

Chapter XI

Achieving a Working Balance Between Technology and Personal Contact Within a Classroom Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the author's model to assist faculty members in gaining a closer relationship with distance learning students. The model that will be discussed consists of a greeting, message, reminder, and conclusion (GMRC). The GMRC will provide concrete recommendations designed to lead the faculty through the four steps. Using these steps in writing and responding to electronic messages demonstrates to the distance learning student that in fact the faculty member is concerned with each learner and the learner's specific questions and needs. It is a practical application of human relations theory and is based on ideas generated by counseling theory. In addition, the chapter will take the reader through issues and examples that will arise during the duration of discussions and exchange of information using electronic messages. It is the intent of the author to provide not simply a theoretical model, but a model that can be learned and applied immediately upon completion of reviewing the article.

INTRODUCTION

It is clear that both the younger adult students as well as the more seasoned adults are seeking efficiency and independence in learning. Williams (2006) documents that utilizing the Web for instruction is being used by institutions and public schools all over the world. Computer techniques,

chemistry, business, and other content areas are being taught through online courses (Williams, 2006). The adult learning market is seeking ways to more efficiently learn course requirements without 45 contact hours in a crowded or inaccessible classroom. Furthermore, the adult is often rushed and harried in life and cannot consistently attend class on any campus. The efficiency in learning,

as well as the quest for independence, has also marked a new era of problems involving standards and contact with the instructors. In addition to taking classes, advising and mentoring remain important. The advisor remains important to graduate students and is a key in the student's success (Polson, 2003). Balancing learning and advising through the Internet is a common issue that has been studied and documented. However, there is much to be learned and discussed. Satisfaction of students with e-learning remains an element of discussion, as does retention and motivation. This all impacts the instructor and the student relationship. Mason and Renne (2006) reinforced the importance of the tutor's and teacher's skills in dealing with the students in their recent publication. Relationships are important even within a distance learning environment.

Independence in itself is certainly no vice, and promotes stretching the borders of individual learning upon demand. The power to learn upon demand is reaching the many sectors of even traditional universities. As noted, distance learning is pervasive in all learning groups. Singh (2004) makes it clear that if the distance learning can be well managed than it can be a positive learning experience or perhaps even better than the traditional classroom learning. At the same time, questions still remain unsolved and unanswered in regard to the very bedrock of learning through electronic means. Distance learning instructors need different skills than the traditional instructors (Bower & Hardy, 2004). What skills do they need and what models can be provided for new instructors who communicate with students through e-mail? Unless academic-based recommendations are provided, it is possible that the same questions could continue to haunt the academic environment far into the 21st century.

Beyond independence and intrinsically involved in this academic mix is the issue of speed and progress in obtaining the credential. Learners see some of the traditional methods of the university as no longer relevant. However, the

ability to access information and advisement at the touch of a button should not replace the advisor's responsibility. Technology can certainly enhance student advisement but it does not replace the advisor (Wagner, 2001).

Attendance in some institutions has become an issue because some students may not want to experience a dry lecture or hear something they could obtain from an Internet posting. In essence, a person has a significant amount of power to learn and may choose to learn what are perceived educational needs. If a lecture is not relevant or is something that an individual already has mastered, it is difficult for the lecturer to obtain and retain the attention of the learner. Therefore, some learners see it as waste of time for them to attend the "live" lectures. Education has attempted to monitor the learner's own progress and sometimes there has been a bogging down or a series of barriers that the students have faced. Perhaps as education has attempted to rush and meet the needs of the student's distance learning aspirations there has been a loss of the personal touch. Payne (2005) documented a study of multiple universities and concluded that some of those participating in the study did not like losing contact with advisors. However, Payne indicated that they did adjust and made it work. This teacher/advisor/student relationship has provided countless elements of support through the centuries. The personal and professional skills for online instructors still should involve the skills listed by Brewer, Dejonge, and Stout (2001) that include choosing words carefully, encouraging e-mail, and scheduling office hours. Certainly another issue is in regard to the students' reasons for using e-mail. Faculty may see students as using it to enhance learning, and on the other hand, faculty may see the students as using electronic excuses for their lack of performance (Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005). Perhaps the truth may lie between the extremes and the type of individuals using the e-mail may also provide some clues in this discussion. Finch, Keaten, and Kelly (2004) note

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