Distance Education Plans: Facilitating Effective Web-Based Education for Adults

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Introduction

Web-based (online) distance education has become a major presence in higher education institutions as a method for serving the needs of adults who are place-bound and/or time-bound. To support the growing number of courses offered via the Internet, instructors are often placed in this dynamic teaching environment with little or no guidance. This lack of preparation in combination with varying levels of institutional support often leaves instructors discouraged and their students dissatisfied. To provide a successful experience for instructors and students alike, instructors need help adapting and developing their teaching approach to incorporate strategies that add value to each adult learner’s educational experience.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of distance education plans and to provide ideas for applying adult learning principles in web-based courses. This paper will help adult educators identify, organize, and facilitate value-laden teaching strategies at each phase of the web-based distance education experience (before, during, and after). Six categories will provide a framework for discussions within this paper, including: (a) needs assessment, (b) providing guidance, (c) building community, (d) facilitating communication, (e) humanizing the experience, and (f) evaluating the experience.

Distance Education Plans

To facilitate successful web-based courses, instructors need to develop a plan that helps them broaden their teaching approach to embrace both the unique demands of learning online and the unique and diverse needs of adult learners. Distance education plans—juxtaposed with the course curriculum, lesson plans, and motivational plans—can help instructors improve their effectiveness and in turn create a successful and
satisfying experience for everyone involved. A distance education plan is a systematic structure for introducing or applying distance education activities, methods, and strategies throughout the web-based learning process (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, in press).

The main goal of distance education plans is to create a technology supported, adult learner focused educational experience that enhances learning and satisfaction. Distance education plans are developed prior to the learning experience though should commonly be reviewed and modified by the facilitator throughout the web-based learning experience. Distance education plans outline strategies and establish appropriate initiatives before, during, and after the web-based distance education experience.

Distance education plans embrace the idea that distance education courses require a renewed commitment to adult learning principles (Burge, 1988; Collins, 1999; Hayes, 1990). The advent of web-based technologies for distance education has had a dramatic effect on teaching. These technologies are believed to have caused educators and researchers alike to question the effectiveness of traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching. Nearly twenty years ago, Knowles surmised that “by the end of this century most educational services will be delivered electronically by teleconferencing, cable and satellite television, computer networks and other means yet to be discovered—provided educators learn how to use the media in congruence with principles of adult learning” (1986, p. 4). Knowles was keen in his vision of electronic delivery of education; however, with the development of web-based education, instructors have yet to consistently place adult students and adult learning principles at the heart of distance learning – at the crux of their teaching strategies.

To offset this problem, distance education plans provide a guide for keeping adults at the forefront of web-based teaching and learning. Distance education plans set a foundation of strategies based on the understanding that adult learners bring a wealth of prior knowledge to the classroom and that adult learners find practical application vital to their ability to master curriculum content. Adult learning theories such as self-direction, experiential learning, and collaborative learning, which are key elements for successful distance learning (Collins, 1999; Hayes, 1990), can be woven within a distance education plan to help adult learners become actively involved in the learning process.

**Instructional Strategies**

Distance education plans provide a written roadmap for organizing instructional strategies throughout the entire web-based distance education process. Six major strategies for improving web-based instruction provide the framework for successful distance education plans. These strategies include needs assessment, providing guidance, building community, facilitating communication, humanizing the experience, and evaluating the experience.
Needs Assessment

Assessing student needs provides instructors information to develop a learning environment that is appropriate, responsive, and beneficial for both the learners and the instructor. Student needs assessment for web-based instruction includes the collection, synthesis, and interpretation of data about learners that can assist the instructor in matching student needs with the demands of the online learning environment. The main purpose of student needs assessment is to give the instructor the tools and information necessary to make solid decisions about how to best facilitate the educational experience from start to finish. This information will assist in setting learning objectives, deciding on curriculum content, and determining methods, strategies, and activities for effective learning. The overall importance of web-based student needs assessment is to create an environment that can establish, facilitate, and maintain learning that is focused on the adult learner.

Some important areas to assess in online courses include: (1) computer skills, (2) learning styles, (3) available resources, (4) learner’s desired outcomes, and (5) prior learning experiences. These are not the only areas an instructor may decide to assess. As long as an instructor can justify the purposefulness of an assessment, there is a high probability that the assessment will benefit the instructor, the learning environment, and in turn the adult learner.

The necessity for student assessments is easily justified and commonly supported as an important endeavor. Unfortunately, understanding the importance does not guarantee the success of the venture. Implementing a student needs assessment may be disastrous without the assistance of a well-organized distance education plan. When conducting needs assessment, planning is central (Galbraith, Sisco, & Guglielmino, 1997). The sequence of events for successful needs assessment within web-based courses includes: (a) define the purpose, (b) choose the assessment methods, (c) develop a timeline for data collection, (d) conduct the student needs assessment, (e) analyze the data, and (f) match student needs with course strategies, methods, and activities (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, in press). By following this sequence and by incorporating these steps into their course distance education plan, instructors can increase success in online courses.

Providing Guidance

A primary goal of teaching via distance education is to develop students who can function independently, think critically, and actively participate in the learning process (Wolcott, 1996). However, attempting to provide web-based learners with a greater degree of autonomy and independence can be unnerving to individuals who are accustomed to spoon-fed, passive education where instructors pontificate information. In order to help students become familiar with the active learning that occurs in web-based environments, the instructor must provide guidance to the learners through developing foundations and articulating expectations.
Teachers accepting the role as a guide, leader, or facilitator, rather than an authoritative disseminator of truths is grounded in adult education literature (Dewey, 1916; Knowles, Elwood, & Swanson, 1998; Lindeman, 1961) and is widely accepted in distance education settings (Dillon & Walsh, 1992; Wolcott, 1996). However, the application of learner-centered teaching styles in web-based distance education can be difficult. Too many rules and the instructor becomes an autocrat; too few expectations and the instructor is besieged in anarchy. Both extremes stifle student learning and satisfaction. Instructors in a web-based course must provide guidance for individuals to flourish in a democratic learning environment where both individual and group needs are met.

Providing guidance in a web-based environment requires purpose and attention. There are five major guidance areas to consider when writing distance education plans. Although most instructors are natural leaders, they need to make a conscious effort to guide students in the following areas: (1) role definitions, (2) course procedures, (3) participation, (4) academic content, and (5) communication. Providing guidance relative to these areas allows students a range of movement—a range of appropriate responses to situations they will encounter in the course. This range allows students to find a response that meets their personal comfort levels and individual needs while creating a situation where behaviors are also responsible to group expectations. The fluidity of the boundaries incorporates a range of appropriate behaviors, which allows for the safety of trial and error learning by the individual yet maintaining a respect of the diversity of the individuals that compose the group. The instructor encourages independent and active learning to take place while still providing enough structure through foundations and expectations to ensure that the group is aligned within a comfortable and appropriate learning environment.

**Building Community**

Joined by members' identities and belonging, communities of learners inspire a vested commitment to the group and to learning. The end result of this investment produces a community of learners that is more complex than merely the collection of individuals that compose that group. In a web-based environment, satisfaction and learning are enhanced by community involvement, interaction, and relationships (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Learning is supported and nurtured through the collaborative learning activities and shared responsibility which are a foundation in learning communities (O’Banion, 1997).

Students who have participated in learning communities describe reaping many benefits from their experience including an appreciation of other students' perception, a new perception on their own learning process, an increased intellectual connection between past and current learning, an opportunity for learning collaboratively, and an avenue for creating friendships and a sense of belonging (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Learning communities have been found to increase learner retention, learner performance, and learner involvement (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1994). Web-based distance education learning communities are valuable because they serve social needs and in consequence enhance learning. Learning communities set a foundation for
democracy in education by highlighting adult learning principles such as collaboration and shared responsibility.

The elements for building community within web-based environments are largely based on instructor beliefs including: appreciating the importance of community, the desire to build community, and recognizing that community can be built in web-based courses. Instructors, by providing means for adult learners to develop local and remote relationships for learning, will create an environment that builds and supports learning communities. Strategies for focusing on building community can be integrated into distance education plans by focusing on five main instructional categories: (1) welcome activities, (2) web page design and interface, (3) group dynamics, (4) integrated goals, and (5) mutual respect and ethics.

Facilitating Communication

Communication is sharing something—information, ideas, or thoughts. Communication pathways (channels) are the avenues for sharing this information from one source to another. In the context of education, communication pathways provide opportunities for learning to take place. The brilliance of what transpires when an individual uses communication pathways to interact with others, share knowledge, debate issues, links other's life experiences with content knowledge is the advanced form of learning which Lindeman describes as "proper stimulations for intellectual growth" (1961, p. 89). The true value of web-based learning is that the technology provides a variety of pathways that can be used by facilitators and students to enhance communication and consequently learning.

Communication pathways are the essence of web-based distance education. When working properly, they promote growth and learning. Specifically, they allow for clarity of information, promote depth of information, create an opportunity for pathway-learner harmony, build enthusiasm for content learning, decrease transactional distance, and facilitate interaction. Strategies for facilitating communication can be integrated into distance education plans by focusing on two general types of communication pathways including (1) asynchronous communication—not concurrent in time and (2) synchronous communication—simultaneous communication. Each type is important and both should be employed to provide balance. Currently there are some mainstay pathways that have stood the test of time and have developed into comprehensive communication systems. These include email, electronic mailing lists, bulletin boards, threaded discussion boards, video conferencing, chat rooms, MUD sessions, and instant messaging. Web-based communication pathways will continue to grow with the emergence of new technologies; instructors should seek to incorporate those pathways that will facilitate communication and enhance adult learning.

Humanizing the Experience

Humanizing is the action of creating a situation or environment that is people-focused and meets the needs of individuals in a holistic manner. Humanizing the web-based
learning environment means making the technologically mediated learning environment
more personal for individuals (DuCharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, in press). Moore
and Kearsley suggested "some of the most common causes of failure in distance
education result from decision makers being unaware of the multidimensional nature of
distance teaching...This comes from an over-simplistic view of teaching that views
teaching as merely the presentation of information" (1996, p. 133). Generated and
nurtured from the inside, a carefully constructed learning environment will give the
learner a sense of self, give individuals an accurate sense of other group members, and
exemplify feelings of genuine caring from the instructor. In addition, such an
environment gives the online learner something to hold on to when they feel isolated or
discouraged.

Instructor immediacy behaviors are a fundamental means of humanizing the web-based
distance education experience. Instructor immediacy is a theory of affective learning
based on the idea that instructor verbal and nonverbal behaviors are related to student
attitudes and instructional outcomes (Andersen, 1979; Mehrabian, 1981; Rodriguez,
Plax, & Kearney, 1996). Immediacy behaviors are behaviors that cultivate closeness
between individuals (Mehrabian, 1981) and reduce the psychological distance between
teachers and students (Andersen, 1979). Instructor immediacy behaviors that increase
student perception of closeness with their instructor have been shown to have a positive
correlation with student learning in classroom settings (Christophel, 1990; Rodriguez, et
al., 1996; Menzel & Carrell, 1999). Such instructor immediacy behaviors have also
been found to create a positive affect toward the instructor and the subject matter and to be
positive predictors of student learning and satisfaction in distance education courses
(Arbaugh, 2001; Dooley, Van Laanen, & Fletcher, 1999).

Implementing immediacy behaviors within the web-based distance education
environment encompasses many different areas. These areas include (1) recognizing
each person as an individual (not a computer), (2) developing rapport and mutual trust,
and (3) returning information to learners about their efforts with the purpose of
modification, improvement, encouragement, and praise. Through the combination of
these efforts education that is built upon technology, takes on a human factor as the
environment becomes about people and relationships.

Evaluating the Experience

Evaluation is a valuable tool for continuous improvement within web-based courses.
Data that can lead to a new awareness will improve the online learning environment for
the instructor and the students. In general, individuals often struggle with change and
this can be aggravated when change is implemented without purpose. Valid evaluation
results provide the instructors with information that will lead to rational decisions on why
they are making changes and how to make necessary changes in future courses.
Drawing conclusions from evaluations does not necessarily have to lead to change. If
evaluation results indicate certain strategies are working, then maintaining that
methodology is appropriate. If evaluation results indicate that the strategies are not
effective, it is crucial that change is explored and that appropriate changes are incorporated.

Evaluations do more than help individual instructors improve their future courses. Sharing evaluation results with other professions can help build a body of knowledge that will assist other instructors in their journey into web-based education. Cahoon (1998) asserts that web-based instructors have a professional responsibility to add to the literature within the field. Since web-based distance education is an emerging educational milieu, adding to the literature by publishing journal articles based on evaluation results is critical. Instructors have a responsibility—a professional standard—to share their evaluations, research, and findings with the broader community.

Quality evaluation takes both variety of sources and depth. Instructors can produce comprehensive assessments based on their experiences. If students are added to the evaluation process, the results will be diversified and strengthened. In addition, if the evaluations are in-depth, instructors will have strong and reliable assessments that cover all areas of the web-based distance education experience. Evaluation does not end when the data is collected; instead the process incorporates the data. Evaluation results and data must be synthesized and then used as information to implement change. The sequence of events for successful needs assessment within web-based courses includes: (a) decide what should be evaluated, (b) choose the evaluation type and method, (c) develop a timeline, (d) conduct the evaluation, (e) synthesize the information, (f) reflect on the results, and (g) implement change. Web-based instructors can increase success by incorporating these steps for evaluation into their course distance education plan.

Developing Distance Education Plans

Instructors must take an active role in developing web-based distance education plans. Since distance education plans influence the success of the web-based educational experience, instructors must continually evaluate, review, and amend their distance education plans. In doing so instructors can facilitate learning that is life-centered and personalized.

When incorporating strategies into distance education plans, instructors should ask themselves the following questions: (1) Does this activity support the learning objectives? (2) Is this activity supporting deep learning? (3) Is this activity directly benefitting the adult learners in this course? (4) Will the incorporation of technology create any barriers to learning? The answers to these questions will allow instructors to make solid teaching decisions. In addition, instructors who incorporate distance education plans will find web-based courses less time-consuming and arduous than expected. The development of distance education plans focuses on organizing instructional efforts before, during, and after the distance education experience and therefore cuts down on redundant effort. With the help of distance education plans,
instructors will find that designing and facilitating a web-based course can be a rewarding.

A first-time plan will not be perfect. Trial and error is a natural part of any educational endeavor. A well-defined distance education plan will help instructors cut down on the number of instructional errors, but imperfections will inevitably surface during development and implementation. The key is to set realistic expectations about promoting learning, student success, and student satisfaction; regardless of any setbacks, an instructor should continuously work toward improvements.

Conclusion

As web-based distance education becomes indispensable to higher education initiatives, it is imperative that these entities refine their distance learning programs to better serve the needs of adult learners. This paper introduced the concept of distance education plans and provided ideas for applying adult learning principles in web-based courses. Throughout this paper, discussion focused on six major strategies for improving web-based instruction including: (a) needs assessment, (b) providing guidance, (c) building community, (d) facilitating communication, (e) humanizing the experience, and (f) evaluating the experience. Value laden strategies for facilitating effective distance education, at each stage in the distance education process, will lead to successful programs by increasing student learning and student satisfaction. Offering students an enhanced web-based learning environment will bolster the reputation of distance learning as a means of delivering quality learning experiences and of propelling distance education enrollment well into the twenty-first century.

References


