

Distance Learning From Multiple Perspectives

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Abstract

With the popularity of distance learning on the rise, attention is often focused on *how to* design and deliver online courses. This paper, based on empirical research, argues that it is premature to dwell on the how-to question before dealing with a number of larger issues from multiple perspectives (student, teacher, future employer) that paint a picture of the negative aspects of online teaching. It then goes on to propose a set of circumstances under which online teaching is most appropriate.

Introduction

In 1938, the New York Times predicted that pencils would become obsolete in the face of emerging sophisticated typewriters [1]. Higher education is confronting a similar situation today. It is predicted – sometimes even welcomed as a desirable outcome – that face-to-face education (F2FE) will become obsolete with the growth of distance learning (DL), the kind of learning that occurs when the instructor and student are separated by distance, time, or both. While DL has been around for decades (such as in the form of the Public Broadcasting System broadcasting educational programming to schools and homes via the television), the term DL is today more closely associated with online, web-based learning that takes place through supporting software programs such as Blackboard (Bb).

Most thinking on DL has assumed its inevitability and has moved on to the issue of how to make the best of it. This can be felt on college campuses. As a colleague remarked recently,

This (DL) is like the Internet. It is a high-speed train coming at us.

There is no stopping it. Either we jump on it or we'll be run over by it.

It can also be felt on the research scene where the majority of research focuses on how to make DL effective and efficient, exemplified by [2]. The danger in assuming DL is inevitable is that we stop thinking about its downsides – what they are, how many they are, how serious they are, and

whether they are worth fighting against. The situation is further exacerbated by the rewards provided by educational institutions to those who embrace DL. These rewards range from recognition and praise all the way to financial bonus for faculty teaching exclusively online.

If we assume that DL is inevitable, then the only valid issue that remains would how to do it. But if we assume that DL's desirability is situational and that it should be used only under a specific set of circumstances, then the issue of how-to should be preceded by the issues of why to use it and when to use it.

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 – seem to have been overlooked. This research explores the perceptions of these three important stakeholders of DL.

- Students. It asked students in two sections of an introductory MIS course and one section of a graduate MIS course (total number = 89) of a mid-size public university to write down their perceptions of the positive and negative features of DL.
- Future employers. In a specially convened meeting of the Information Systems Business Advisory Council of the same university, the perceptions of seven Chief Information Officers regarding DL were discussed.
- Faculty. Five professors from the same university were approached to discuss their perceptions of DL.

The contents were then analyzed to derive the basic categories. The emphasis was more on content analysis than on statistical analysis. As long as some categories of analysis are ill defined or are completely missing, it would be premature to subject them to statistical analysis.

In what follows, these factors are classified under the two major headings of “positive features of DL” and “negative features of DL” and discussed one by one. At the end, a conception of DL that would capitalize on strengths and avoid the weaknesses is proposed.

Positive Features of DL

1. Tools such as Bb provide an effective environment through which course documents can be shared. This covers three types of documents: Those shared by
 - instructors with students, such as readings, cases, and lecture handouts
 - students with one another, such as group project files
 - students with instructors, such as homework assignments and finished project deliverables
2. DL prepares students for professional certification training that is increasingly offered online. Some companies, such as Oracle, offer certificates in an exclusively online format.
3. A host of commercial, non-academic educational institutions (such as University of Phoenix) offer online degrees. If universities do not rise to the challenge and offer similar DL programs, they will lose students to these commercial enterprises.
4. DL is a boon for shy students who rarely speak up in class, as faceless communication prevents them from being put on the spot and allows them to express themselves openly. The same for international students who may be self-conscious about their foreign accent.
5. DL provides for flexible study times. Students do not have to go to class at pre-assigned hours that may be inconvenient or undesirable for them.

Negative Features of DL

1. Students can cheat on tests. In principle, a student can pass a course with all the tests taken and all the work done by another student.
2. Written communication (mostly email) replacing oral communication takes a lot more time to execute since typing is slower than talking. It is typical for a professor to send out 2,000 or more email messages in only one semester for a single DL course.
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. Many commit themselves to a field of study without knowing much about it. It is then the job of educators to demonstrate their passion about their subject matter to their students, and to transfer this passion to them. Effective DL assumes commitment, motivation, enthusiasm and self-discipline on the part of the learner. These attributes are present only in a small percent of students who commit themselves to a field of study. In a business school, even those who are already passionate about their major field of study (say, marketing) have to take a host of other business-related courses (accounting, finance, human resources, information systems, etc. in the core segment of their curriculum) in which they usually have little interest and for which they find little justification. So a significant portion of the course must be spent selling the students on the topic. Given that 70% of human communication is nonverbal [3], 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. This type of personal relationship can be effective in helping recent graduates find employment opportunities with past alumni who have kept in touch with their former professors. DL creates not only a physical, but also a social, distance.
6. There are technical problems associated with the use of DL. Among the major ones are the following:
 - Slow communication speed, leading to unrealistically slow downloading of large files.
 - Unreliable communication links, unexpectedly cutting off a student in the middle of a session. This is particularly frustrating when the student is taking a test online.
 - Incompatibility of various versions of software, leading either to a posted document not opening up at all or opening up with partial, scrambled contents.
7. Lack of opportunity for shy students to overcome their shyness and become more assertive in a controlled social setting, i.e., the classroom. This is the flip side of the

- positive feature 4 listed above. The overcoming of shyness and the learning of proper conduct is particularly important in professional fields such as business, law, medicine, and engineering.
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. Conversely, the resentment of the same type of students who are told that all their DL email communication has to conform to formal rules of writing.
 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. These oral presentations are common in the business world.
 10. Lack of opportunity to build up self-discipline associated with professional work, such as getting dressed, going to class on time, etc. This is the flip side of the positive feature 5 listed above.
 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.

A Proposed Conception of DL

Considering the positive and negative features identified above, it would be desirable to propose a conception of DL that would combine the best features of DL and F2FE. While proposing a detailed design would be outside the scope of this paper, the general outline of such a conception would be as follows.

First, the target audience needs to be assessed in terms of their level of motivation and enthusiasm about the subject matter. The higher the level of enthusiasm, the higher the informational (vs. motivational) content of communication, and hence the greater the relevance of DL. Conversely, the lower the level of enthusiasm, the higher the motivational (vs. informational) content of communication, and hence the greater the relevance of F2FE.

Even in situations requiring F2FE, a valid role still exists for the type of software that is typically used to support DL, such as Bb. These programs can be used as a repository of course documents such as lecture notes, readings, cases, and student projects. They can also be used as a messaging device in which faculty and/or students can communicate short email messages. But for more substantial, complex exchanges, face-to-face classroom contact would be required to develop the intellectual, expressive and social aspects of student interaction. Under these circumstances, it will be necessary to sell them before you tell them.

Conclusion

The recent speculations about DL replacing F2FE may be as much hype as the New York Times prediction was about the obsolescence of the pencil. As typewriters got more and more sophisticated and were ultimately replaced by word-processors, the pencil managed to survive. This is due to the fact that typewriters and pencils are two related but essentially different tools. The typewriter is for formal communication, whereas the pencil has a more personal, expressive function. Likewise, DL and F2FE are two related but essentially different approaches to teaching. DL is appropriate for training situations in which the student is already sold on the need to learn, whereas F2FE is suitable for settings in which the scratching (teaching) is not based on an already-existing itch (desire to learn), or those in which interaction is too complex to be effectively conducted through the medium of technology.

References

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