Planning, managing, and maintaining distance learning courses present challenges and opportunities for faculty that require shifts in teaching techniques and management. Interviews with experienced professors, published reports, and primary data assist in identifying reasons for the successes and failures of previous e-learning efforts while providing practical recommendations for lessening workloads, handling chat sessions, facilitating communications, and meeting other challenges. A technology overview details expectations for e-learning faculty, and the obligations of institutions. Methods of enhancing distance education are provided.

Planning, managing, and maintaining distance learning environments begin with a thorough examination of published reports and the insightful comments and practical recommendations of professors with years of experience in both traditional teaching and instructing through e-learning courses. The purpose of this article is to provide perceptions and survival techniques that aid in e-education, including useful comments and advice for lessening the workload, handling chat sessions, encouraging discourse, and facilitating interaction, which were gathered through interviews and feedback from instructors who have 10 to 25 years of traditional university teaching and 3 to 8 years of instructing through distance learning courses. Furthermore, faculty enticements and the results of data collected from professors are presented.

There are many challenges in online teaching (Glahn & Gen, 2002), including promoting individual learning strategies and finding ways for technology to enhance a student’s ability to read, write, reflect, and synthesize course materials. Instructors who are successful in mentoring student-teacher communications utilize many techniques to create a more positive online learning environment.

Expanding technology and distance learning are vital and growing aspects of most academic institutions (Alexander & Baird, 2003). The term “distance education” encompasses many forms of instructional delivery, including satellite television, video conferencing, cable, audiotapes, computer systems, fax, correspondence courses, home study, and independent study (Floyd, 2003). Opitz (1996) includes telephones in the definition and states that most students have opportunities for interactions with their instructors and other distance learners. Bruder (1991) reflects that teachers use distance learning telecommunications equipment to send instructional programming to students. Businesses have long used various forms of online learning for training and retraining employees (Abernathy, 1997), and these methods have broadened in appeal to institutions of higher education.

Distance learning programs are increasing “de-
Despite the limited amount of empirical research on their effectiveness” (Burgess & Russell, 2003, p. 300). “Anecdotal evidence and studies by individual institutions suggest that course-completion and program-retention rates are generally lower in distance-education courses than in their face-to-face counterparts” (Carr, 2000, p. A39). “Although there are variations among institutions, several administrators concur that course-completion rates are often 10% to 20% higher in traditional courses than in distance offerings” (p. A39).

Faculty Enticements

Despite challenges of distance learning, certain departments are shifting their courses and shutting down traditional versions of some classes (Schank, 2002; Young, 2001). Thus, incentives are being provided to faculty to encourage them to teach online.

Irani and Teig (2001) reported that most institutions offered faculty training and provided incentives for teaching distance education courses. Some enticements, in addition to monetary compensation, are graduate assistant support, release time to develop a course, and software and hardware. An incentive that faculty appreciate most, however, is to have leaders who are understanding, good listeners, and willing to invest in their colleagues (Floyd, 2003).

Royalties entice professors to design Web courses (Young, 2001). One example is a university that pays professors’ royalties when their online materials are used by other instructors. This institution also shares some tuition from online courses with the teachers who create them. A professor receives about 4% of the tuition from every student enrolled in sections taught by other faculty members, and, if the university licenses this course to another institution, he will receive 50% of the licensing fee. The extra money is used to hire an adjunct professor to lead discussions and to grade papers. Additionally, universities have developed detailed plans for online classes with royalties being paid to professors whose materials are used by other instructors or institutions.

Disadvantages of Distance Learning for Faculty

Teachers face new challenges. One of these is establishing lines of communication with and between learners. It is difficult to build a rapport between instructors and students in this atmosphere (Perreault, Waldman, Alexander, & Zhao, 2002), but maximizing the openness of communication can help learners feel empowered, rather than helpless. When learners feel empowered “and have close contact with the instructor, their learning experience in an online course will be a good one” (Serwatka, 2002, p. 48). Adequate feedback assists both teachers and students in improving the quality of e-education, thus resolving some problems specific to this mode of learning. While enrollees may have had little or no input of their viewpoints into the development of a course, instructors can create activities that foster student-to-student collaboration through curriculum design (Perreault et al., 2002).

This format of teaching can be more time-consuming than a traditional class due to increased e-mail and message board responses and the tendency to carefully word a written reply rather than giving a spontaneous, spoken one (Kerka, 1996; Perreault et al., 2002). Implementing a distance learning class requires extensive planning and development (Deal, 2002). “More planning and effort is needed than in traditional courses, and instructor preparation, course development, instructor accessibility, and course monitoring are all critical elements of effective online courses” (McEwen, 2001, pp. 101-102).

Faculty who understand the differences in successful online versus classroom teaching are more likely to meet the needs of learners (Cyrs, 1997; Schank, 2002). Moving from instructor-centered teaching to student-centered learning is essential (Perreault et al., 2002). This requires at least three changes: more interactive exercises for users to keep their attention than in a traditional setting (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995), the development of alternative assessment techniques (Perreault et al., 2002), and the recognition that there are limitations in this medium.

Online learning requires that the teacher become a facilitator, guide, mentor, and coach rather than an authoritative source of knowledge (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000). This approach works well in online learning environments because the learner actively builds knowledge structures, discovers new ideas, and
connects concepts in a meaningful way. The mentor assists by promoting the development of relationships, maintaining group continuity, and encouraging students to connect their experiences and knowledge with instructional content.

**Instructors and Technology**

Some instructors may feel uneasy, anxious, and stressed if students are more knowledgeable about the technology than they (Floyd, 2003), and others may find electronic communication uncomfortable or intimidating (D. C. Lawhon, personal communication, May 4, 2004). Teachers need formal training in distance education methodology, delivery mechanisms, and content sequencing beyond a specific software package or technology, like video conferencing (Perreault et al., 2002).

Faculty may not have expected to take on the roles of information science guru, programmer, content expert, and technical assistant, but the instructor must provide additional training and technical support to some students (Rohfeld & Hiemstra, 1995). This is challenging because there may be little or no technical support and teacher training provided by the institution (Perreault et al., 2002).

Successful online communication requires additional research before the course begins, to ensure that technical problems are resolved or minimized. Platform parity is essential—software applications such as chat software, Webcam software, and visual presentations online must be usable on a variety of different software and hardware platforms, with modest enough requirements in terms of processor speed, video display ability, hard drive storage space, and memory that it will run on older machines (D. C. Lawhon, personal communication, May 4, 2004). Presentations and audio/video conferencing must be accessible to users with a dial-up modem; this requires instructors to limit the size of files and to become familiar with the amount of information that can be transmitted over a low-speed connection.

Instructors may find it difficult to establish an interactive learning community that reduces isolation, promotes a shared identity, establishes social networks, and encourages discourse. According to Moallem (2003), online course communication is essential, and it should be graded. If interactions are not adequately planned and integrated into problem-solving activities, assignments, projects, and group work, students are less likely to avail themselves of these opportunities. Guidelines for collaboration in e-learning are to:

- permit group members to demonstrate social skills and communication competencies,
- provide opportunities for group members to assist each other,
- make all group members aware of individual responsibilities, and
- increase the time allocated for group activities because teams work together for longer periods than when they are in tradition classrooms (Moallem, 2003; Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2003).

A research study including 81 distance-learning instructors reflected that they had challenges of their own (Perreault et al., 2002):

- 80% had some problems with the reliability of the technology,
- 63% had some problems with the level of student competency with technology,
- 58% had some problems with the technology support provided by the institution, and
- 41% had some problems with their own technology competence.

The main concerns of these teachers related to the reliability, support, and use of technology, the adaptation of teaching styles, and the fostering of communications. Faculty may not realize that “when communicating on-line, students expect immediate feedback” (Perreault et al., 2002, p. 314). This expectation is also present in face-to-face classes. For example, one of these authors taught a traditional graduate class that met for 40 in-class-hours during a five-week period. Even with posted and announced conference times immediately after the traditional class, there were 20-22 hours per week of additional contact hours and editing assistance requested. These contacts were through telephone calls, faxes, e-mails, and drop-in conferences at non-scheduled times. Students wanted immediate responses, and they sent e-mails expressing their appreciation for the assistance. This was one of the two classes taught by this professor during a five-week summer session.

**Instructors and Attrition Rates**

Student drop-out rates vary by classes, professors, and institutions. When attrition rates are high, instructors need to discover why by talking with students who have had the course (Hartley, Gill, Walters,
Bryant, & Carter, 2001). For example, one online class without collaboration had a completion rate of 25% (Kiser, 1999). The same course with access to a tutor by e-mail or telephone and collaboration through a discussion list had a completion rate of 75%.

McEwen (2001) reported that one out of nine dropped the online course and that this was about the same as in the traditional class. Others reported that dropout rates ranged from 20% to 50% (Frankola, 2001; Irani & Teig, 2001). Some instructors and students are more successful in traditional classes, but both will need to make adjustments when moving to distance learning.

New Data Collected From Distance Learning Professors

Based upon the references cited in the previous content of this article and in other literary reviews, a questionnaire, Challenges and recommendations for those developing or offering a Web-based course, was developed to gather recent in-depth information on the distance education experiences of professors (Lawhon, 2004). The instrument was utilized and data were collected from seven experienced instructors in the Summer of 2004 (Ennis-Cole, 2004). These male and female participants were associate or full professors who had taught in the university setting for 10-25 years and have been involved in e-learning from three to eight years. Much of their feedback reflected the research presented earlier in this manuscript. There were indications that online learning is extremely time intensive and necessitates the development of creative strategies to lessen the workload. Some of their input appears below.

Time Intensive

One interviewee indicated that there were challenges in distance education but that this method of instruction is preferred to traditional face-to-face classes. Some reasons given for the partiality were that she could better organize, control, and facilitate student communication on her timetable. The professor acknowledged that those in her courses were exceptional graduate students – the best in the college – and that this made a tremendous difference.

Other professors reported that some of their most time-consuming tasks related to distance learning were:

- developing and pilot testing information and ideas in traditional classes prior to placing the information in online courses;
- becoming overloaded with e-mails from students who want immediate feedback, and receipts of second requests before a first one is answered;
- writing and sending reminders of due dates for materials, activities, and other matters that are already reflected in the course syllabus;
- grading assignments, exams, learning projects, worksheets, and other materials; and
- writing and sending memos and making other contacts with students to encourage their involvement and to enhance their feelings of satisfaction.

One participant noted, “I have to baby sit them. I send out reminders of everything.” This remark came from a long-time instructor offering undergraduate distance learning courses. Even though he posts due dates of assignments, tests, learning projects, worksheets, and other requirements in the online course calendar, reminders are sent as due dates approach. Although these reminders are time consuming, he says they help the students complete requirements in a timely manner.

Another participant reported that, “I actually spend two hours each day answering e-mail. That is a minimum. I find that I just have to do that in order to keep up with the volume.” One of the three courses that this faculty member teaches in a given semester is a Web-based class with 30 graduate students. She is responsible for grading, reviewing collaborative efforts of groups, posting critical information from discussion threads, and responding to all student inquiries. “Hundreds of messages come in each week, so I check course e-mails several times daily.” Students in online classes seek clarification. They want additional information, and they desire to interact with their instructor. Learners need immediate feedback to increase their enthusiasm and to keep them actively moving through course material.

Having a posted policy for responses to e-mail is one way to reduce the stress level for instructors and learners. This document alerts students to the length of time that they may need to wait before receiving a response to a query. Twenty-four to 48 hours is usually considered an acceptable window of time for replies. Waiting for responses, however, can be frustrating and discouraging and may impede the learn-
ers’ progress in the course work. From the teacher’s perspective, responding to student requests is a necessary and important part of the job. But it is time consuming and reduces one’s availability for conferences with traditional students, research, writing, other scholarly activities, and service functions that are expected of professors. Another way to reduce the stress level of the professors while providing more available time for student interactions is to utilize teaching assistants.

Instructors need to plan online courses with the help of student feedback. One method for receiving course feedback and performing quality assurance is through pilot testing. In a pilot test, the online course is simultaneously evaluated with a traditional class offering identical content. This procedure helps identify inconsistencies and incomplete items in the online materials. Once problems are located, they are corrected before they become a significant hindrance to students.

**Strategies to Lessen the Workload**

These professors provided some techniques or strategies to consider in an attempt to lower the instructors’ workload. Some of these related to receiving e-mail inquiries, managing discussion group participation, and moderating chat sessions. One instructor commented, “Anytime one student submits an e-mail query about an assignment or course requirement, I remove the student’s name, respond to the query, and send my reply to all students in the class or post it as a discussion.” This minimizes duplication and allows all participants in the course to use the information supplied as needed.

Another professor stated that, “I find it necessary to mandate the use of discussion groups in my online courses. I have the groups discuss chapters and topics and post summaries of their communications.” This technique facilitates interactions, helps establish a learning community, and provides learner support. It also allows students to understand the dynamics of online collaboration, to resolve group conflicts that might arise, and to reduce the level of isolation they may feel.

One professor recommended, “Moderate all your chat sessions, and use an established chat protocol.” These sessions can be challenging and invigorating because they permit a free flow of dialogue that can encourage active student participation. However, chats can be difficult to manage if they are unmoderated.

In unmoderated chat sessions, instructors can have so many questions bombarding them simultaneously that they lose focus and fail to cover important content. During chats, pockets of students can also begin their own conversations and divert group attention from planned discussion topics. A chat protocol is needed to set rules for interaction. Often the instructor uses a call-and-response format to recognize and respond to participants in an orderly and cohesive manner. Another strategy mentioned to lessen the workload involved posting the contents of chat sessions.

Two professors who were interviewed found it best to make chats optional, but both saved the dialogue from these sessions in a file. They then edited that file by substituting participant initials for actual names and posted the sessions so that students who missed the chat could review the content at their leisure.

There are multiple challenges presented in developing, delivering, and evaluating distance learning. Sharing experiences, information, and recommendations can be helpful and rewarding to instructors and students.

**Conclusions**

Perceptions and survival techniques that aid in e-education include useful comments and advice for lessening the workload, handling chat sessions, encouraging discourse, and facilitating interaction gathered through interviews and feedback from professors experienced in both traditional university teaching and distance learning courses. Furthermore, an exploration of the disadvantages of distance learning for instructors, faculty enticements, and the results of the data collected from professors were presented.

The authors referenced, and the data collected, indicate that experienced instructors have specific challenges in meeting student needs in distance learning courses. They also provide positive recommendations for improving the environments for teachers and students.

**References**


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