Where Do I Begin? Designing Online Learning Courses Which Work

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ABSTRACT

One of the greatest needs of faculty in adult and higher education today is to understand how to design distance learning courses which address the needs of their current and prospective students while upholding academic excellence and remaining feasible to develop (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009; Palloff & Pratt, 2004). This article provides an overview of the rapidly changing field of distance learning with a focus on trends and lessons for faculty course design and facilitation. Beginning with distance learning, the article illustrates not only the possibilities for teaching and learning through a variety of inexpensive, popular and easy technologies, but will also lead into how to plan, design and facilitate courses which incorporate them. The basis for this model is 13 years of distance learning research, design and teaching, as well as extensive continued literature reviews. The aim is to assist faculty in identifying how to envision, plan, design and facilitate online classes which will best address the many demands they have to satisfy.

Keywords: Adult Education, Digital Media, Distance Learning, Distance Learning Course Design, e-Learning, Faculty Development, Higher Education, Learning Styles, Online Learning, Professional Development

INTRODUCTION

The convenience and flexibility of instruction may be compelling 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). Consider that the multitude of people engaged in informal learning via Internet searches, audio books, podcasts, and television programming
highlights the fact that people of all ages seek learning opportunities when they have a critical need to gain knowledge and skills. (Berg, 2005; Christiansen, Johnson, & Horn, 2008; King & Santquist, 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 24/7 global information, 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 challenges that arrives with ubiquitous technology may be that educational institutions need to set aside their preconceived notions of distance learning. In addition, they may also consider opportunities to 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 article’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 capabilities of technology provides a robust environment for academics and learners to grow intellectually, creatively and responsibly.

First Things First

Institutional Support

This article makes a few institutional assumptions. Such a step may be temerarious; however in this case they provide a 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. These fundamental services include:

- Faculty development center which provides training individually and
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