Education at a Distance: Best Practices and Considerations for Leadership Educators

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Abstract

E-learning is an increasingly popular form of education for college students (Allen & Seaman, 2007). There are a number of best practices for teaching online courses (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006) which should be followed by leadership educators. In addition, for a wide variety of reasons, women comprise a significant portion of the distance education population. Because of their differing communication styles and needs (Tannen, 1989, 1991), women may have a harder time being perceived as valuable members of the virtual community. They may also find the experience less meaningful than their male counterparts (Harper, 2007). If leadership education is to be successful moving into the 21st century it must be welcoming to female students. Suggestions for improving online learning are provided, especially for female students.

Distance Education Trends

While distance education was a relatively novel concept only a decade ago, its popularity has spread to nearly all institutions of higher education, and its growth rate outstrips that of traditional "on-ground" classes with approximately 3.5 million people enrolling in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Surveys by the National Center for Education Statistics suggest that 90% of two-year and 89% of four-year public degree-granting institutions offer distance learning as a part of their curriculum (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). Some argue that e-learning better prepares students for the 21st century world in which they will be working than the traditional on-ground education and that the very nature of education has shifted to one of enabling communication, information seeking and filtering, and collaboration with peers and instructors (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Given this trend, it is essential for those who teach leadership to find ways to best deliver their curricula in an online format in order to continue to reach this evolving market.

The increasing cost of living, of gas specifically, has made earning a degree from home an even more attractive option than it once was (Young, 2008). Additionally, the expanding use of technology has made it easier for people to take classes online. According to the Census Bureau (2005), as of 2003, nearly 62% of U.S. households have personal computers, and approximately 55% of U.S. households have internet access. As a result, e-learning is now a viable option for over one-half of all U.S. households, excluding those who have access to public computers at libraries and other locations.

Even when correspondence courses were the only way to earn a degree from a distance, these programs were marketed predominately toward women (Kramarae, 2003). In today's society distance education for women continues to be an attractive option, especially for those who are in the traditional role of taking care of children at home whether it is their full-time job or their task when they are not at a job outside the home. Given this constraint, while their male counterparts may more readily have the option of going to evening or weekend classes to complete degree programs offered by their local colleges and universities, many women who wish to further their education are turning to the option to go online to pursue their degrees. Aragon and Johnson (2008) found that women are more likely to complete online courses than are men, so making sure those courses are "female friendly" is essential to the value received by the majority of those who complete online courses.

Best Practices

With these factors in mind, it is important for facilitators of leadership classes online to follow the best practices for e-learning with an understanding that female students may be more sensitive to some class dynamics than their male counterparts will be. Best practices have been broken down into several areas: technology, learner, instructor, pedagogy, and organization (Miller & King, 2003).

Technology

When employing distance learning, instructors must be sensitive to the technical skills of their learners and should be willing to provide support with new software to help students effectively use the electronic platform chosen (Miller & King, 2003). For example, providing a pre-course welcome letter that outlines the use of the software can be helpful. Additionally, providing some non-credit or pass/fail assignments that require students to interface with the learning software and platform can improve technical skills of all users. While synchronous learning at a distance maintains some of the "live" interactions found in face-to-face classes, it

is more expensive to run a synchronous class than an asynchronous one. As a result, there is more growth in asynchronous courses (NCES, 2008). Given the potential for technological failures, instructors must have plans in place for students in the event of an internet outage or the like. While technical glitches are less of a "crisis" in asynchronous classes, instructors still need to be flexible with students who experience difficulties. For example, being able to reset the deadline for a paper submitted online is an important feature of any learning platform.

Being able to handle technology, including developing contingency plans for technological failures, is a skill leaders in the 21st century must possess. While it has always been important for leaders to be able to manage a variety of people and projects, now they must also be prepared for leading people who are technologically dependent. Teaching students to navigate a variety of software and to handle occasional disruptions in technology is important to the success of any program preparing leaders for today's job market.

Students

Because most of the students in distance classes are non-traditional (Miller & King, 2003), they bring life and work experience to the class that their traditional counterparts often do not. Including assignments which ask students to relate to their experiences can be especially meaningful to this student population. To be successful in online coursework, students need to have strong self-discipline and need to take more responsibility for their learning than their peers who enroll in face-to-face classes (King, 2001; Lamb, 2000; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). This is especially true in asynchronous courses because there are no specific times at which the student must be in class. The written communication skills of learners become even more critical in distance learning than in face-to-face classes because of the need for the written word to convey the full extent of the ideas which the students are trying to express without the benefit of facial expressions, tone, body language, and other cues. Care should be taken when enrolling students into distance courses to prepare them for the strong written skills they will need and to apprise them of the need to be self-motivated if they are to succeed.

Instructors

Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) provide a list of characteristics of effective online instructors. Among the behaviors they found to be best practices are: fostering interaction, providing feedback, facilitating learning, and maintaining enthusiasm and organization. While all of these may also help success in "on-ground" learning, they are seen as especially critical to the success of distance education. The communication skills needed by students are also requisite for instructors of

distance education. To have a successful course, instructors need to go beyond simply posting their notes and slides from their "on-ground classes." Perhaps the biggest barrier for instructors of distance education is a lack of time and compensation for their efforts with distance education (Miller & King, 2003). It requires significantly more time to teach an online course than a traditional one (Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Smith, et al., 2001). Some research has shown that this extra time results in students finding instructors more approachable than in traditional classes (Kroder, et al., 1998). Fostering interaction among students and between the students and the instructor is critical to student satisfaction and retention (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). Because of the pedagogical shift when moving a class from a face-to-face format to an online one, the interaction between the students and the faculty member is a key to success for the students and the class as a whole (Hiltz, 1997; Miller & King, 2003; Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Palloff & Prait, 1999, 2001). Distance educators need to be willing to commit the time to interact on message boards, in chat rooms, and via email with their students if they are to achieve the best course outcomes.

In many ways, leadership educators who teach online have an opportunity which their face-to-face colleagues do not. Online leadership educators can demonstrate leadership communication skills which their students will need in an increasingly technology driven world. While leadership educators often discuss communication as a vital skill for their students, in online courses this skill is critical to completing classes. If students cannot communicate effectively using technology, they may be ill-prepared to be leaders in a world where virtual meetings and virtual teams are becoming commonplace.

Pedagogy

Pedagogically distance educators need to be aware that even without face-to-face interactions, it is incumbent upon them to promote interaction among students and to encourage collaborative learning (Gunawardena, 1995). This is especially critical to female students for whom communication with peers helps them to form bonds (Tannen, 1989, 1991). Instructors can facilitate a collaborative learning environment and help students feel more attached to the class by using discussion threads that require students to incorporate their own life and work experiences rather than hypothetical examples (Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006) and by assigning team projects that require learners to make connections with others in the class. In leadership education, having relatively small teams where each student has the opportunity to take a leadership role during the course in completing a team project is one way to facilitate the learning of "soft skills" usually incorporated in face-to-face classes. Given that more and more virtual teams are being used in business, having teamwork in online courses actually provides a level of skill many face-to-face programs do not currently offer. The ability to lead others at a distance is increasingly in demand in today's global

economy. By teaching students how to collaborate without needing to be in the same room, leadership educators can better prepare their students for the market place in which they will be working.

Organizations

Many universities are still reluctant to embrace distance education, and that attitude is another barrier to its success. Organizational structures support historic ways of teaching and are often slow to incorporate technology into the equation (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Vaughn, 2007). If distance education is to succeed, the leaders within educational institutions must support it both financially and attitudinally. There is a learning curve for faculty who have never taught distance courses and there are training costs the organization must incur if they are to develop quality education online (Vaughn, 2007).

Additional Considerations for Female Students

While all of these suggestions for best practices can help distance educators, special care must be taken to make sure that female students are feeling connected to the class because without that attachment, female students are less likely to be retained. Burge (1998) suggests that avoidance of male dominated discussions and other typically male interactions will help improve the quality of online education. This includes the crowding out effect (Fahy, 2002) which occurs when male students are permitted to "rule" the online discussions. It also includes the perceived male dominance in online discussions based on their use of language (Tannen, 1989, 1991). Research has shown that, regardless of the gender of the student, instructor feedback had a significant effect on students' perceived learning outcomes (Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006). It appears, then, that facilitator interaction in a class which provides feedback to all students and prevents domination of discussions will enhance the learning experience and increase satisfaction for students of both genders. This may be especially important to the satisfaction of the women in the class.

There are other factors which seem to contribute to overall satisfaction with online courses. Social presence was associated with students' reports of learning more and gaining more satisfaction from online courses (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Social presence is defined as the degree of salience a person has in a mediated interaction. Richardson and Swan further defined salience in this context as the degree to which a person is perceived to be a meaningful participant in online discussions. Tinto (1993) found that students who felt they were part of the learning community were more likely to persist in courses than those who felt unattached to the class. Helping to enhance this attachment allows

for students to feel that they are an important part of the class (Moore, 1989, 1993; Wagner, 1997) which may be especially important to the female students.

Unfortunately, if women are not encouraged to post more nor provided with supportive feedback, they often perceive lower group attachment in online classes than their male counterparts (Harper, 2007). This is especially important when understanding that women seek, through their communication, to find membership in groups and to build bonds and attachments with others (Tannen, 1990, 1994). If they do not perceive attachment to their peers in online courses, they are less likely to report satisfaction with their learning experiences and to persevere to degree completion (Tinto, 1993). One obvious measure of attachment may be the number of posts a student adds to discussion threads. In general, women posted fewer messages than their male counterparts (Chyung, 2007). Awareness of this issue will allow facilitators of online leadership classes to intervene early to encourage female students to post more.

A warning flag for facilitators of leadership courses online is the use of tentative language because it is associated with a low degree of salience (Fahy, 2002; Reid, Keerie, & Palomares, 2003). Unfortunately, Herring (1994, 2000, 2001) found that women's communication patterns were more often perceived to be tentative including signs of being apologetic and qualifying. Graddy (2006) showed that the tentative language from women included significantly more frequent use of words such as, "I think" in their postings than in men's postings in the same course. As a result, many women's postings may have been perceived as less meaningful than men's, and the language used may also be a sign of women's lower overall attachment to and salience for online courses. Facilitators of online leadership courses should be aware of these signs of detachment from a class so that they can both intervene to help retain women in their classes and also improve their satisfaction with the course. The courses Graddy (2006) reviewed were graduate courses, but there is no reason to expect different trends in undergraduate classes, especially given that research has found that older students generally post more often than their younger peers (Chyung, 2007).

Conclusion

Distance education is a growing trend for educators. Those who hope to successfully deliver leadership education online must be aware of not only the standard best practices for online teaching but also of the specific issues which may arise for women enrolled in these courses. Best practices outlined here include: (a) making sure that satisfactory technology is in place, (b) that students are aware of the need for strong communication skills and self-motivation, (c) that instructors do not abandon the pedagogy they use in leadership education face-to-face when they shift to online teaching, and (c) that institutional support needs to

be available. These practices will help develop quality distance education courses. Further, educators need to be on the lookout for signs indicating a lack of attachment to their courses among female students and need to take action to help retain this critical demographic of students.

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