

Creating a Successful Distance Education Environment

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### Abstract

A successful environment, what makes a successful environment? Through this research of a number of journals and sources, hopefully this question will be resolved. Distance education is growing rapidly. More and more people are strictly in online programs due to flexibility, convenience, etc. It is important that educators are conducting these online courses in a way that makes the student feel a sense of community through collaboration. It is important that both the student and instructor have a good sense of communication throughout the course so that both can succeed. This research will look at the definition of distance learning, the impact it has and will have, important factors regarding successful distance learning and challenges that can arise in distance education.

### **DEFINING DISTANCE EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

According to Simonson, distance education can be defined as “an institution based, formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (Teaching and Learning at a Distance, 31). There are many other things that can define distance education, but this gives a general overview of the subject and what it entails. Distance education and learning is growing and evolving day by day. Southeastern Oklahoma State University gives a more in depth and specific definition of distance education, they define it as education that uses one or more of the listed technologies: delivering instruction to students who are not near the instructor and synchronously or asynchronously interactions between student(s) and instructor. Types of technology used in distance education include: the internet, video conferencing, blogs, web-based multimedia, audio files, online quizzes and tests, email, synchronous and asynchronous communications through video or audio, portfolios and a number of other things. The incredible thing about distance learning is that there is no real limit on where it can end. Technology is growing and advancing by the second, even in the past 5-10 years leap we have made in technological advances is unbelievable. Distance education and distance learning is something that is fluid and evolving.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Distance education is extremely relevant in today’s society. The number of people who are pursuing degrees online has increased. A news article written by Jordan Friedman states, “based on federal data from more than 4,700 colleges and universities, more than 6.3 million students in the U.S. took at least one online course in the fall of 2016” (Friedman, 2018). Friedman also noted that this is the fourteenth consecutive year that growth of online enrollment

has been reported by the Babson Survey Research Group. Distance education gives people the opportunity to pursue and obtain a degree or certification that they may otherwise not have been able to accomplish. Whether it is someone with a full time job, a person with social disabilities, someone who lacks reliable transportation to and from a college or university, or a number of other things, distance education provides a more flexible plan in order to reach more people. From my own personal experience, online learning has made it possible for me to get my masters degree while holding a full time job. There is no way I would be able to attend face-to-face classes and hold the job that I do now. I am extremely thankful for distance learning and education.

A topic that has only been talked about briefly this semester is virtual schools at the high school level. A study performed by Flores, Walters and Kiekel talks about the need for virtual schools and the options it opens up for high school students, including: access to courses for college and career readiness, AP tests, Dual Credit classes, stem courses, the ability to recover credits, graduate on time and the flexibility online courses offer to ones schedule (Flores, 2018). While I believe that these are all valid reasons for high school students to participate in online learning, I also believe that if the student is to take online classes, they should also be taking at least three face-to-face classes. High school is a crucial time in the development of young people and it is important that students are exposed to social settings where they can learn from each other in more ways than just through a computer screen.

Within the last few generations we have seen a major change in what most children are interested in and how they learn. Technology has become so prevalent that a number of children have access to a cellphone, iPad, computer, etc. As educators, this can be used to our advantage. In the school that I work at every student is issued an iPad. While it can become a distraction at

times, if the teacher is willing to come up with activities and projects using the technology, it can be beneficial. Information is taken in much smaller bits than 5 to 10 years ago due to the increase of social media. Our students are learning differently and it is our job as educators to find their learning styles whether it is in a face-to-face class or through distance education.

### **IMPORTANT FACTORS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

While distance education is important as a whole, there are a number of factors that play into distance education being as successful as possible. These include, but are not limited to, communication, collaboration, attitude, retention and reduction of attrition and the presence of an instructor.

### **COMMUNICATION**

Communication is an act that is crucial in all aspects of life. As with learning styles, the communication styles that people are comfortable with differ. Some people prefer and are more efficient at communicating face-to-face, whereas others would feel more comfortable communicating through an electronic device, there is no right or wrong when it comes to this, just a matter of personal preference. Communication in distance learning must come from both the instructor and the student, without a high level of consistent communication it is unlikely that the course will be as successful as it could be with communication. Instructors must communicate expectations and course requirements from the very beginning of the course. In turn, students must communicate with their instructors on both the expectations and requirements if there is something that lacks clarity or the student is having trouble locating. I personally have been very blessed with instructors who have a high level of communication and provide most all the information needed plus some from the very beginning. Communication may be exhibited through email, the class portal, discussion boards, or blogs. Each of these tools can play a big

role in successful distance education. Another important type of communication is among the students. Many times in distance education, students are expected to work together and this obviously takes a great deal of communication. This is one of the more challenging types of communication in my experience. Generally, everyone has a different schedule and it may be hard to all “be in one place.” However, as stated before distance education provides the flexibility and time needed to respond to peers and instructors as needed.

### **COLLABORATION**

Collaboration can piggyback off of communication. In order to successfully collaborate with your classmates, communication is key. The study *Student Perceptions of a Successful Online Collaborative Learning Community* (2016) really hones in on a multitude of challenges that students face trying to achieve success in an online learning environment. In terms of online collaboration researchers found that “online learners often report feeling alone and/or isolated during participation in online courses” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). This is certainly a downside to the online classroom. However, researchers continue to search on how these feelings can be resolved. There are efforts being made in the online learning community to create a sort of community through distance education. This community can be built through collaboration. Collaboration enables the students to get to know each other and share ideas, thoughts, etc. with one another. Yes, at first being in an online class can be intimidating and there is a sense of aloneness, but the importance of sticking it out and giving your best effort can not be of any more importance. I can say through personal experience, when I began an all-online program I felt extremely isolated. Being in a strictly online program is much different than taking one or two online classes and being in three or four face-to-face classes. However, with adjustments and also finding a common ground with my classmates, it became easier and much less intimidating

as the course went on. It is important for educators and potential future instructors to always promote a sense of community through collaboration in distance education.

### **ATTITUDE**

Distance education tends to be more self-guided learning. Yes, there is an instructor who provides direction for the course, but in an online setting it is crucial that the learner take responsibility. The attitude of the learner is important because if the learner does not want to “be there,” their success probably is not going to be very high in the course. The instructor is obviously not responsible for the attitude of the student, but the instructor should provide engaging information in order to give the student the best chance at success.

### **RETENTION AND REDUCTION OF ATTRITION**

The retention of students within the first few online courses taken can be a challenge. This lack of retention causes attrition throughout the online program. A study performed on factors that influence student attrition in online courses found verbal and physical learning styles as well as personal attributes (ex. Procrastination) can increase the likelihood of attrition, whereas the desire to pursue a degree, computer competency and typing skills tend to decrease the likelihood for attrition (Shaw, Burris & Ferguson, 2016). This study also concluded that several factors contributed to student retention, these included: class rank, GPA, previous experience with the Internet, and previous technology experience. It must be mentioned that many students that participate in strictly online programs are often non-traditional students (ex. Parents, working adults, military, etc.). In order to measure the likelihood of student attrition, researchers used *SmarterMeasure* to diagnosis factors that include: attributes (motivation, procrastination, willingness to ask for help, etc.), life factors (availability of time, support from family, finances, etc.), learning styles, competence in regards to technology, technical

knowledge, typing speed and accuracy and on-screen reading rate and recall (Shaw, Burris & Ferguson, 2016). When non-traditional students are taken into consideration along with the factors mentioned above, it can be seen why attrition rates are seen. Student engagement is a big part of retaining students, much like collaboration. It is crucial that instructors make students feel as though they are apart of a community.

### **PRESENCE OF AN INSTRUCTOR**

There is understandably a concern among students with the presence of an instructor in an online environment. Most students have grown up with a teacher in the classroom who is for the most part readily available to them. A study performed by Cutsinger, Wall and Tapps evaluated the students' perception of the amount of instructor presence in a predominately online class versus a face-to-face class. While there is no real difference between the perceptions of the two, the study did find that satisfaction with the course was related to the presence of the instructor of the course. In an earlier study that Cutsinger references, researchers found "that teacher and social presence were significantly higher in the online format...three elements of teaching presence (instructional management, building understanding and direct instruction) were identified as significant (Bowers& Kumar, 2015). This goes back to the topic of communication. In an online setting, it is important for instructors to be able to manage the material being used, help build the student's understanding of the material and then give instruction related to the materials. Just as instructors expect students to be efficient and timely in turning in work and communication, students also expect timely feedback and communication from the instructor. These qualities exhibited by an instructor tend to show more satisfaction from the student, just as qualities shown from the student provide satisfaction for the instructor of the course. Whether it be communication, collaboration, attitude, retention and reduction of



attrition or the presence of the instructor, all five of these factor into a successful distance education environment.

### **THE IMPACT OF DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Over a twelve-year period, online student enrollment jumped from 5.9% to 32.1% (Cutsinger, Wall & Tapps, 2018). The impact distance education has had is remarkable and the impact it will have is completely unknown. Distance education provides people with opportunity, opportunities that may otherwise not be there. Distance education provides flexibility, accessibility and a level of convenience to people. Not only does distance education provide flexibility for non-traditional students, it also is highly popular among student athletes, dancers, singers, etc. (Bates & LaBrecque). The particular activities tend to take a great deal of practice whether at the high school or college level. Distance education provides these students with the opportunity to participate in these activities while still getting the best education possible. This type of education allows anyone with access to a computer/internet, a willingness to learn and the right resources with a chance at an education. Distance education is growing and increasing rapidly, it will be extremely interesting to see where we are in the next five to ten years in our definition and understanding of distance learning and education.

### **CHALLENGES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Similar to most things in life, distance education also possesses challenges. The challenge of self-discipline from the student, the lack of face-to-face communication with other students and/or instructors, the feeling of isolation, the need for a reliable computer and internet source, and the struggle if the student is unfamiliar with technology overall. Another challenge that lies within distance learning is supporting different types of learners. Although instructors will hardly ever be able to teach to every student's strengths all the time, there does need to be an awareness

of the abilities of the students and how they learn best. A study by references “new ‘types’ of learners emerge who may be more digitally competent than previous generations due to their ‘digital native’ status” (Gillett-Swan, 2017), however if this is the case, we cannot forget about those who may also be in the course that are non-traditional learners that tend to be a little older. There is a fine line that the instructor must balance on in order to try and reach each learner and bring out the best while also creating a community through collaboration in the class. There are clearly many more challenges that could be listed, however, these are the main ones. Researchers continue studying and searching out the best way to go about distance education. As it is studied more and more, instructors will become more proficient in retention of students in online programs.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, hopefully the importance of creating a successful distance education environment can be better understood. While distance learning and education has more of a focus on the student, it really is a balance of communication between the instructor and the students. There are “duties” that each must perform in order to get the most out of the course. Distance education will continue to evolve as technology advances. An article published by John Traxler raised the question “Does distance learning have a place in the world of the future, a place amongst other ongoing and emerging educational trends, fashions and concepts and a place in a world of dramatic political, economic, social and ecological change? Starting with the global context and systematically working inwards and downwards provides us with a framework for analyzing whether distance learning does indeed have a place.” I believe the answer to this is quite simple. Distance education certainly has a place in the future and will only continue to expand over time.

It is exciting to see where distance learning and education will go from here. The possibilities are truly endless with the advances that are being made. One can only hope that in online learning and distance education that we do not lose the value of our educational systems and what has been done for so long. However, times change and our brains work in different ways as technology and the world around us changes. It is important that educators remain diligent in their teaching whether it be face-to-face or in an online setting. A certain standard must be held in order to get the best out of students and make online learning and distance education the best that it can be.

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