



## Strategies for Distance Learners

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Received: 23 Oct 2012

Reviewed & Accepted: 28 Nov 2012

### *Abstract*

*Distance education is becoming a good way to acquire knowledge separate from the traditional method of attending the classroom. Examples of the use of variety of distance delivery methods, such as teleconferencing in Australia, show how useful distance delivery is around the world (Olive & Reeves, 1996).*

*To the learners, distance learning means more freedom of access and thereby a wider range of opportunities for learning and qualification. The barriers that overcome by distance learning include not only overcome by distance learning include not only geographical distance, but also other confining circumstances, such as personal constraints, cultural and social barriers and lack of infrastructure. Distance learning may also mean a more learner-centered approach, allowing greater flexibility and choice of content as well as more personal organization of learning programme (UNESCO, 2002).*

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001284/128463e.pdf>

**Key words:** *Strategies, Distance Learner*

## Introduction

Distance learning, sometimes called e-learning, is a formalized teaching and learning system specifically designed to be carried out remotely by using electronic communication. Because distance learning is less expensive to support and is not constrained by geographic considerations, it offers opportunities in situations where traditional education has difficulty operating. Students with scheduling or distance problems can benefit, as can employees, because distance education can be more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered virtually anywhere.

Studies indicate that distance learning can be as effective as the traditional format when the methods are appropriate to the teaching tasks, there is student-teacher interaction, and the teachers provide students with appropriate and timely feedback ([http://searchcio-midmarket.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0..sid183\\_gci509906.00.html](http://searchcio-midmarket.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0..sid183_gci509906.00.html)).

This paper mentions the complexities of distance learners and strategies to be successful as distance learner. This paper is categorized in this manner:

- Definition of distance education/learning
- Advantages of distance learning & benefits of distance learning
- Complexities of distance learners
- Quality concerns about distance learners
- Improving distant learning
- Strategies for distance learners
- Conclusion

**Definition of distance learning:** The term “Distance Learning” or “Distance Education” have been applied interchangeably by many different researchers to be a great variety of programmes, providers, audiences and media. Its hallmarks are the separation of teacher and learner in space and or time (Perraton, 1988), the volitional control of learning by student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and non-contiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison & Shale, 1987).

Distance learning is a general term used to cover the broad range of teaching and learning events in which the student is separated (at a distance) from the instructor, or other fellow learners (Hoyle, Glenn; 2008).

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), an advocacy group founded in 1987, defines distance learning as... “The acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance”.

Distance learning is defined as ----

- Education that takes place when the instructor and student are separated by space and/ or time. The gap between the two can be bridge through the technologies.
- A mode of education in which students enrolled in course do not attend the institution but study off-campus and may submit assignments by mail or email.

I think, distance education is instructional programmes or courses in which the instructor and students need not be in the same physical place, particularly those relying on computers, audio or video technology as the medium for delivery and sometimes for two-way instructions.

**Advantages of distance learning:**

1. Distance learning requires no committing – therefore saving your money and time.
2. You complete most of the classes at your own pace – no pressure.
3. You can live anywhere in the world, study from anywhere in the world, and pursue your choice of distance education course studies.
4. Gain extra knowledge while you are learning – taking those computer and internet skills you gain and then applying them to other facets of your life.
5. The self-paced learning environment can be taken advantage of by the quickest or the slowest of learners – increases the satisfaction level while reducing stress in the process.
6. Accessibility factors – distance education courses address the physical accessibility issues that people with mobility problems oftentimes encounter while being enrolled in the traditional on-campus classes.

<http://www.scottsgavy.com/126-definition-of-distance-education>

**Benefits of distance learning:**

- 1. Convenience:** Distance learning technologies can provide convenient locations for both students and instructors. Many of the technologies, such as the internet and telephone, are easily accessed at home. Others, such as videoconferencing, can be distributed from a single point (such as a university) to multiple remote sites (such as schools). Satellite transmissions can be viewed at specified sites, or the transmissions can be recorded for later viewing at home or school.
- 2. Flexibility:** Many forms of distance learning provide students the option to participate whenever they wish, on an individualized basis. For example, some students may want to review a podcast in the middle of the night or read their e-mail during early morning hours. In addition, one student may wish to spend 30 minutes reviewing a website, while another spends an hour.
- 3. Effectiveness:** Not only is distance learning convenient, it is also effective. Several research studies have found that distance learning is equally or more effective than traditional instruction when the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, when there is student-to-student interaction and when there is timely teacher-to-student feedback (Moore & Thompson, 1990; Verduin & Clark, 1991).
- 4. Affordability:** Many forms of distance learning involve little or no cost. For example, almost all of the homes in the United States have televisions and many are connected to a cable-TV service. For these homes, it is relatively easy for the students to watch a public broadcast television show or educational documentary. In addition, almost all homes have access to a telephone and/ or the internet, enabling the use of voicemail and auto conferencing.
- 5. Multi-sensory:** One of the benefits of distance learning is that there is a wide variety of materials that can meet everyone's learning preference – at least part of the time. For example, some students learn from visual stimuli, such as video, and others learn best by listening or interacting with a computer programme. If distance learning courses are well designed, they will likely offer learners a wide range of choices, thereby providing the optimal combinations of interaction and media.
- 6. Interactivity:** Contrary to popular opinion, distance learning courses can offer increased interactions with students. In particular, introverted students who are too shy to ask

questions in class will often “open up” when provided the opportunity to interact via e-mail or other individualized means (Franklin, Yoakam & Warren, 1996). Through the increased interactions, teacher can better meet individual student’s needs.

7. **Equity:** Educational inequity is a major issue in this and other countries. Rural schools often have less contact with educational trends, fewer qualified teachers, and more need for technology. Distance learning offers great potential for alleviating these issues and has been employed very effectively in Canada and Australia – two countries with geographically diverse student populations.

<http://fcit.usf.edu/distance/chap3.htm>

**Complexities of distant learners:** The primary role of the student is to learn. Under the best of circumstances, this challenging task requires motivation, planning and the ability to analyze and apply the information being taught. In a distance education setting, the process of student learning is more complex for several reasons (Schuemer, 1993).

- Many distance-education students are older, have jobs and families. They must coordinate the different areas of their lives which influence each other their families, jobs, spare time and studies.
- Distant learners have a variety of reasons for taking courses. Some students are interested in obtaining a degree to quality for a better job. Many take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in completing a degree.
- In distance education, the learner is usually isolated. The motivational factors arising from the contact or competition with other students is absent. The student also lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is present and able to motivate and if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study.
- Distant learners and their teachers often have little in common in terms of background and day-to-day experiences and therefore, it takes longer for student-teacher rapport to develop. Without face-to-face contact distant learners may feel ill at ease with their teacher as an “individual” and uncomfortable with their learning situation.
- In distance education settings, technology is typically the conduit through which information and communication flow. Until the teacher and students become comfortable with the technical delivery system, communication will be inhibited.

**Distance learners:** Beginning students may have some difficulty determining what the demands of a course of academic study actually are because they do not have the support of an immediate peer group, ready access to the instructor or families with the technology being used for delivery of the distance-education course. They may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Morgan (1991) suggests that distant students/ learners who are not confident about their learning tend to concentrate on memorizing facts and details in order to complete assignments and write exams. As a result, they end up with a poor understanding of course material. He views memorization of facts and details as a surface approach to learning and summarizes it as follows:

- **Surface approach:**

- Focus on the “signs” (e.g., the text or instructor itself).
- Focus on discrete elements.
- Memorize information and procedures for tests.
- Unreflectively associate concepts and facts.
- Fail to distinguish principles from evidence, new information from old.
- Treat assignments as something imposed by the instructor.
- External emphasis focussing on the demands of assignments and exams leading to a knowledge that is cut-off from everyday reality.

Distant learners need to become more selective and focused in their learning in order to master new information. The focus of their learning needs to shift them from a surface approach to a deep approach. Morgan (1991) summarizes this approach as follows:

- **Deep approach:**

- Focus on what is “signified” (e.g., the instructor’s arguments).
- Relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge.
- Relate concepts to everyday experience.
- Relate and distinguish evidence and argument.
- Organize and structure content.
- Internal emphasis focussing on how instructional material relates to everyday reality.

**Improving distant learning:**

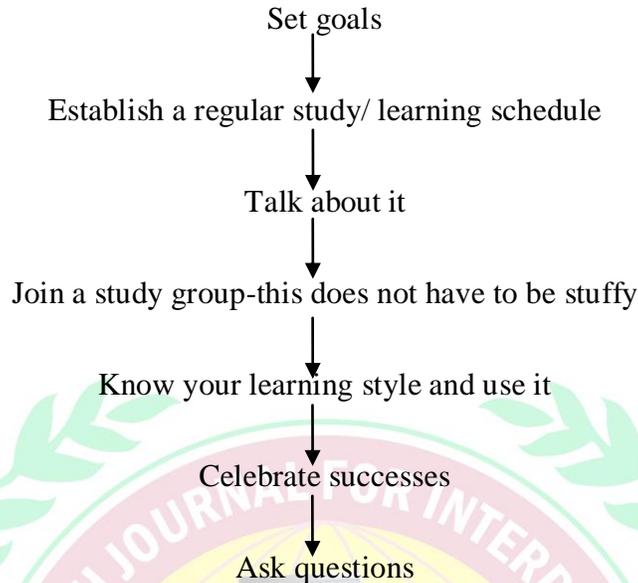
The shift from surface to deep learning is not automatic. Brundage, Keane, and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult students and their instructors must face and overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place including: becoming and staying responsible for themselves; “owning” their strength, desires, skills and needs; maintaining and increasing self-esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate knowledge is; and dealing with content. These challenges are considered in relation to distance education.

- **“Becoming and staying responsible for themselves”**- High motivation is required to complete distant courses because the day-to-day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking. Instructors can help motivate distant students by providing consistent and timely feedback, encouraging discussion among students, being well prepared for class, and by encouraging and reinforcing effective student study habits.
- **“Owning one’s strengths, desires, skills needs”**- Student need to recognize their strengths and limitations. They also need to understand their learning goals and objectives. The instructor can help distant students to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Providing opportunities for students to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course helps to make learning more meaningful and increases motivation.
- **“Maintaining and increasing self-esteem”**- Distant students may be afraid of their ability to do well in a course. They are balancing many responsibilities including employment and raising children. Often their involvement in distance education is unknown to those they work with and ignored by family members. Student performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their instructional activities and if they receive family support in their academic endeavors. The instructor can maintain student self-esteem by providing timely feedback. It is critical for teachers to respond to students questions, assignments and concerns in a personalized and pleasant manner, using appropriate technology such as fax, phone, or computer. Informative comments that elaborate on the individual student’s performance and suggest areas for improvement are especially helpful.
- **“Relating to others”**- Students often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students. Interaction among students typically leads to

group problem solving. When students are unable to meet together, appropriate interactive technology such as E-mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication. Assignments in which students work together and then report back or present to the class as a whole, encourage student-to-student interaction. Ensure clear directions and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge,1993).

- **“Clarifying what is learned”**- Distant students need to reflect on what they are learning. They need to examine the existing knowledge frameworks in their heads and how these are being added to or changed by incoming information. Examinations, papers and class presentations provide opportunities for student and teacher to evaluate learning. However, less formal methods of evaluation will also help the students and teacher to understand learning. For example, periodically during the course the instructor can ask students to write a brief reflection on what they have learned and then provide an opportunity for them to share their insights with other class members.
- **“Redefining what legitimate knowledge is”**- Brundage, Keane and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult learners may find it difficult to accept that their own experience and reflections are legitimate knowledge. If the instructor takes a facilitative rather than authoritative role, students will see their own experience as valuable and important to their further learning. Burge (1993) suggests having learners use first person language to help them claim ownership of personal values, experiences and insights.
- **“Dealing with content”**- Student learning is enhanced when content is related to examples. Instructors tend to teach using examples that were used they received their training. For distance learning to be effective, however, instructors must discover examples that are relevant to their distant students. Encourage students to find or develop examples that are relevant to them or their community.

**Strategies for distance learners:** Seven success strategies for distance learners are suggested by Randall Shierly. Follow the simple tips below, and you will do better in your learning.



**Conclusion:** Teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and deeper for distant learners, if the students and their instructor share responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaining self-esteem; and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and the opportunity provide by distance education.

Due to the nature of the distance learning process, students need to take considerable responsibility in managing their own learning. It is essential to explicitly communicate program expectations about student responsibilities in program announcements. Learning occurs through interaction with faculty members and other students, sustained independent study, and the use of technology to produce meaningful learning experiences. Maturity and motivation to learn characterize the successful distance learning student.

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