



What's the deal with Long-Distance Learning?

by **Dwight Widaman**

So what is long distance-education? It is certainly not new, though we tend to think it is. Long-distance learning has been taking place for over a hundred years. Previously, mail-order courses were offered and used by millions of Americans. But technology has meant things have changed and the way the courses are offered continues to evolve.

Long-distance learning is the fastest growing segment of all education levels. For adults going back to school, it can open up doors to new careers and ministry. Is it right for you?

What is Distance Learning?

Distance learning traditionally has provided access to instructional programs for students who are separated by time and/or physical location from an instructor. Distance learning has been thought of as prepackaged text, audio and/or video courses taken by an isolated learner with limited interaction with an instructor or other students. This perspective is changing. Today information technologies and the Internet can allow rich interactive distance learning experiences that may surpass the interactivity of a traditional classroom.

Distance learning can be provided in several contexts, including stand alone distance learning, blended learning where the student participates in a regular class and distance learning class concurrently, and hybrid learning where distance learning supplements classroom instruction.

Learning is defined as "the act, process, or experience of gaining knowledge or skill."

Learning is the preferred term rather than education, which is generally defined as the knowledge or skill obtained or developed by the learning process. However educators often use the terms interchangeably.

Distance learning is conventionally defined as... "any educational or learning process or system in which the teacher and instructor are separated geographically or in time from his or her students; or in which students are separated from other students or educational resources."

Contemporary distance learning is effected through the implementation of computer and electronics technology to connect teacher and student in either real or delayed time or on an as-needed basis. Content delivery may be achieved through a variety of technologies, including satellites, computers, cable television, interactive video, electronic transmissions via



telephone lines, and others. Distance learning does not preclude traditional learning processes; frequently it is used in conjunction with in-person classroom or professional training procedures and practices. It is also called distributed learning."

Defining Elements

Several key features define distance learning. The importance of the teacher — learner communications cannot be overstated.

n The separation of teacher and learner during at least a majority of each instructional process

n Separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time.

n The use of educational media to unite teacher and learner and carry course content.

n The provision of two-way communication between teacher, tutor, or educational agency and learner, and

n Control of the learning pace by the student rather than the distance instructor.

These definitions apply equally to high tech and low tech approaches to distance learning. Having the appropriate, enthusiastic, and qualified staff is a make or break requirement.

clude e-mail, listservs, audiocassette courses, videotaped courses, correspondence courses, and WWW-based courses.

Two Types of Distance Learning

There are two distance education delivery system categories - synchronous and asynchronous.

Synchronous instruction requires the simultaneous participation of all students and instructors. The advantage of synchronous instruction is that interaction is done in "real time" and has an immediacy. Examples include interactive telecourses, teleconferencing and web conferencing, and Internet chats.

Asynchronous instruction does not require the simultaneous participation of all students and instructors. Students do not need to be gathered together in the same location at the same time. Rather, students may choose their own instructional time frame and interact with the learning materials and instructor according to their schedules. Asynchronous instruction is more flexible than synchronous instruction but experience shows that time limits are necessary to main focus and participation.

The self-paced format accommodates multiple learning levels and schedules. Examples of asynchronous delivery in-

clude e-mail, listservs, audiocassette courses, videotaped courses, correspondence courses, and WWW-based courses.

The advantages of asynchronous delivery include student choice of location and time, and interaction opportunities among the students as well as the instructor. One disadvantage is that self paced instruction places a substantial burden on the student to maintain interest, focus, and pace. This motivation can be difficult to sustain.

Three elements are of paramount importance to any successful distance education program:

- n instructional design
- n technology
- n support

When considering a long-distance program, ask questions about support and integration of technology.

Why Distance Learning?

Distance education increases access to learning opportunities. Well organized distance learning accommodates multiple learning styles.

Distance learning serves learners who are not likely to attend traditional class-

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10 Tips for Distance Learning Success



Starting a distance-learning course can be daunting, especially since in many cases students haven't done any formal education for many years. With this in mind, we've put together some useful tips to help you get the most out of your studies, keep motivated and on track with your course and achieve the qualification you need.

Get to know your course materials...

Your course materials and textbooks are designed to give you the basic knowledge and information you need to get through the course, so make sure you're familiar with them. If your textbooks are still in their wrappers, it's time to get reading...

...but don't stick to them exclusively

Reading around your chosen subject will give you a greater breadth and depth of knowledge, so extra reading and research can really help your studies. Your tutor will be able to suggest good resources, and will be able to offer you extra advice based on their own experience as well.

Set aside time to study

Organization is key to succeeding in distance learning, especially if you're juggling work and family commitments as well. Setting aside regular, short bursts of time to spend on your studies is much better than trying to cram in huge amounts of work as

deadlines loom. Distance learning gives you the flexibility to study at a time that suits you, so make use of it - early in the morning before work or late at night after the kids are asleep can be great times to devote to

your course work.

Create a study space

As well as setting aside time to study, it can be helpful to have a quiet space set aside to help you concentrate on your work. If you can't convert a spare room or a quiet corner into a mini office, it might be more helpful to escape to a local library to help get yourself in the mood for studying.

Set regular goals

Breaking down your ultimate goal into small, manageable steps is the best way to make regular progress whilst feeling like you're actually achieving something. Your tutor will help you set a timetable which breaks down the course elements, but it can help to break these down even further when it all starts to feel like too much.

Cater for your learning style

If you don't already know it, now is an excellent time to find your learning style and use it to your advantage. Try to convert the topic or subject you're studying into a format that helps you to learn best, whether that's reading, listening, looking or doing. Speak to your tutor for advice on this, as they may be able to point you towards some useful resources.

Boast!

Telling your family, friends, colleagues or even your

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room instruction (effectiveness). In some cases, it can serve as many or more learners per dollar spent (efficiency). California research continues to show that it can attract and serve lower level learners (equity).

Adult life for many is complex and demanding. Many adults are unable to or unwilling to attend traditional adult education schools and classrooms for many reasons including:

n having work and family obligations that make attending a regular class time

difficult, learning more effectively from video, audio, and web-based media when moving at their own pace.

n experiencing the dearth of public transportation systems in many parts of the state, needing more practice of skills to achieve mastery.

n living in locations without convenient access to traditional classes, and/or

n lacking the full confidence to participate in a large classroom setting in front of other students.

People who can't attend traditional classes because of these realities need alternatives. These adults are prime targets for distance learning.

They are motivated to continue their education, but limited by circumstances as to how they participate in adult basic education.

Flexible learning approaches that are not classroom centered appeal to these potential learners. It opens up new possibilities which cannot be ignored. Deciding if it is right for you is a big step. Do so with all the facts.

Some information quoted from the American Council on Education's "Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society"

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