

DISTANCE LEARNING: SUCCESS REQUIRES SUPPORT

by

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Abstract

As the ranks of distance learners grow and distance programs develop, the differing needs of students enrolled in such courses must be examined and supported. A sample model of how courses are adapted for distance learning at Toronto's Ryerson Polytechnic University show how this institution has addressed these needs by providing a cohesive and unified support infrastructure. Ultimately, a high degree of co-operative collaboration between university and college departments is essential in creating effective distance education programs and resources.

Students and faculty on campus are familiar with the idea of online databases, available Internet resources, and services of interlibrary loans units. But imagine yourself trying to research the essay you're writing while living 300 km from the nearest college or university library. This is just one issue facing the learner who, for one reason or another, has chosen to pursue education at a distance. The concept is not new. People have been learning in non-traditional ways for more than a century. In fact, it's been suggested that St. Paul's letters to the Corinthians were one of the earliest forms of distance education. This example illustrates the kind of flexibility and adaptability to specific audiences that is one of the outgrowths of distance education. Students have learned and still learn independently using paper manuals, study groups, radio programs, videotapes, and a combination of any of these. They learn at home, on oilrigs, in submarines, in prisons, or in the desert. As the ranks of distant learners grow and our distance programs develop, we need to provide the services that these remote students will need. The goal of these services should be to support these distance students on the same level as their on-campus counterparts.

Student Needs

To consider how best to do this, it is necessary to understand this emerging audience with its rapidly changing needs and the concurrent impacts on universities. Apart from examples such as the Open University in the UK and Athabasca University (the first university in Canada to offer courses only at a distance), both which were created for the sole purpose of offering education at a distance, most educational institutions have added distance learning in response to differing needs expressed by students. These needs may be related to ongoing professional development, to physical distance from educational institutions or to a preference for learning more independently. In addition, institutions may want or need to broaden their appeal to a wider student audience. A department in the university or college, or in many cases, a school, creates a lone course, only to find that more students are interested and are demanding more of the same types of courses. Inevitably, the ancillary needs of these students make themselves known and the case for distant student support develops.

Why would a person choose to take a course at a distance? There are as many reasons as there are different types of learners. A working person might seek a professional or academic upgrade, an undergraduate might wish to graduate early, a handicapped person might have difficulty getting to campus, or a working mother may not have the time to commute. Most of these people will succeed at their chosen courses if they possess the required perseverance and discipline. They don't expect a classroom atmosphere and will often, if allowed, work through a course independently without ever asking a single question of the instructor.

One Model

At Ryerson Polytechnic University, in Toronto's busy downtown core, it was decided two years ago to set up a unit within the Continuing Education Department that would be responsible for guiding and supporting faculty through the process of adapting courses for distance. The situation at Ryerson illustrates the phenomenon of an emerging educational continuum that stretches from the face-to-face structured in-class presentation to the complete distance delivery of all aspects of the course. Along this continuum a variety of delivery methods and options occur. In some cases, students can choose to attend a scheduled class or simply access the material online. Some distance and in-class students listen to the same live radio broadcast and submit questions by e-mail. In addition to the regular lecture, instructors provide practice and enrichment on their WebCT sites. They also provide support while students work independently through a printed manual and complete self-test quizzes online to check their progress.

The Learning Continuum

Research has shown that students who experience a course in a more interactive way will experience more satisfaction and may learn better (Gilliver, Randell & Pok, 1998). Online course development and the use of computer-mediated conferencing have gone a long way towards reducing the "transactional" distance felt by learners who couldn't communicate with other class members. A key impact of this use of computer technology on the learning and teaching process is the rising expectations of students and faculty. New students enter class expecting the use of web-based activities. Faculties who move to the Web to supplement their in-class activities may not only increase student interest but also the need for support. This support is not only technical but also administrative. Rising dependence on computers, on web-based activities, and online resources, requires new approaches to learning and the resolution of the many hurdles

traditional administrative process creates. Moving along the continuum towards an "anytime, anyplace" open learning model necessitates being aware and acting on all the implications (see diagram).

One route to addressing these various issues resulting from expectations and concerns is the development of a unified support infrastructure. Where the learning institution is providing a cohesive, integrated set of student support services, learners tend to feel less isolated. Wegner and Holloway (1999) found that students had more positive reactions to all aspects of a course in its online form than their counterparts in the classroom-delivered course.

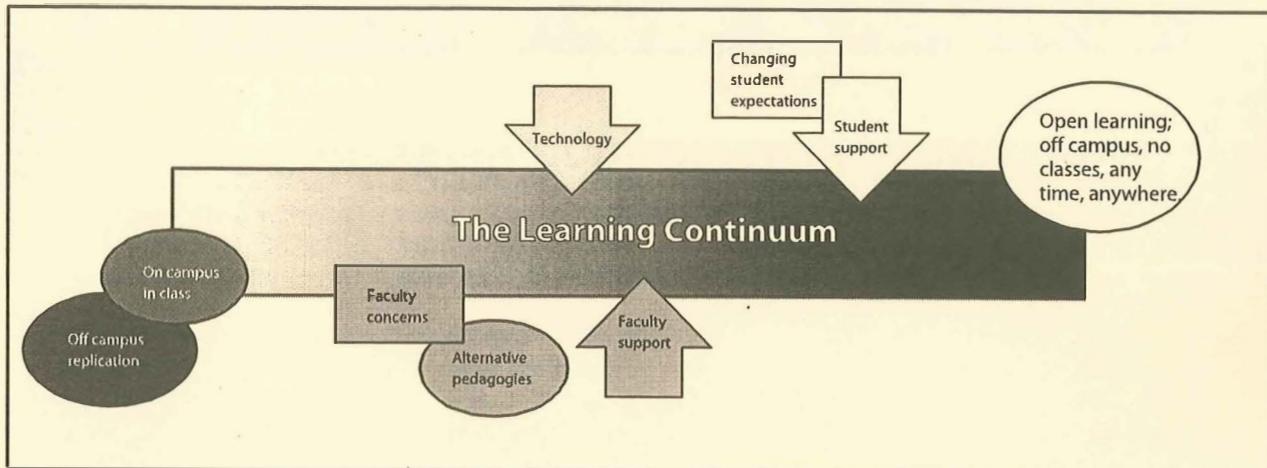
Student Support

What types of support do students need, whether at a distance or in the classroom? They need to be able to get technical, administrative and academic help when they require it. Technical help is generally provided through computing services, with different degrees of hotline availability. Administrative help can be provided through information on a web site and a telephone assistance system. Academic help might be provided through a writing or study skills center, and/or through library services.

At Ryerson, we believe, along with others (Buchanan, 2000; Frieden, 1999), that there must be coordination among these various systems in order to provide seamless support for students of all types. Formerly, a student could physically seek out help by walking into the necessary office. As we see the emergence of more flexible learning activities, students will need access to much of this support both by computer and telephone. These students may not necessarily be "distance" students. Support services should be the same for all, and changes in one service will often affect how others provide support (Carswell, 1999). It is important that the different services communicate with one another to avoid redundancy, save labour, and provide the student with the best support solutions.

The library at Ryerson is a good example of how to implement this seamless use of an academic service. The library answers a student's research needs while he or she attends on-campus courses. Until recently the distance student has not had equal access to this valuable resource. Many institutions opt to send library materials by mail to students. Others have avoided the issue by creating "coursepacks" which are assembled reading materials purchased by the students as a package through the Bookstore.

Currently Ryerson students access the library at any time from any computer correctly configured and connected to the Internet. At the library website, students search hundreds of online journals, as well as for citations to the permanent collection. They check



their records, put a hold on a volume, and/or request an interlibrary loan. They can receive help from 9 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. for most of the academic year through the library "hotline" where a librarian answers research requests and assists in logging onto the library website. Open College, the distance education unit in Continuing Education at Ryerson, works closely with library staff to connect the sources mentioned within distance courses directly to the library databases of full-text holdings or to selected reserve readings. Library staff has developed an online tutorial to help students get the most out of the resources (<http://www.ryerson.ca/library/tutorial/>). The library staff also collaborates with Open College student support staff to coordinate the allocation of library barcodes to new distance students, some of whom cannot come to the campus.

Conclusion

Understanding changing student demographics while coordinating the various types of support services is a complicated task. A high degree of collaboration between university or college departments is necessary to create the structure that will accompany a student who is learning at a distance. While faculty are learning how to adapt teaching strategies to the World Wide Web, other areas, such as registration, learner support centers, and libraries are proposing new ways of offering services to students that directly respond to the needs of learners at any place along the educational continuum.

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