

A SYSTEM DESIGN FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

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We cannot solve the challenges of the knowledge age with the same tools we used in the industrial age. In this context, if higher education institutions want to be successful with their implementation of distance education strategies, they need to implement it using a system perspective.

The new millennium is characterized by important changes affecting all aspects of our lives. We have experienced a major societal transformation from the industrial age to the postindustrial information/knowledge age. However, we continue to think and solve problems using the mindset of the classical scientific orientation that still prevails in both educational scholarship and practice.

This way of thinking has influenced distance education and today we study distance education taking in consideration a diversity of fragmented disciplines including student support, faculty development, information technology and instructional design. This separating- into-disciplines approach can provide only partial interpretation of the system studied, and sets forth descriptions based on disparate theoretical frameworks (Banathy, 1996).

THE DISTANCE EDUCATION SYSTEM

The distance education system proposed here is composed of six main elements:

1) Planning, 2) Instructional Design, 3) Technological Implementation, 4) Academic Implementation, 5) Quality and Evaluation, and 6) Administration.

Subsystem 1: Planning

This subsystem includes two main elements: Organizational Change for the Implementation of Distance Education and Strategic Planning of Distance Education Projects

Organizational Change for Digital Education: One of the main issues in the success of campus initiatives in distance education is the support of campus leaders. These leaders must create a shared vision to involve faculty, administrators and students in the development of campus wide initiatives to support distance education. In this way the project will be able to articulate a clear educational purpose, demonstrate validity for stakeholders, and reflect the broader mission of the institution. “Both top-down and bottom-up support is needed for successful distance education.” (Berge & Schrum, 1998).

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Strategic Planning: Strategic planning is the key to link all the elements involved in the implementation of a system for distance education. Through strategic planning is possible to link topics such as pedagogical changes needed for distance education, institutional and cultural issues, and organizational structure. For example, how distance education programs fit within the mission of the institution must first be determined before any major resource allocation should be expected.

Subsystem 2: Learning Theories and Instructional Design

Good instructional design is the core of any quality distance education course. It is virtually impossible to create a distance education course without knowing and understanding instructional design. The instructional design of distance education needs to be based upon sound learning theories otherwise it runs the risk of being an inappropriate use of the medium. Although there are many learning theories, two that dominate instructional design are behavioral and cognitive psychology. Higher education institutions should have clear and written statements about their instructional design and learning theories approach to distance education.

Subsystem 3: Technological Implementation

Information technology (IT) has the potential to solve many problems. It can increase access to higher education through distance and distributed learning programs, change the roles of students and faculty through interactive technologies, facilitate more learner-centered education, increase funds through improved business processes and distance education, and expand the scope and content of the curriculum (Horgan, 1998). However, information technology is just a means to an end; is a tool that has to be guided using clear objectives where learning should be the final purpose. Information technology, like any educational tool, cannot exist in isolation, but must be made an integral part of the entire system approach to distance education.

Subsystem 4: Academic Implementation

Effective teaching at a distance is more the result of preparation than innovation. The distance educator can employ a number of strategies focusing on planning, student understanding, interaction, and teaching to ensure a successfully delivered course (Barry, 1992). It is important to include faculty development programs for distance education that take into consideration incentives and reward structures and motivate instructors to develop instructionally effective distance education courses.

Subsystem 5: Quality and Evaluation

According to Lockwood (2000, p. 81) “quality assurance is a set of procedures or systems planned to ensure that an effective, efficient and satisfying experience is provided for learners”. Higher education institutions should have in place quality assurance systems that include general sets of principles and standards that endeavor to get things right first time, and that can be checked regularly during the whole process.

Subsystem 6: Administration and Costs

It is not possible to implement a system for distance education without taking into account decisions about the budget, infrastructure, staffing, and policy. This type of decisions should come from both academic planners and the implementation team. Leaders championing distance education within their institution must be able to show that such programs are adding value, are relevant, and may increase enrollment and retention, and thus warrant a change in some policies (Berge & Schrum, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Armed with a systematic plan that lists goals and priorities, a financial strategy that allows for life cycle planning, a reliable and robust IT infrastructure, adequate support services, and incentives for faculty to experiment with information technology in their classes, higher education institutions will be well-positioned to use distance education effectively. Ultimately, the goal is to educate students and faculty to be able to function successfully with technology in the 21st century (Horgan, 1998).

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