Chapter 3

Comprehensive Distance Learning Design for Adult Education

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ABSTRACT

Understanding and successfully designing online learning courses are among the greatest needs of faculty in adult and higher education today. An adult learning perspective emphasizes design which has rigorous academic engagement, addresses current and prospective students' needs, while being feasible to develop (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009; Palloff & Pratt, 2004). This chapter describes rapid changes in society, technology and distance learning which influence both course design and facilitation. Beginning with distance learning, the chapter illustrates the possibilities for teaching and learning through several inexpensive and easy technologies, before progressing to planning, designing and facilitating courses which incorporate them. Drawing upon 13+ years of distance learning research, design and teaching, and extensive continued literature reviews, the chapter has a robust knowledge base and model. The aim is to assist faculty in envisioning, planning, designing and facilitating online classes which best address the many demands they have to satisfy.

INTRODUCTION

The convenience and flexibility of instruction may compel people to pursue distance learning opportunities; however, there are other motivations and incentives from an educational perspective (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Today, adults 18-72 are using the Internet not only for information, but also entertainment and socializing (Jones & Fox, 2009). The multitude of people engaged in informal learning via Internet searches, audio books, and podcasts highlights the fact that people of all ages seek learning opportunities online when they have a critical need to gain knowledge and skills. (Berg, 2005; Christiansen, Johnson, & Horn, 2008; King & Sanquist, 2009; The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004; Simonson et al., 2009). Nonetheless, traditional educational institutions

tend to ignore this fact in the scope and design of distance learning offerings.

Instead, informal distance learning opportunities may be on-demand, highly dynamic, and result in turning the tables on traditional formats. Therefore, people arrive at traditional learning spaces expecting more technology that they can control. Control and flexibility have become major characteristics of continuous information gathering, daily learning and entertainment; therefore they need to be included in distance learning. Fueled by the technological delivery of global information 24 hours day, seven days a week (24/7), users expect to pursue academic studies with the same tools, convenience, and global reach as their work, entertainment, and social engagement. (Allen & Seamen, 2007; Tapscott, & Williams, 2006).

One of the greatest opportunities that arrives with ubiquitous technology is to consider how it may help reframe student-teacher relationships, traditional program study restrictions, and student responsibility, allowing for new models to emerge. When we are able to embrace what technology offers and learners seek, we become ready for an educational revolution. Moreover, if institutions are not able to embrace these opportunities, many educational leaders expect that learners will go outside traditional venues, and schools, colleges and universities will struggle with enrollments and income (Berg, 2002, 2005; Christensen et al., 2008; Simonson et al., 2009).

This chapter's model of designing distance learning is built upon these critical premises. It provides a valuable introduction to envisioning, planning and designing distance learning courses which will sustain and advance academic integrity. Transforming learning with the ever-expanding capabilities of technology provides a robust environment for academics and learners to grow intellectually, creatively and responsibly.

BACKGROUND: FIRST THINGS FIRST

Issues Related to Institutional Support

This section addresses several institutional issues of support which are not always reviewed, but in fact are requisite for successful distance learning. Evaluating an educational organization according to the criteria provides a invaluable basis for evaluating organizational readiness. If a college, university or adult education program does not already have the following services available to them on a consistent basis, they need to develop or outsource them in order to be successful in distance learning.

Faculty Development Accessibility. The first assumption is that programs which are developing and supporting distance learning course need to regularly provide faculty development on a convenient basis. Whether it is a faculty development center which provides training individually in regularly scheduled classes, or ongoing outsourced professional development, faculty need to have resources to learn how to expand their technology and instructional skills (Brown, 2006). Some people would argue to have outside agencies entirely design the courses and think such support would not be needed. However, faculty should be involved in design, conversant in instructional design and able to make valuable and necessary changes as course and semesters progress. It is unrealistic to try to offer courses on *autopilot;* the best adult learning is customized to specific learner needs and contexts; therefore at the very least faculty need to be educated and prepared to be able to make adaptations (Simonson et al., 2009).

Technical Support. The issue of technical support may seem to be moot, but in fact, many institutions who undertake distance learning do not adequately provide the faculty and student support which is needed. The recommended guideline is 10 hrs a day live technical support

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