

What's Different about Distant Teaching?

Classroom teachers rely on a number of visual and unobtrusive cues from their students to enhance their delivery of instructional content. A quick glance, for example, reveals who is attentively taking notes, pondering a difficult concept, or preparing to make a comment. The student who is frustrated, confused, tired, or bored is equally evident. The attentive teacher consciously and subconsciously receives and analyzes these visual cues and adjusts the course delivery to meet the needs of the class during a particular lesson.

In contrast, the distant teacher has few, if any, visual cues. Those cues that do exist are filtered through technological devices such as video monitors. It is difficult to carry on a stimulating teacher-class discussion when spontaneity is altered by technical requirements and distance.

Without the use of a real-time visual medium such as television, the teacher receives no visual information from the distant sites. The teacher might never really know, for example, if students are asleep, talking among themselves or even in the room. Separation by distance also affects the general rapport of the class. Living in different communities, geographic regions, or even states deprives the teacher and students of a common community link.

Why Teach at a Distance?

Many teachers feel the opportunities offered by distance education outweigh the obstacles. In fact, instructors often comment that the focused preparation required by distance teaching improves their overall teaching and empathy for their students. The challenges posed by distance education are countered by opportunities to:

- Reach a wider student audience
- Meet the needs of students who are unable to attend on-campus classes
- Involve outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable
- Link students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds

Improving Planning and Organization

In developing or adapting distance instruction, the core content remains basically unchanged, although its presentation requires new strategies and additional preparation time. Suggestions for planning and organizing a distance delivered course include:

- Begin the course planning process by studying distance education research findings. There are several research summaries available (see Moore & Thompson, 1990).
- Before developing something new, check and review existing materials for content and presentation ideas.

- Avoid technological solutions in search of instructional problems. Analyze and understand the strengths and weaknesses of the possible delivery systems available to you (e.g., audio, video, data, and print) not only in terms of how they are delivered (e.g., satellite, microwave, fiber optic cable, etc.), but in terms of learner needs and course requirements before selecting a mix of instructional technology.

- Hands-on training with the technology of delivery is critical for both teacher and students. Consider a pre-class session in which the class meets informally using the delivery technology and learns about the roles and responsibilities of technical support staff.

- At the start of class initiate a frank discussion to set rules, guidelines, and standards. Once procedures have been established, consistently uphold them.

- Make sure each site is properly equipped with functional and accessible equipment. Provide a toll-free "hotline" for reporting and rectifying problems.

- If course materials are sent by mail, make sure they are received well before class begins. To help students keep materials organized, consider binding the syllabus, handouts, and other readings prior to distribution.

- Start off slowly with a manageable number of sites and students. The logistical difficulties of distant teaching increase with each additional site.

Meeting Student Needs

To function effectively, students must quickly become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance. Efforts should be made to adapt the delivery system to best motivate and meet the needs of the students, in terms of both content and preferred learning styles. Consider the following strategies for meeting students' needs:

- Assist students in becoming both familiar and comfortable with the delivery technology and prepare them to resolve the technical problems that will arise. Focus on joint problem solving, not placing blame for the occasional technical difficulty.

- Make students aware of and comfortable with new patterns of communication to be used in the course (Holmberg, 1985).

- Learn about students' backgrounds and experiences. Discussing the instructor's background and interests is equally important.

- Be sensitive to different communication styles and varied cultural backgrounds. Remember, for example, that students may have different language skills, and that humor is culturally specific and won't be perceived the same way by all.

- ❑ Remember that students must take an active role in the distance delivered course by independently taking responsibility for their learning.
- ❑ Be aware of students' needs in meeting standard university deadlines, despite the lag time often involved in rural mail delivery.

Use Effective Teaching Skills

Use For the most part, effective distance teaching requires the enhancement of existing skills, rather than developing new abilities. Pay special attention to the following:

- ❑ Realistically assess the amount of content that can be effectively delivered in the course. Because of the logistics involved, presenting content at a distance is usually more time consuming than presenting the same content in a traditional classroom.
- ❑ Be aware that student participants will have different learning styles. Some will learn easily in group settings, while others will excel when working independently.
- ❑ Diversify and pace course activities and avoid long lectures. Intersperse content presentations with discussions and student-centered exercises.
- ❑ Humanize the course by focusing on the students, not the delivery system.
- ❑ Consider using a print component to supplement non-print materials (see Graham & Wedman, 1989).
- ❑ Use locally relevant case studies and examples as often as possible to assist students in understanding and applying course content.
- ❑ Personalize instructor involvement, realizing that distance teaching does not replace the value of face-to-face contact and small group interaction. If budget and time permit, teach at least one session from each site. Typically, the earlier in the course this is done, the better.
- ❑ Be concise. Use short, cohesive statements and ask direct questions, realizing that technical linkages might increase the time it takes for students to respond.
- ❑ Develop strategies for student reinforcement, review, repetition, and remediation. Towards this end, one-on-one phone discussions and electronic mail communication can be especially effective.
- ❑ And finally...relax. Participants will quickly grow comfortable with the process of distance education and the natural rhythm of effective teaching will return.

Improving Interaction and Feedback

Using effective interaction and feedback strategies will enable the instructor to identify and meet individual student needs while providing a forum for suggesting course improvements. To improve interaction and feedback, consider the following:

- ❑ Use pre-class study questions and advance organizers to encourage critical thinking and informed participation on the part of all learners. Realize that it will take time to improve poor communication patterns.

- ❑ Early in the course, require students to contact you and interact among themselves via electronic mail, so they become comfortable with the process. Maintaining and sharing electronic journal entries can be very effective toward this end.
- ❑ Arrange telephone office hours using a toll-free number. Set evening office hours if most of your students work during the day.
- ❑ Integrate a variety of delivery systems for interaction and feedback, including one-on-one and conference calls, fax, E-mail, video, and computer conferencing. When feasible, consider personal visits as well.
- ❑ Contact each site (or student) every week if possible, especially early in the course. Take note of students who don't participate during the first session, and contact them individually after class.
- ❑ Use pre-stamped and addressed postcards, out-of-class phone conferences, and e-mail for feedback regarding course content, relevancy, pace, delivery problems, and instructional concerns.
- ❑ Have students keep a journal of their thoughts and ideas regarding the course content, as well as their individual progress and other concerns. Have students submit journal entries frequently.
- ❑ Use an on-site facilitator to stimulate interaction when distant students are hesitant to ask questions or participate. In addition, the facilitator can act as your on-site "eyes and ears".
- ❑ Call on individual students to ensure that all participants have ample opportunity to interact. At the same time, politely but firmly discourage individual students or sites from monopolizing class time.
- ❑ Make detailed comments on written assignments, referring to additional sources for supplementary information. Return assignments without delay, using fax or electronic mail, if practical.

References

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