link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be re-integrated. Study hypothesized that students who did not receive adequate reintegration measures such as electronic or telephone communication, would be less likely to experience complete academic and social integration into institutional life. Consequently, such students would be more likely to drop out.

Technological methods such as e-mail, telecommunication and postal mail by integrating these into the delivery of the course are used to provide the missing interactivity.

Provision of student services such as advisement, library services, admissions and financial aid is a critical aspect of any distance learning program. The isolation that results from the distance learning process can complicate the learning process for adult students.

Support and services such as providing tutors, academic planners and schedulers, and technical assistance for distance learners should not be neglected when planning distance programs. Students need tutors and academic planners to help those complete courses on time and to act as a support system when stress becomes a problem.

Lack of Social interaction must be moderated by institutions providing a sense of personal involvement between the student and the institution. Also through the use of tutors that communicate with students electronically, by phone or personally at personal contract programme, social interaction can be increased.

Many adult students are not well versed in the uses of technology such as computers and the Internet. Using electronic medium in distance learning can inadvertently exclude students who lack computer or writing skills. These skills are required if computer technology is used.

VII. Conclusion

Distance learning is still in its infancy today. This is due to the limitations of distance education. But the potential of distance education cannot be ignored. If all the challenges are thoroughly studied and efforts are made to remove the uneasiness of students, teachers and educational institution due to odd factors, then distance learning programs can be more successful. Also, Virtual Reality-based communication, situated learning use, augmented panorama and real-time communication technologies can promote distance education arena. In this way, students can feel and experience the outdoor facilities inside the classroom. In addition, using wireless communication, students can access encyclopedia and e-books. Moreover, Mobile students can participate in a lecture, use online references, or read class notes. Students’ attraction, attention and motivation can be enhanced by making use of game technologies in education.

References


