

Guidelines for Good Practice in Distance Education

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Abstract: Distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities. These guidelines drawn from what we know today amid a constantly changing landscape—are not in any way designed to be the “last word” on the subject. We have attempted to make our standards high without being unattainable, specific without being rigid. We have also tried to go “deeper” than a number of other guidelines we have reviewed.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The term DISTANCE EDUCATION is commonly used to describe courses in which nearly all the interaction between the teacher and student takes place electronically. Electronic communication may take the form of audio, video, e-mail, chat, teleconferencing, and, increasingly, the Internet. Distance education courses range from short-term training workshops to undergraduate and graduate programs for college credit.

Distance education courses for academic credit have been expanding dramatically at colleges and universities.

Proponents of distance education point out that the practice may allow learning to reach thousands or even millions more people on an “anytime anywhere” basis. This applies especially to potential students who are homebound or physically remote from a college campus, as well as students who find it extremely difficult to fit their family and work responsibilities into a traditional academic schedule. Proponents maintain that distance education is better able to foster independent study—that it is preferable to move the faculty member, as they often say, from a “sage on the stage” to a “guide on the side.”

These guidelines drawn from what we know today amid a constantly changing landscape—are not in any way designed to be the “last word” on the subject. We have attempted to make our standards high without being unattainable, specific without being rigid. We have also tried to go “deeper” than a number of other guidelines we have reviewed.

For example, many existing standards of good practice state that there should be a high level of interchange between the professor and the student. That is true, but the really important

question is: what specific things do we need to do, what do we need to put into place to have what we're willing to call a "high level of interchange"? And what are we willing to do about a course if we do not have the appropriate level of interchange? Frankly, we are concerned about good practice guidelines being applauded at their inception and then ignored whenever it becomes inconvenient to stick by them. If these guidelines have validity, administrators and faculty members must be willing to say "no" to practices that violate good practice.

The following guidelines will assist faculty members teaching, or preparing to teach, distance education courses, as well as higher education locals negotiating distance education issues with management, and also it will be useful to college administrators and public officials who want to put quality at the center of their technology programs, as well as other organizations around the country who are attempting, as are we, to shape new media of instruction in constructive ways.

2. FACULTY MUST RETAIN ACADEMIC CONTROL

To receive college credit, distance learning courses offered by the institution should be reviewed and approved in advance by the faculty. Review is necessary even when changing a course from a classroom mode to a distance learning mode. Faculty do not always make perfect decisions, but their choices are much likelier to be based primarily on educational concerns aimed at student learning rather than market incentives that elevate convenience, attractiveness and digestibility above all else.

Decisions about particular courses should be made at the departmental or interdepartmental level, including the decision to award credit for distance courses generated by transfer from another institution or provider.

Distance education courses for credit should be taught by faculty appointed and evaluated through traditional processes involving the faculty and the department.

Teaching and research faculty, not just "curriculum specialists," must be involved in developing the curriculum. A number of studies have demonstrated the importance to student learning of establishing a feedback loop between classroom teaching, curriculum development and scholarly research. That loop becomes inoperative when teaching faculty operate from workbooks based on a prefabricated curriculum that the faculty member had little role in developing, a curriculum that was not shaped directly by the practitioner's experience in teaching these classes or conducting research on these subjects. Students deserve teachers who know all the nuances of what they are teaching and who can exercise professional judgment and academic freedom in doing so.

3. FACULTY MUST BE PREPARED TO MEET THE SPECIAL REQUIREMENTS OF TEACHING AT A DISTANCE

Background

Faculty teaching distance education courses must become proficient in the communications technology employed in their distance education courses. They must be prepared—either on their own or working in teams with other specialists—to design courses that take full advantage of the potential of the medium in which they are operating. Faculty teaching Web based courses must possess strategies and skills to communicate with their students electronically in the absence of visual and oral cues.

Required supports

To handle these responsibilities effectively:

Faculty must be provided adequate training and technical support—in terms of hardware, software and troubleshooting. The importance of adequate technical support was emphasized repeatedly by faculty in the field. Support should include special assistance in instructional design. Upon request, the institution must enable faculty members to work with knowledgeable instructional and technical design specialists in designing courses as long as the faculty member has the final say about presentation.

4. COURSE DESIGN SHOULD BE SHAPED TO THE POTENTIALS OF THE MEDIUM

Background

As we all know, live theatre is a special experience that delivers a unique brand of emotional impact. In most cases, however, live theatre looks claustrophobic and strangely inert when it is filmed “straight on,” without the camera moving among different locations, doing close-ups and engaging in its own special tricks. This tells us that you can’t “do” film the same way you do a live performance. Each medium has its own strengths and weaknesses and can deliver different kinds of dramatic experiences.

The literature on distance education suggests a similar relationship between same-time same-place instruction and distance education. It may not always be effective to simply transfer a live lecture and accompanying course materials into an electronic course on the same subject.

Same-time same-place instruction and distance education each have their own pluses and minuses, and each have their own potential to deliver certain kinds of learning. As noted by Professor Andrew Feenberg of San Diego State University, “Writing is not a poor substitute for physical presence and speech, but another fundamental medium of expression with its own properties and powers. The online environment is essentially a space for written interaction. This is its limitation and potential. Electronic networks should be appropriated with this in mind and not turned into poor copied of the face-to-face classroom that they can never reproduce adequately.”

Standards

Faculty members developing distance education courses should approach course design—curriculum planning, class projects, visual aids, library materials and student interaction—not in terms of replicating the traditional classroom, but in terms of maximizing the potential of the medium that will be employed.

5. STUDENTS MUST FULLY UNDERSTAND COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND BE PREPARED TO SUCCEED

Successful distance education students need to be highly motivated, and found the practice more problematic for younger, less-motivated students. Some emphasized that distance education students must have strong written communication skills; that cyberspace coursework may be more difficult for students whose personal learning styles depend heavily on visual and verbal cues. Finally, the importance of students receiving good advance information; too many students, they believe, begin distance education courses under a false impression that they are easier and less time consuming than traditional courses.

All first-time distance education students should be given a clear statement of course requirements in advance. This should include: (1) all course requirements; (2) the weekly time commitment and specific computer skills required by the course; and (3) a presentation of the practical difficulties of working at a distance and what is needed to manage those challenges successfully. This information must be provided either in written form or through a same-time same-place video or Internet-based orientation program.

In response, before the course begins, students should be required to submit a written statement to the institution delivered electronically. As little as a paragraph or two explaining the student's aims, the statement would be designed to demonstrate: (1) that the student possesses the proper equipment and knows how to make it work; (2) that the student has the skills needed to perform effectively in a writing-based medium; and (3) that the student has motivation and realistic expectations. Since distance education will not suit every student, reliable and extended-time technical support are required.

6. CLOSE PERSONAL INTERACTION MUST BE MAINTAINED

Almost everyone agrees that the most important challenge facing distance education is the need to develop a rich level of personal interchange between professor and student and among students themselves. Web based courses received generally higher marks from those who taught them. Many teachers maintain that in-depth interaction with students over the Web is actually stronger than in traditional classrooms. Others, however, felt that the loss of immediate visual and verbal interaction undermined the advantages of Web base coursework.

To maximize communication electronically, distance learning courses should, to the greatest extent possible, incorporate both: real-time electronic interchange through devices such as chat

rooms and discussion groups; and asynchronous forms of communication such as e-mail and computer bulletin boards.

7. CLASS SIZE SHOULD BE SET THROUGH NORMAL FACULTY CHANNELS

The 1999 report of the University of Illinois Faculty Seminar on Distance Education recommended smaller faculty-student ratios in distance education because there is so much information to be monitored. Class size should be established through normal faculty channels to insure that educational rather than bureaucratic or financial considerations drive the process.

Class size should encourage a high degree of interactivity. Given the time commitment involved in teaching through distance education, smaller class size should be considered, particularly at the inception of a new course.

8. COURSES SHOULD COVER ALL MATERIAL

The amount of material covered in a distance education course, and the depth with which it is covered, should equal that of a classroom-based course.

9. STUDENT ASSESSMENT SHOULD BE COMPARABLE

The level of achievement expected of students, and tested for in a distance education environment, should be as challenging as that in a classroom-based course. Again, differences in electronic and classroom educational techniques may dictate different forms of assessment or different emphases in assessment. But the overall standard of student achievement should be equivalent.

10. EVALUATION OF DISTANCE COURSEWORK SHOULD BE UNDERTAKEN AT ALL LEVELS

Evaluation of distance education should become a priority concern of the government. The government should take two steps immediately: (1) create a national information clearing-house to share data about successful and unsuccessful practices; and (2) initiate a priority program of targeted research in distance education.

11. CONCLUSION

Some believe that distance education erects too many impediments to faculty-student interaction and therefore should be abandoned or severely restricted. Others say that the “market” will demand convenience and a flashy presentation style above all other values and that higher education had better adapt or lose out to competitors. It is indisputable that colleges and universities should develop courses that are as attractive as possible and no more onerous

than necessary. But credit-bearing coursework must produce education that lasts, and to achieve that, we must develop and stick to high standards of good practice.

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