

DISTANCE LEARNING: EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

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ABSTRACT

Today's educators are faced with interesting, if not intimidating, challenges emanating from what some observers have called, "the bandwidth revolution." A growing number of educators, particularly in business schools, are utilizing satellite linkages, Internet, video-conferencing, web pages, electronic mail, chat rooms and electronic bulletin boards, on-line testing and student study groups functioning in cyberspace.

These dramatic technological innovations have made possible the introduction of new approaches to educating students located at off-campus sites. In the past, having a remote site meant a professor had to physically travel to another location and students are confined within the four walls of a classroom. With the bandwidth revolution, students can either telecommute or enroll in classes from universities with satellite campuses several hundred [and even thousands of] miles away. New pedagogical methods are emerging as professors adapt traditional methods to telecasting, electronic communication, and cyberspace.

Distance learning (hereafter DL), which we define as the online delivery of education, is increasingly controversial. Recent articles in two global newspapers read by marketers around the world, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Financial Times*, have highlighted the vigorous debate among educators, corporations, students, and university administrators concerning the future of DL. Some persons believe that DL is the wave of the future in delivering education. It makes possible the delivery of specialized education to persons located in geographic areas in which there is no other provider of comparable education. Other observers perceive that DL is a disservice to education because they believe that learning outcomes are more shallow and superficial than can be obtained in a traditional classroom. Some faculty enjoy the challenge of learning to use new technologies and adapting their craft to the next millennium. They contend that the bandwidth revolution is more powerful than the invention of moveable type and that they must participate. Other faculty members contend that DL is simply the latest financial device to gain leverage over fixed costs by increasing enrollment, student to faculty ratios.

These widely diverse views cannot be attributed to age differences in the persons expressing them. One of

the authors recently attended a session at an international conference in which experiences in internet teaching were described successively by: a professor within 24 months of retirement, a doctoral student, and a mid-career professor. All three expressed dissatisfaction with some aspect of the technology or with some aspect of how students were able to use it for the purpose of accomplishing their learning objectives. Further, we hear from other faculty that their investment of time in learning new technologies and new pedagogies for DL is further magnified (during the semester in which the class is taught) by the burdens of exploding class sizes and requirements to respond to all e-mail messages from students within 24 hours. Faculty who observe their colleagues laboring under these burdens are understandably reluctant to get involved themselves.

Regardless of one's opinion regarding the merits and problems associated with DL, it seems apparent that in order for an educational institution to be responsive to the changes in the external environment and its various stakeholders' needs, distance learning is a pedagogical avenue that has to be explored because it is gaining momentum both within the United States and around the globe. As it does so, marketing educators are increasingly involved as their universities call upon them to participate in the new DL degree programs. Accordingly, marketing educators have a responsibility to explore the DL environment and its implications for pedagogy, to identify approaches which have merit, and to pursue sound pedagogical practices.

The Teaching and Technology SIGs are proposing two special sessions for the 1999 AMA Winter Educators' conference. The session proposed in this paper is designed for the marketing educator who has been participating in a DL program for more than two semesters and who is pondering future directions of the programs.

Session Content

Faculty who have taught in DL programs often express frustration and puzzlement over student learning outcomes, their satisfaction with their own performance, what went right and what went wrong, and the levels of satisfaction with DL which students express on their evaluations of the course and instructor. Administrators puzzle over ways in which they might make decisions which would increase the satisfaction levels of both

students and faculty. Both faculty and administrators are concerned about the financial results of DL programs and the incentives offered to faculty to participate. We have identified five key issues which DL-experienced faculty and administrators raise as they contemplate future directions, best practices, and benchmarks for the DL programs in their university. These five issues are often expressed in the form of questions.

1. What technologies have proved most useful? Are some technologies better suited to some teaching methods?
2. What do we know about the effectiveness of various DL pedagogical methods?
3. Student evaluations: How do we compare evaluations from DL students to those from on-campus students? What are they telling us?
4. Faculty incentives: How satisfied are faculty with the DL job? With the feedback they are receiving from students? With the compensation system?
5. Faculty commitment: Is it appropriate to attempt to encourage a faculty member to make a long-term commitment to DL? Or is the DL experience an

important, but short term, activity in professional development?

Session Outcomes

To effectively address the above issues, panelists have been selected to provide session participants with realistic evaluations of their experiences and with their expectations and recommendations about the future of DL in their educational institutions. The invited panelists have significant and varying experiences with DL. Each panelist will be asked to make a short (fifteen minute) presentation on specific areas pertinent to the above questions. They will also be asked to provide a short (few pages) handout of specific advice. We have had numerous conversations with colleagues who have participated in DL programs. From them, we have generated the questions listed above. The questions are real, vital, and timely. For these reasons, we believe the session will be well-attended and worthwhile for a segment of the AMA educator population.

Purpose

The purpose of the session is to focus on addressing the needs and concerns of faculty and administrators who have been involved with DL and who are pondering the future directions, identification of best practices, and problem areas in DL programs.

Session Chair

Alma Mintu-Wimsatt, Texas A & M University – Commerce

Panelists

Raymond “Buddy” LaForge, University of Louisville and Editor of *Marketing Education Review* will provide an overview on current practices regarding distance learning.

Hector R. Lozada of Seton Hall University will discuss the issue of student evaluations.

Joseph Ben-Ur of the University of Houston – Victoria will discuss effective DL technologies and programs.

Barnett Greenberg of Florida International University will discuss the future of DL as well as provide some insights on Administrators’ view of DL.

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