
Distance Learning in the Millenium: Where is it Going?

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Like mushrooms in a damp forest distance learning programs have sprung up and multiplied incredibly over the past ten years. However, despite its high profile in academe, distance learning remains highly controversial. Will it be the “savior” of the educational enterprise, or will it be the “destroyer” of the educational establishment as we know it? Will “virtual colleges and universities” replace brick and mortar, as some visionaries have asserted, or will it coexist with traditional educational systems? These are some of the issues being discussed not only in the United States, but around the world.

What does the term distance learning mean? The range of interpretations runs from sending an instructor some distance from the main campus to teach a group of students face-to-face to providing all instruction and interaction via the World Wide Web. Between these two extremes lie several different paradigms. First of all, sending faculty to teach at distant sites is no longer considered distance learning by most practitioners of the field. The current definition of the term usually includes physical separation of instructor and student and the use of some technological delivery system. Nonetheless, the patterns for instruction continue to expand based on local situations and funding. The most important factor, however, in whether a distance learning program grows or the direction it takes is most likely the administration and faculty of the college. Lacking sufficient support from either group will make the road rocky, if not impassible.

At present colleges in the Tennessee Board of Regents System deliver distance learning courses basically four ways, but two modes dominate: Compressed video “smart classroom” transmissions over telephone lines and videotapes sent to the students’ homes or placed in local libraries for use or checkout. Most of the colleges are also trying to enter the on-line market as well, but the growth of on-line courses has been slow. Even with these systems, however, local modifications have been made to meet the needs of the colleges’ students or to compromise for administration and faculty support.

Over the fifteen years that Chattanooga State has offered some form of distance learning, several delivery systems have been used. The first of these was broadcasting courses in the early morning and late evening via the local PBS station. Students came to campus for help sessions, test reviews and test taking, but the instruction was totally asynchronous. Next a lab-based independent telecourse program was developed which was very popular and became even more so when, in 1989, students were given the option to have the tapes checked out or mailed to them in their homes. A synchronous ITFS system which transmitted one-way video/two-way audio

came on-line in 1985 and fed instruction to as many as seven different locations. Faculty liked this option because their role as “the sage on the stage” continued, even if they could see only one section of their students. Until the video checkout system came into being, this was the most popular delivery system. However, once students could take courses “anytime, anyplace,” the popularity of the ITFS system declined significantly. In the early 1990s the college began experimenting with on-line course delivery. At first a “bulletin board” system was set up, but it was “clunky,” and students had many technical difficulties using it. Then the college contracted with an outside Internet service provider, and the system improved. Still, though, enrollments in the on-line classes have been small. The probable cause for this situation is hesitancy of faculty to try developing on-line courses, the desire of deans to keep as many students on campus as possible, and the fact that many students still do not have access to computers in the home. Presently the college enrolls over 3000 students per year in distance learning, primarily through the videocourse option and a small number of on-line courses. The local cable company also donates airtime to broadcast telecourses, if the college wishes. The IFS system has now been decommissioned and leased to a wireless cable operator who has been delayed in implementing the local operation due to red tape.

Despite the negatives, however, the distance learning program here has flourished, partly because of the breadth of course offerings (83 at present) and because it provides the flexibility many students need. Although the two modes are primarily asynchronous, several hybrid patterns have evolved, with both advantages and disadvantages to each.

Most of the videocourses are totally asynchronous except for the requirement of proctored testing. However, the program has worked out a system that allows students to be tested in their locations, with the designation of an approved proctor at an educational institution or library there. The program has even developed a complete Forestry certificate with laboratories that may be completed without coming to campus. On the other hand, the Biology Department developed two anatomy and physiology courses which allow students to receive the instruction at home but require them to attend an on-campus lab once each week. While this option is very attractive to students in this area, it shuts out students from far away who have seen information about the courses in distance learning guides and would like to take the courses. If other colleges begin to offer these courses totally asynchronously through interactive on-line labs or through partnering with other colleges for teaching the labs, will the faculty here decide to try a new approach or will the courses fail to grow because potential students from outside the local area have a better option?

Another similar hybrid delivery system has been very well received by area employers. This arrangement pairs videotapes and workbooks for home use with “live” company-site laboratories using company equipment. Individuals taking these courses may opt for a certificate in six industrial maintenance fields or an Industrial Maintenance Technology Associate of Science degree. The popularity of this arrangement stems from the fact that workers do not have to leave the worksite to take the classes, and they receive both fundamental concepts as well as application of those concepts to machinery used at the company. Labs are provided by a “traveling” instructor paired with an in-house “expert” at the company location.

Even within the on-line offerings at Chattanooga State several delivery patterns have emerged. One instructor holds class one night a week in a chat room on “America On-Line.” He requires outside assignments that are shared during the “class” and brings in “guest speakers” on a frequent basis. Another instructor has placed everything on-line, including tests. Another uses a videocourse for instruction, with email interaction and submission of work. Another has developed a model which requires students to do research on

the Web, read and analyze cases in a text, and participate asynchronously in a newsgroup once each week

Is Chattanooga State “missing the boat” by focusing so heavily on asynchronous delivery systems? Surely “live” interaction is better. Perhaps so, but it is clear from what is happening with the Western Governors Virtual University and the Southern Regional Education Board’s Electronic Marketplace that many other colleges see the need and advantage of offering “anytime, anyplace” classes to students who might be locked out of college access in traditional classrooms. Will these new delivery systems spell the doom of traditional on-campus colleges? That seems unlikely, since taking courses through distance learning is not an option all students want or need. In fact, at Chattanooga State over 60% of the students taking distance learning courses are also taking at least one course on campus. The distance learning program allows them to take more courses, complete degrees more quickly, or work around the circumstances in their lives.

What does the future hold for distance learning in the new millennium? That will depend, I believe, on the continued mind-boggling pace of development of new technologies, such as WebTV, and the “greening” of faculties around the country as “old heads” retire and new, more technologically literate young instructors replace them. Finally, the issues of financing technology and instructional integrity will play pivotal roles in thwarting or expanding the role of distance learning for future students. My bet is on continued evolution of hybrid systems that draw from the advantages of several different formats in providing what students need to succeed.

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