DISTANCE LEARNING: FROM HOW-TO TO WHY-TO AND WHEN-TO

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ABSTRACT

Universities in the U.S. are under considerable pressure to transform their delivery method from face-to-face education (F2FE) to distance learning (DL). Most thinking on DL has assumed its inevitability, and has moved on to the issue of *how to* make the best of it at the expense of *why-to* and *when-to*. While most of the push for DL has been generated by university administrators and their concerns for revenue enhancement as well as cost cutting, the perceptions of the three principal stakeholders of the educational system– students, their future employers, and faculty – have been largely overlooked. This research explores the perceptions of these three important stakeholders of DL to reveal that a number of factors critical to the mission of higher education have been ignored in the current push towards DL.

Negative Features of DL

1. Students can and do cheat on tests. A student can pass a course with all the tests taken by another student.
2. Written communication (email) replacing oral communication takes a lot more time to execute.
3. Not having seen their students face-to-face, it would be difficult for professors of DL courses to write meaningful letters of recommendation for these students after they graduate.
4. Educators are not just "informators"; they are also motivators. For those students who are already fully motivated to learn a subject matter, DL may be appropriate. But this is rarely the case with undergraduate students. So a significant portion of the course must be spent *selling* the students on the topic. Given that 70% of human communication is nonverbal, passion and enthusiasm are best conveyed via face-to-face communication.
5. Exclusively online education makes difficult the possibility of a personal relationship developing between the teacher and student after the student graduates and becomes a successful professional.
6. There are technical hardware, software, and transmission problems associated with the use of DL.
7. Lack of opportunity for shy students to overcome their shyness and become more assertive in a controlled social setting, i.e., the classroom.
8. The tendency of a whole new generation of students, brought up on instant messaging, to use abbreviated writing, such as *ur* for *you are*.
9. Lack of opportunity for students to practice standing in front of an audience to deliver an effective oral presentation involving proper timing, voice projection, gesturing, eye contact, etc.
10. Lack of opportunity to build up self-discipline associated with professional work, such as getting dressed, going to class on time, etc.
11. In a traditional teaching environment, lecture handouts, cases, and readings would be handed out to students, whether in class or in the form of a course packet to be purchased at the beginning of the semester. In DL, the onus of printing all this material – sometimes hundreds of pages per course – is transferred to the student.