

Advantages and Disadvantages of Distance Education

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Abstract: The debate about the advantages and disadvantages of distance education is continuously going on among educators. Their arguments are mainly focused on pedagogical, technological and sociological issues. This paper discusses on the advantages and disadvantages of distance education from six different aspects.

Keywords: distance education, advantages and disadvantages, accessibility, collaborative work

1. INTRODUCTION

The debate about the advantages and disadvantages of distance education is continuously going on among educators. Their arguments are mainly focused on pedagogical, technological and sociological issues, and the concern about whether the technology will replace the teacher has also been an arguing point. Belanger & Jordan (2000) say the reasons for the rapid growth of distance education are many and name the cost of technology devices, user-friendly interfaces as well as better computer access throughout the world. Moreover, one of the main reasons for this success is the younger generation and their ability to use computers effectively with less fear of technology than the older generations.

2. ACCESSIBILITY AND CONVENIENCE

The social struggle, in terms of isolation, that students had in distance education is now changing because of greater support and advanced technology that allow for collaborative learning.

The main advantage of learning at a distance either by open or distance learning is access. Students have a greater opportunity of studying wherever they are and whenever they can with the help of a technical medium. Students who would not have the opportunity to get an education because of their mobility, location, loaded timetable, pace or financial status can benefit from distance education courses. In addition, there are greater possibilities of accessing and choosing more courses than would be possible in face-to-face classes because of limited time.

The world revolves 24 hours a day, and everywhere somebody is trying get something done while there is opportunity to do it. Fewer jobs fit the “9 to 5” category as business becomes globalized and operates in different time zones all over the world, and the same is true of education. People in remote areas have few chances to attend college locally, much less to travel to another country to earn a degree. If a college or university happens to be close by, attendance still demands relocation from one place to another several times a week at a preset hour of the day. Not many people these days enjoy a “flexible schedule” that permits reshuffling appointments and obligations to suit a rigid campus routine. Then, too, there are people who are physically challenged and struggle to travel even short distances. For anybody, anywhere, convenience is opportunity. And for some people, convenience is a necessity.

Convenience matters only if abundant resources are readily available to someone interested in distance learning. Availability and access are key words for judging the convenience of a distance learning system. In addition, the step-by-step process for managing distance learning materials and methods must be comprehensible and simple to follow. A program should be compatible with the lifestyle and priorities of the user.

Think about convenience as a priority instead of an option. Convenience, in pure form, is the power to make choices and decisions on demand. Classes conducted on location at any structural facility are more labor-intensive and therefore less convenient than a learning program delivered any place, any time, and in person. Because mobility is an essential component for a distance learning program, knowledge can be delivered anywhere in a compact and convenient package instead of by sitting through a classroom lecture set to a rigid schedule.

People who need to take a course for certification or special job training may not be able to take classes during working hours. If evening classes are open, rushing to a campus location after work does not promote ideal conditions for education. Stress and fatigue can have a negative impact on the ability to study, on grades, and on job performance. The distance learning alternative fits in a pocket between work and rest without cramping either one. Distance learning is the convenient way to balance job responsibilities with work-related education.

The different methods used to deliver a distance learning curriculum offer convenience through a variety of information technologies. Lower prices for computers and computer software, and access to computers at libraries and community centers, have rapidly increased computer literacy and reduced “technophobia.” Although the emphasis so far has been on distance learning at home, other programs utilize video disks and virtual conferencing to instruct students with a combination of communications technology and conventional classroom techniques. This approach may not appear as convenient as home study, but convenience is a matter of making choices. A feeling of satisfaction that follows completion of a distance learning course indicates the right choice was made.

3. COLLABORATIVE WORK

Strong relationships and effective collaborative work can be established with the help of computer-mediated communications (CMC). Such relationships between student-to-student and student-to-teacher are important in building some kind of community online and in making the learning more efficient. In the past, learners have complained about isolation, lack of support and collaborative work, but with CMC students can be in regular contact with a group of students, which gives them social support as well as academic support. Some of the tools they use in their collaborative work are for example: web cameras, electronic mail, whiteboards, chat room applet (voice and text chat) and language translation. With this system participants can also share files, which takes them further towards classroom learning than ever before in distance education. With growing interest in CMC and collaborative work, some students feel that the flexibility they used to have in distance learning is not there anymore. The pressure of “meeting” other students online because of group work and drive some learners away from studying at a distance. In most cases a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning could provide the diversity and flexibility needed to come towards catering for everybody’s needs.

4. TIME

Time spares no one, which means making each hour of the day count. Distance learning does away with unnecessary delays that slow down the educational process. Consider that classes at a conventional college campus require the student to be at a designated location, at a fixed time, on certain days of the week. Besides coordinating a weekly routine around a rigid time grid, add extra minutes of travel to campus, hunting for a parking space, and walking to class, and then figure in an equal number of minutes for the trip home. For someone who takes a course to build on an existing career or become certified in a specialized field, rearranging a daily work schedule to attend class may not be an option.

Now that computers are in almost every household, business, library, and school, instant access to abundant sources of information is literally within reach for everyone. While a few people still feel overwhelmed by technology, computer software has become easier to use as computer operation has become faster, more reliable, and more familiar to more people. Search engines sweep cyberspace quicker and with better results than ever before, spreading information at an astonishing rate. Keeping up with all the information available takes longer than finding it.

Besides the Internet option, distance learning courses pass knowledge through other forms of communications technology, such as interactive video.

Distance learning programs never close on weekends or for vacation, which means more freedom to handle coursework. A distance learning program features virtually unlimited access to knowledge, morning or night, seven days a week. Versatile time management also means deciding how long to study and how often. Study time divides into different portions rather

than fixed hours or days. (Be aware, however, that having flexible study periods does not mean a reduced workload or less time spent completing a subject. Earning credit hours still takes dedication to the tasks required to comprehend material and finish a course.)

Time is also an advantage in distance learning programs that are not geared to occupational goals and career purposes. For anyone who believes that education is a pursuit that spans a lifetime and contributes to the overall quality of life itself, knowledge means self- fulfillment. For those who value continuing education as a way of life, distance learning offers a multitude of courses designed to enhance the quality of life without the pressure of meeting deadlines. Distance learning saves time, allows time, and rewards time.

5. COST

Tuition and other cost considerations for distance learning programs take into account several variables, but the collateral savings realized through home study compared to on-campus classes are obvious: no travel expenses, no childcare services, no absence from work, and usually no out-of-state fees.

Distance learning courses do not always cost less per hour than a regular college curriculum; indeed, some online degree programs are quite expensive. What counts most is value for the dollar when selecting a distance learning provider. An online academy should be accredited, or otherwise the course credits earned may be worthless or nontransferable to another degree program. Price does not always ensure quality, because some well-advertised distance learning institutes charge high tuition rates without delivering a worthwhile education. Money wasted on coursework that cannot be applied to a genuine degree results in double the effort and expense to retake a subject. Earning useful credits begins with buying into the right program. Taking a few hours to investigate the credentials of a distance learning operation, and to compare prices, saves time and money in the long run.

Start out with a budget before deciding on a distance learning education, then search for discounts among the courses offered by several accredited institutions. After choosing the most cost-effective options, a customized, portable course package can be put together that meets the credit requirements for most degree programs. Remember to check registration fees and other charges before committing to several different programs at once.

In the decades since distance learning first became available through the Internet, computer software, and other forms of information technology, most of the early problems with electronics or communications networks have gradually been solved. Consequently, on-site educational institutions began to show more interest and invest more resources in developing distance learning techniques. Now colleges and universities that once shunned distance learning, or offered only a few non-degree courses, have introduced comprehensive programs to award degrees at every level. As more colleges go online, competition for students forces all distance learning providers to keep prices and costs under control. Again, shop around.

In comparing distance learning and campus-based education, intangible costs and benefits should be considered in addition to financial calculations. Certainly, the financial cost of an education is significant, but intangibles matter, too. Greater freedom might be considered an intangible benefit derived from fewer delays, less anxiety, increased mobility, and more choices. Distance learning programs may well provide such benefits by allowing for more profitable use of time and energy.

6. STUDENT/LEARNER SUPPORT

The rate of dropout has sometimes been associated with distance education because of lack of support, but a number of researchers have shown that there is no linkage between distance education and dropout rate (Keegan, 1993). Educators involved in distance education are said to be more aware of the help students need to learn and therefore they want to give them the best support available (Walker, 2000). Rowntree (1992) makes an attempt to analyse the support students need and focuses on individual support where the teacher has to give constant feedback and be considered about students' academic life as well as personal life. This is perhaps the most demanding work for the teacher to handle, especially if he is facilitating a large group of students and if the students are very young. In my opinion, the younger the students are, the more support they need.

Students with little computer knowledge need as much technical support as possible. If this kind of support were not available many students would not even consider choosing distance education for their study (Elzey, 1999). Many students are excluded already because of their lack of confidence using the computer as a learning tool, but with a good support system some of those students might be able to overcome their fear of technology.

It is well known that studying at a distance demands lot of self-discipline and motivation on the student's behalf, either if they are working in a group or individually. The tutor has to be aware of that pressure and also it is important that the student's family is supportive and understanding about the work ahead (Rowntree, 1992). It is easy to put down a formula for the best support teachers should give, but it is harder to follow it through. Individuals need a different kind of support and their learning needs vary from student to student. Therefore the teacher/facilitator has to deal with each case as they go along in the process.

However, all in all, the need for individual support in distance education is not so different from face-to-face setting, maybe apart from the technical issues. In my experience as a teacher I need to make an individual curriculum for each student and know about their background situations to be able to guide them on the right track in their study.

7. DISADVANTAGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Disadvantages of distance learning occur at a basic human level. Responsibility and self-discipline are crucial factors in the success or failure of a distance learning program. Slack study habits go unchecked without the presence of an influential personality like a classroom

instructor or professor. A pupil who doesn't understand a problem or subject inside class can ask for help, whereas the distance learner sometimes gropes for answers without guidance. If a distance learning program provides individual assistance for students experiencing difficulties, a delayed response to questions or failure to connect may interrupt coursework for hours or days. Frustration caused by a failure to comprehend distance learning subject matter may lead to abandoning the course completely. Information technology has yet to produce an adequate substitute for cooperative, person-to-person problem solving between teacher and student.

A college campus offers social activities that distance learning programs do not provide. College-bound young people fresh out of high school look forward to joining a fraternity or sorority, attending sporting events, meeting new people, and generally experiencing the excitement of campus life. Distance learning makes no provision for physical education, nor do distance learning programs sponsor team sports. Another advantage of attending a college is that after deciding on a major, students meet in person with a graduate advisor who recommends which courses to take and when. An advisor also tracks student progress towards a degree and counsels students who have trouble selecting the right combination of courses to complete a major. On campus, the relationship between student and advisor is a personal one.

A diploma from a prestigious college or university, such as an Ivy League school, means belonging to an exclusive and privileged group that does not share the usual challenges confronting the average college graduate entering the job market. Even the "cap and gown" tradition after four years or more on an ordinary college campus holds a measure of prestige and self-esteem not easily duplicated through distance learning.

Keep in mind that as distance learning expands and improves, the disadvantages to the system will be compensated by new developments.

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