

# The Significant Challenge that Distance Learning Represents to Educators

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Developing an undergraduate or graduate level course for delivery at a distance is significantly more work than developing one for a traditional face-to-face (F2F) class. Educators must be aware of this before beginning the process. Research indicates that time required to conduct a distance learning (DL) course will be 2 ½ -3 times that of a F2F course (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Dedicating this additional amount of time and effort will make our DL products meaningful. Moreover, professors need to develop and then provide much more comprehensive information for students in the DL environment than they do in a F2F course.

Teacher education, and referencing existing literature add significantly to educators' ability to orchestrate DL courses effectively. Teacher education at many Universities comes in the form *best practices* and faculty support in key areas. Past and emerging literature has much to offer the DL educator in an array of topic areas.

Faculty support can come in boot camps and workshops for novice and more experienced educators in the DL realm. Information and insights exchanged there can speak to building learning communities (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), tools available for collaboration in community building (Aggarwal, 2000), online teaching being likened to e-moderating (Salmon, 2000), and colleague advice that DL students need to know that a professor is behind each course. These encourage us to put as much of ourselves into DL courses as in our F2F classes. Building learning communities, e-moderating, and becoming the educator behind the course mean that we need to produce a wealth of information for students, to bring them together, help them orchestrate their own learning, and to be available to them. Many institutions do not provide the necessary training or faculty support to ensure success. Teacher education needs to enable educators to become comfortable and then proficient with DL and its technologies but they need to view their pedagogy in a new manner as well (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). This will represent significant work (a) prior to any course, (b) during it, (c) subsequent to it, and (d) prior to the next term it is offered. Initial development efforts are great. Maintenance issues prove to be significant as well, in our attempt to keep courses up to date, meaningful, and engaging for students. Throughout the process, teacher education, dedicating the needed time, and examining the latest DL literature are crucial.

The roadmap that we provide DL students must be complete, detailed, and accurate. We can structure comprehensive electronic Syllabi that provide students with a clear understanding of how the courses will unfold. Syllabi also need to allow students more leeway for exploration (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Considerable work will be required to have Syllabi and courseware features include (a) professor introductions, (b) course description, (c) course objectives, (d) learning outcomes, (e) week-by-week schedule, (f) institutional focus areas, (g) textbook information, (h) textbook components and features, (i) recommended additional readings, (j) valuable periodicals and journals, (k) general policies, (l) grading policies, (m) grading criteria, (n) weekly reading assignments, (o) writing assignments, (p) threaded discussion (TD) information, (q) online chatroom (OC) information, and schedule, (r) class groupings, (s) student journals, (t) weekly lectures, (u) PowerPoint slides, (v) document sharing, (w) course calendar, (x) gradebook, (y) email, and (z) communication links. Syllabi for DL courses are not mere conversions from their F2F counterparts (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Converting existing documents and then blending online course components appropriately within our new pedagogical construct takes hard work.

Syllabi should plainly delineate what we as instructors expect of the students in our DL courses. In them we need to set the expectations, clearly contrasting them to what we require in F2F settings. This sets a unique stage for learning. Conveying this critical message at a distance brings new challenges to educators. Fortunately, the above courseware features are in place to enable us to be successful (Brooks, et al, 2001). In much the same vein we set expectations of ourselves. We should share those thoughts with students. Thus, we establish a contract of sorts with students, indicating what we expect of them during our course as well as what they can expect from us. Everyone knows early on that we will strive to form a learning community and interact rigorously, as we challenge ourselves and each other. Educators tend to blend course features in innovative, exciting, and engaging ways to accomplish this. Every time we develop, conduct, or redesign a course, we should arrange the distribution and configuration of these Syllabus components and courseware features appropriately. Subject matter and our familiarity with it, the DL

platform, student input, along with our imagination and reprioritized learning outcomes, will determine how we configure each unique course.

With respect to course features, colleagues indicate that they may well be moving away from reliance on real time features of their courses. Some researchers agree, preferring online teaching in the asynchronous environment (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Others of us remain steadfast in our belief that real time exchange of thoughts, insights, and reactions is vital in our courses. Immediate feedback, collaboration, and immediate processing of the messages' social meaning (Wolfe, 2000) favor use of synchronous course components. Coordinating a dispersed group and facilitating so that all will be heard is a challenge in real time chatrooms (Palloff and Pratt, 1999). Participants in recent teacher education sessions recommended addressing this challenge by segmenting larger classes into 10-15 student groups. Assigning day-of-week dates to each group, setting standard times for the OCs, and including details in the Syllabus, will enable students to prioritize them. Many students gravitate to the TDs. They respond favorably to the opportunity to participate when they are prepared to do so, and it is convenient for them to engage their fellow students on various course topics, and any previously posted reactions to them. Moreover, they find TDs most meaningful when educators review threads, contribute themselves, and respond to student posts on a regular and vigorous basis.

Time requirements manifest themselves markedly when it comes to educators being available to students during their online courses. We need to participate in our course TDs on nearly a daily basis, checking on development of discussions, often spending considerable amounts of time entering contributions and responses ourselves. For scheduled OCs, we should arrive before the first student and not leave until the last student has signed off. Being there is crucial. Palloff and Pratt advise us to "Stay present!" and to perform more as facilitator than professor (2001). Further, Email communication is much more substantive in DL courses than in most F2F classes. It should be reviewed several times each day. Establishing a unique Email account for each course is a good approach. Separating it from business, personal, and other course Email accounts is helpful but represents additional work and time requirements for the educator.

When conducting DL courses, we must be prepared for just about anything. Challenges and problems come from many new and exciting directions. There will be courseware, hardware, and software problems – for us as well as our students. We need to be able to respond quickly and definitively. TAs and GAs are invaluable, if they are assigned to our courses. This assistance enables educators to concentrate on course content and pedagogy rather than getting mired down in hardware, software, or courseware-related problems. However, educators must become as familiar with the courseware, etc. as possible. Many issues will require immediate attention rather than referral to another party. As DL educators we would be wise to probe all of the courseware features, complete courseware tutorials several times, become familiar with the basic hardware and software requirements, and investigate every possible feature and characteristic of our DL environments.

It takes time and effort to make our courses meaningful. This is certainly true for F2F classes but represents even more challenge for DL educators. Changes in the DL environment continue to evolve and emerge (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Using our imaginations will enhance our efforts as we select from myriad choices that varying courseware offers. We are challenged to over-design our courses, offering opportunities for students to investigate, search, and learn via a multitude of differing modes. Video and audio clips, Webliographies©, OCs, TDs, journals, document sharing, student Web pages, and professor biographies represent but a few of the possibilities. The manner in which we design, organize, offer, and enhance these components will determine the effectiveness of our classes. Each course will, and should, be different. As we meet these challenges across time, we become better at our craft, making subsequent offerings more engaging, meaningful for students, and rewarding for ourselves. Educators will continue to be challenged to enter, grow, and succeed in the DL environment. Only by investing the requisite time and effort will we meet these challenges. Teacher education, establishing best practices, faculty support, and literature that focuses on DL topics will assist us all.

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