TIME AND PLACE UTILITY AND THE REQUIREMENT FOR SPONTANEITY

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This research brief addresses the quandary that arises when distance learners require both time and place utility, and prefer live interface. The development of the hybrid course, which incorporates elements of time delayed and instantaneous interaction, is seen as a response to instructor and student scheduling conflicts. Faculty and student preparation for a delivery format that utilizes electronic communication is addressed as well as instructional strategies and delivery methods. Equipment requirements are suggested. There are proposals for further research into the question of what subject matter is suitable for distance learning and the need to incorporate emerging technologies into the process.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education (DE) began as a response to the need for time and place utility. DE has evolved from the correspondence course and its mail delivery system to high tech, live interface delivery systems that involve state of the art electronic systems in the instructor's studio electronically linked to the student's classroom, home, or office. The trend appears to favor asynchronous offerings. Nebraska's Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education (2007) reports, "Synchronous and traditionally-delivered courses were once offered in the majority of Nebraska counties, but this number has declined as the popularity of asynchronous courses has increased" (p. 2). Midkiff and DaSilva (2000) offer an explanation: "Asynchronous distance learning effectively removes barriers of space and most barriers of time" (para. 6).

Throughout the evolution distance instructors and students have grappled with the students' preference for live interface as opposed to time-delayed interaction. Offir, Lev, and Bezalel (2008) recently found that when distance education is offered, "students prefer learning via a synchronous system rather than by an asynchronous system" (p. 1181). While synchronous distance learning (SDL) addresses the need for place utility, SDL does not adequately respond to the need for time

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utility. The response to this quandary appears to be, as Lorenzetti (2006) explains, "a new product known as a hybrid course" (para. 1), which incorporates live interface with the time delayed distance-learning models.

RESPONSE

The solution is found in a response to the need for time and place utility and the students' preference for live interface. Technological advances are the enabling agent. As Beldarrain (2006) reports, "The 21st century learner requires educational opportunities not bound by time or place, yet allow interaction with instructors and peers" (p. 150). The necessary pre-condition for the formula to be implemented is institutional commitment for capital expenditures and culture change. Levy (2008) counsels institutions to seek an answer to this question: Do you want a distance-learning program? If the answer is yes, are you willing to make the commitment for the reallocation of resources and culture change.?

FACULTY PREPARATION

The instructor is the make-or-break element. As Keegan (1990) explains when referring to the distance instructor, "needs the skills of a word process operator, of an instructional designer, graphic artist, and layout expert for print materials and extensive skills in the development and evaluation of audio, video, and computer-based materials" (p. 155).

Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, and Marx (2000) found that "faculty feel it is most important to obtain further education about, assistance with, or support for (a) developing interaction, (b) developing instructional materials, and (c) applying selected technologies" (para. 16).

The adage to walk in another person's shoes in order to understand that person applies here. Many instructors offering distance courses have never taken a distance course. Steinbronn and Merideth (2008) offer common sense advice: "The opportunity to participate in a course as an online student would benefit faculty who are unfamiliar with an online environment" (p. 275).

STUDENT PREPARATION

While faculty preparation for the distance learning experience is self-evident, student preparation is often overlooked. Bergman and Raleigh (1998) address the need for student preparation: "A room filled with cameras, monitors, and microphones becomes immediately intimidating" (para. 2).

For both synchronous and asynchronous delivery systems, the instructor needs to take time to brief the students on the use of hardware and software. Students should be alerted to the need for a computer with sufficient power to interface with the institution's software, and the institution needs to provide telephone access to a help desk (D'Orsie & Day 2006). The need for an initial live interface session, particularly for those students who are first-time distance learners is evident. An additional consideration is the student's ability to use a computer and to write in a clear and concise form. As Galusha (1997) comments, "distance learning can inadvertently exclude students who lack computer or writing skills" (para. 23).

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Distance is a barrier to spontaneity, and students seek spontaneity. Park and Bonk (2007) found "that learners valued spontaneous feedback, meaningful interactions, multiple perspectives, and instructors' supports" (p. 245). The course delivery strategy needs to enhance spontaneity. Fortunately, technological advances are enabling instructors to respond to this need.

Ng (2007), in an attempt to enhance spontaneity, suggests dividing students into tutorial groups that will meet, online, under the direction of tutor every 2 or 3 weeks during the

semester. Interwise software is suggested as a platform to enable this exercise.

The equipment and software systems, in addition to providing synchronous communication between the student and instructor, must provide a means of monitoring the student's progress. As Fidas, Kapsalis, and Tranoris (2006) noted, "it is considered to be the ability of the system to provide students and teachers with the necessary information that is important for each other regarding the past and current status of the involved entities" (p. 139).

Loeding and Wynn's (1999) suggestions include: clothing suitable for cameras, appropriate visual cues such as physical appearance and body language, name cards, the use of visuals with larger than normal fonts and colored backgrounds, and a visit to remote sites. Instructors are also encouraged to brief the audio-visual crew as to the lesson format so that camera angles and other hardware and software concerns are addressed. They concur with many authors who have researched DE by emphasizing the importance of interactivity.

Teaching at the remote site, conducting orientation sessions, and offering copious feedback are among the suggestions offered by Grasinger (1999).

EQUIPMENT

Equipment that provides real time interaction with a minimum of technical interruptions is needed for the desired spontaneous interface. Instructors report that lag time in videoconferencing makes it more difficult to engage the student (Anderson, Beavers, VaDeGrift, & Videon 2003).

Participants report technical problems, rather than pedagogical methods, as the difference between face to face and electronically connected interaction. Furthermore, they report particular concern with the audio equipment (Grant & Cheon 2007). The need for quality audio synchronous communication is supported by the students' comments found throughout the published research. Park and Bonk (2007) explain "Audio live communication…helped increase participant mutual understanding during discussions" (p. 259).

FURTHER RESEARCH

The question of whether or not specific subject matter is suitable for DE needs to be confronted. Current research suggests that students favor interactivity. Does this imply that a survey course in American history would be more suitable candidate for DE than a field biology course? The intuitive answer is American history. The empirical answer is inconclusive.

Student performance in the traditional classroom and in the DE experience is another factor. Kan and Cheung (2007), when commenting on current research, note that "there was no significant difference in student achievement between distance-learning classes and traditional classes" (p. 764). However, they point out that the predominant research was done in "accounting, economics or finance courses" (p. 763).

The traditional classroom oriented instructor needs to address the emerging technologies or, as Kop and Hill (2008) note, "new learners … will be able to find their experts elsewhere." Sauers and Walker (2004) advise future researchers "to focus their efforts on more narrowly identifying the best uses of online instruction and how to best implement these" (p. 441). Lindner, Dooley, and Hynes (2003) offer similar advice. They note that a precise definition of distance learning is required and then the researcher is to focus on the role of distance learning in academia, the instructor, the technology, and who are the students and their reason for coming.

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