

MANAGING THE MANDATE: Role of the Teacher in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Distance education provides opportunities for instructors to extend and expand their classrooms beyond the confines of a building. It is also an opportunity to revisit techniques for teaching since distance education incorporates both place and time shifting (Herring & Smaldino, 1997). A *place shift* suggests that all the participants in the class are not in a single location, whereas a *time shift* implies that the instruction is not “live.” Both these aspects of distance learning present instructional challenges to even the most experienced educators. Distance education is an opportunity to revisit the role of the instructor and the student in the learning environment.

ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Lesson Organization

A primary role of the instructor in an educational setting is to provide guidance in the learning process (Herring & Smaldino, 1997). Student-centered learning is a direction that is taking a strong hold in education today. In particular, it is important in a distance education setting to center attention on the student and to focus the instruction away from the teacher and toward the learners.

After the initial planning and preparation for instruction is completed, it is time to concentrate on issues associated with the delivery of the instruction. One issue is the organization of content. Key elements of each lesson should be outlined. Cyr and Smith (1990) recommend incorporating no more than three or four major concepts or points in a 50-minute time period. Cyr and Smith (1990) recommend that “teacher talk” be limited to 10 to 15 minutes and be varied by incorporating visuals and student interactions. Attention also should be given to the number and choice of visuals used in the lesson.

Another issue is time allotment. While the key elements of planning are essential regardless of the distance education format, the allotment of time for specific activities is crucial to ensure student success. Lessons should be planned to allow time for students to engage in the learning activities.

In a time-shifted Internet-based learning environment, it is important to ensure the instructions are complete so that the learners are not struggling with how to use the technology or how to respond to tasks. It is important to focus on independent learning tasks, shifting the role of the instructor to that of manager of the prompts to encourage student learning.

Instructional Methods

Teaching methods should be chosen based on the characteristics of the instructor, students, content, and delivery system (Herring & Smaldino, 1997). Due to the increased responsibility for learning placed on the students at a distance, methods that focus on the learners and incorporate interactivity have been shown to be most successful (Souder, 1993).

Besides determining the appropriate instructional methods to be used in delivering the content, the instructor should also determine ways to involve the class at all instructional sites. With some adaptations, the same methods and techniques that are successful in a traditional classroom setting usually work as well in distance instruction, especially if they encourage student interaction.

The instructor is responsible for the learning environment created in the traditional and distance classroom settings. The technology incorporated in distance learning should be considered as a tool to enhance instruction and not as an end unto itself. It has been suggested that if a strategy works in a regular classroom, it probably will work in distance instruction with some adjustment (Herring & Smaldino, 1997). It is important to consider a variety of techniques, but an instructor must remember to think of strategies that engage learners in active rather than passive learning experiences.

Teaching at a Distance

Beginning the Class. Developing rapport with students is important at the beginning of any class. Such rapport is essential to ensure a successful distance learning environment. This is especially true when the environment is computer-based.

Although a class composed of students who might know one another might not require introductory activities, groups of strangers, such as people across a span of distance within the class setting, can certainly profit from getting to know one another. Instructors, all too typically, merely warm up their groups of students with simple introductions. Instructors need to employ more directive and creative ways of helping the participants learn about one another.

Also, using elaborate techniques for introductions can reduce the lonely feeling that some students might be experiencing. It is important to find ways to involve shy people. By investing time at the beginning of class for introductions, students will become more at ease with the setting and potentially will become more spontaneous in class participation (Herring & Smaldino, 1997).

Introduction strategies help the instructor demonstrate that the focus of the class is on the students, not on the instructor. Further, they give the instructor an opportunity to gather additional information about the members of the class.

Structuring the Class. In any instructional setting, students benefit when they have a clear view of such issues as class organization and student responsibilities. Class organization includes such items as class schedule, grouping for activities, and expectations for interaction. It is the responsibility of the instructor to ensure that students understand how the class is structured. These issues of format or structure are important to help students quickly and easily become involved in learning rather than focusing on trying to puzzle through the manner of delivery (Herring & Smaldino, 1997).

Instructors need to adhere to the predetermined schedules (Macfarlane & Smaldino, 1997). For synchronous settings, instructors need to maintain a class schedule that is congruous with the transmission schedule. For asynchronous distance learning settings, they need to post information and assignments in a timely fashion. They need to practice ways to use time wisely and to maintain the schedule of activities. Students need to know about the importance of presentation handouts if they are used and how to use them to benefit their learning.

Students need a clear understanding of their own responsibilities (Cyrs & Smith, 1990). They need to know what is expected of them in terms of preparation for class and participation in class activities. Further, students need to know how their participation in class discussions is measured (personal communication, R. Muffoletto, spring, 1997). Students who are reluctant to engage in discussion or are unprepared should be prepared to accept the consequences of nonparticipation if a portion of assessment is dependent on a certain level of participation. Instructors must assume responsibility to meet the needs of students who might be reluctant learners.

Students need training in communication protocols. In an audio setting they need to be prepared to use microphones or other audio equipment. Further, they need to understand their responsibilities to be courteous and well-mannered, in both audio and text-based communication formats. Respect for others is an important part of working in groups, especially at a distance (Herring & Smaldino, 1997).

Also, students need to assume responsibility for initiating communication with the instructor. Because of the venue, the instructor and students may not meet in person, but rather must meet via the technology. If students are having difficulty with the course or need additional information or assistance, it is their responsibility to contact the instructor. But the instructor must provide them with contact information.

Another related issue is what to do when there are technical difficulties. Provide students with alternatives. Students need to know what is expected of them. When teaching with technology, always assume the worst and be pleasantly surprised when everything goes well.

Preparing for Remote Resources. When preparing to work with students at a distance, it is necessary to consider the resources available to students. This information will provide an instructor with the data necessary for creating equal educational opportunities for all students in the distance education classroom. It is important for students to feel they all have equal status in the class regardless of where they are located. If this means creating new, different ways of achieving the same tasks, then the instructor must engage in creative endeavors (Macfarlane & Smaldino, 1997).

While many items deal with the mechanical side of the classroom resources, there is a human side to classroom resources. The presence of a facilitator is often considered optional, but this person can be important for the success of the distant instruction (Herring & Smaldino, 1997). A facilitator is generally an adult who has been hired by an educational institution to be a local contact for students. Facilitators' roles vary depending on their capabilities. They may be on-site during instruction, they may be available prior to and following transmissions, or they may be responsible for hardware and software performance.

No matter what the role of the facilitator, it is important to set up a time for discussion about expectations of each member of the team prior to starting the course, to avoid misunderstandings once the course begins. Further, it is important to share this information about the facilitator's role with students.

Summary

It is important to remember that distance education may be as new to the students as it is to the instructor. Preparing students for instruction is important in any teaching mode to maximize learning from class participation. But it is especially important to prepare students for settings where class participants are separated across distances. Students need to understand their responsibility to ensure a successful learning experience.

The instructor at a distance needs to be creative and imaginative in the design and structure of the course. One rule of thumb is that successful interactive learning experiences that work in a traditional classroom are adaptable to the distance learning environment. But they may require more than just some changes to the visuals or the handouts. They may require inventiveness and innovation.

Teaching at a distance can be a pleasurable experience for everyone involved, instructor and student alike. Keeping it interesting, and motivating the learners to remain active, can make it a valuable learning experience as well as fun.

References

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