

Distance and Online Learning in Higher Education

Distance and online learning are directly impacting the higher education landscape and likely will continue to cause this evolution into the future. Peters (2006, p.8) describes “distance education as a product of the industrial age, while traditional instruction is more of the artisan type”. This statement validates the unique qualities that distance education can offer higher education institutions as they attempt to offer programs that utilize emerging technologies, meet learner needs and demands, and search for strategies that will entice adult learners. Higher education is facing some real challenges in today’s economic times and their continued survival is tied to the ability to adapt (Stokes, 2009).

Higher education historically has been a slow changing institution, but traditional methods are now being reexamined as colleges and universities compete for resources and students. Today’s students are looking for programs that will prepare them for the global marketplace and colleges are looking for foreign students that can pay cash (Wall Street Journal, 2009). Dual-mode institutions, face to face and at a distance, began operating in the 1970’s and have grown because of the internet which allows greater diversification (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 124). Uses of the internet for instruction and current brain research are causing higher education institutions to creatively seek out novel methods for teaching and learning (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 128).

Although emerging technologies provide the opportunity for relevant, timely constructivist learning to occur within both face to face and distance learning formats at the college and university level, the foundational reason for the creation of distance education was commercial but has grown to recruit students that were no longer content with traditional instruction (Peters, 1996, p. 110). Post-industrial man is able to study at a distance, a phenomena never seen before

(Peters, 2006, p.9). This online learning method offers higher education new markets consisting of lifelong learners, students in remote areas, and international students, a situation that potentially may be self-financing (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 130).

Adult learners offer higher education another potential market of 25 to 50 year olds, a group that learn more independently and see learning as necessary for solving problems in the present (Moore, 1996, 154). Enrolling in distance learning courses for a variety of reasons, instructors and tutors develop lessons that are motivating, engaging, and relevant (Moore, 1996. P. 155). Courses that present new information or new technologies are often in high demand by both undergraduates and post graduates (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 130).

These developments require that faculty members understand new instructional methods and technologies, an area that causes stress for many established instructors that know their content but lack knowledge of how to use technology in a variety of styles (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 140). Another aspect to consider is the support that students will need to successfully use technology for registration, counseling, and help-desk concerns (Moore, 1996, p. 168-169). As distance and online programs continue to grow in higher education, due to economic and student needs, new challenges will arise that will likely require a focused system's view to solve. Using a collaborative approach with a variety of stakeholders, distance education and online learning will continue to impact the entire higher education landscape for the foreseeable future.

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