



Chapter II

Interactive Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major criticisms of distance education is the perception of inferior interaction between professor and students. Although the question of sufficient interaction is just as valid in a traditional classroom setting, the very nature of distance education serves to exacerbate the problem. This doesn't have to be the case. There are strategies an instructor can employ to ensure the interaction is maintained at a high level. In fact there is a type of distance learning structure where interaction is even higher than in a traditional classroom. This chapter will facilitate faculty in enriching the quality of the communication exchange by assisting professors in enhancing the "high touch" aspects of pedagogy when using "high tech" media.

BACKGROUND

A very dramatic statement about the state of interaction in a traditional classroom can be seen in the film *Back to School*. The series of scenes start by showing a lecture hall full of students and a professor lecturing at the board. In the next scene, some of the students have been replaced by tape recorders. As the scenes progress, more and more students are replaced until the professor is lecturing to a room full of tape recorders. In the final scene, the professor is gone and there is a tape recorder lecturing to tape recorders. Clearly an exaggeration, this does, nevertheless, identify a possible problem in interaction. If

such is the case in a traditional classroom, there is an even greater potential for problems in distance education where the student is already physically removed from the instructor.

Repman and Logan (1996) said “interactions lie at the heart of any learning situation and remain critical to active learning” (p. 35). Wolcott (1996) said “it is time we shift our attention from how to work around the distance in its physical sense, to how to keep from further distancing learners in a psychological and social sense” (p. 23). There are strategies that can be employed to ensure that interaction is maintained and learning is achieved. The University of Phoenix has instituted policies and training to assist the instructor in achieving a highly interactive environment.

FACULTY TO STUDENT INTERACTION

As in the example from the film a student can feel disconnected even in a traditional classroom environment. Wolcott (1996) pointed out that “combining both physical and psychological distance makes for a potentially troublesome mix” (p. 23). The instructor in the film adopted a “sage on the stage” methodology for transmitting information. Combining this with a medium in which a student may be sitting all alone in front of a computer in their home invites feelings of being disconnected from the learning. At least in a traditional classroom the student can feel a sense of community with the others in the room.

Many believe (Repman and Logan, 1996; Wolcott, 1996; Gibson and Herrera, 1999) that the way to combat this feeling of being disconnected is to establish a learner-centered environment. How does one move from the teacher-centered environment to the learner-centered environment? The role of the instructor becomes quite different.

In a learner-centered environment, the instructor is not the “star” or the “sage on the stage.” In the learner-centered environment the instructor becomes the “guide on the side,” with sometimes unexpected opportunities to reflect on his or her instructional style and philosophy (Repman and Logan, 1996, 36).

The learner-centered teacher encourages students’ personal growth and emphasizes facilitation of learning over transmission of information (Wolcott, 1996, 25).

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