Personalizing
Distance
Learning

by Rita Coombs-Richardson

A personal approach to online learning can yield a successful experience for adults earning advanced degrees or certification in teaching.

Distance learning has become increasingly popular among learners with family and work obligations. Degree-seeking adult learners appreciate the flexibility and convenience of learning from their homes. Especially for those who would need to commute long distances to institutions of higher learning, education via the Internet has the appeal of saving time, relieving stress associated with traffic, and avoiding driving expenses.

Though clearly convenient for the learners, Jorgensen (2002) and others have questioned: Is distance learning an effective substitute for face-to-face teaching? Also, does this impersonal mode of teaching deprive students of quality instruction? Some studies have been openly critical of the online experience. For example, Hara and Kling (2000) tracked the learning of six inexperienced computer users enrolled in an online course. They found that the learners had three common frustrations: lack of prompt feedback; ambiguous instructions on the Web; and technical problems. In another study, Arbaugh (2000) noted these same roadblocks in online learning.

Technology certainly may pose problems, but technology itself does not cause learning outcomes. The instructor, the course design, and the participant decide whether learning will

occur. For distance learning to be successful, online learners must assume greater responsibility for their own learning than students in the traditional classroom setting. Distance learners often spend endless hours researching information to meet the course requirements. Moreover, adult learners with family obligations frequently are interrupted by children and spouses who may not understand the need for long hours at the computer.

Personality types and learning styles also may affect student performance in distance learning. Participants with an extraverted personality type—who enjoy the physical interaction of working with others (Meisgeier and Richardson 1996)—may feel isolated from the human experience and become disillusioned. Considering learning styles, Elkins et al. (2002) found in a two-year study of Web-assisted courses that divergent learners—who seek broad elaborate ideas prompted by a problem or stimulus—did not perform nearly as well as convergent learners—who are able to bring material from a variety of sources to solve a problem.

What does an online course demand that a face-to-face class does not? Online learning requires self-discipline and a greater amount of work than a face-to-face course. Students must demonstrate a high degree of autonomy and motivation (Ladyshewsky 2004). Two important elements of a distance course are transferring theory to practice, and discussing essential topics of the course with classmates and the instructor. Integral to an online program are hands-on projects, reports, and goal-directed searching for information rather than reading a multitude of unrelated articles. Online discussion is one avenue where students must demonstrate knowledge through their interactions.

Unlike in a traditional course, online students cannot passively listen to a lecture while taking notes. Chad Hanson (2000, 1), a professor of sociology, described a familiar classroom scenario.

When the first discussion date rolled around, I walked into class with genuine enthusiasm. . . . I followed in the footsteps of one of my fondest mentors by issuing a familiar challenge. 'Okay,' I said, 'who would like to begin?' No one began. There were no hands in the air. I did not hear the cacophony of voices I had come to know so well in graduate school—everyone anxious to support or refute the claims of the author now up for discussion. Instead there was silence.. . . Twenty-nine pairs of eyes pointed in my direction. So I began. I continued, and eventually I finished the discussion myself. Mean-

Rita Coombs-Richardson *teaches special education and education administration at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. She has developed and taught asynchronous courses at several universities and trained prospective teachers in Mexico via the Internet. She is a member of the Editorial Review Panel for the* Record *and a former Counselor to the KDP chapter at Southeastern Louisiana University.*

while, students wrote in their tablets. They took what looked like detailed notes while I talked, and that was gratifying, but not part of my plan.

In contrast, online discussions require that students interact with their virtual peers and build on one another's perspectives. Prior to the discussion, instructors assign topics and readings pertinent to the discussion. On the discussion board, instructors provide a starting "thread" on the topic to elicit students' contributions based on their opinions and readings. Shy students who fear embarrassment or those who lack the confidence to speak in front of peers take a backseat in the traditional classroom, but may find an online discussion the perfect arena to become active participants. Students participating in online conversations feel less exposed (Hanson 2000), allowing them to discuss topics that may be too sensitive or controversial to address face-to-face. Taking advantage of the technology, they can compose, edit, and refine their ideas before expressing them to the group.

Successful Distance Learners

Typical distance learners in teacher education programs consist of two distinct groups: degreed teachers enrolled

> "Neophyte distance learners may encounter countless problems, such as technological predicaments and having to adapt to a different mode of study."

in a master's program; and degreed "career switchers" who are currently teaching in areas of need, such as Special Education and Bilingual Education, and are seeking licensure to meet the "fully qualified" clause of No Child Left Behind. Though many are experienced in the technology and familiar with online learning, others are not. Neophyte distance learners may encounter countless problems, such as technological predicaments and having to adapt to a different mode of study. With these students, the instructor must give more specialized instruction and demonstrate a considerable amount of patience (Conrad 2002).

Successful distance learners share some distinctive features in their mode of study (Littlefield 2005):

- They work independently, are self-motivated and persistent, and do better without people giving them constant guidance.
- They seldom procrastinate, realizing that timelines are important and that neglecting to turn in their work on schedule may end up delaying completion of their studies.
- They demonstrate good reading and writing skills, which are essential for acquiring most of the course information. Though some distance learning courses offer video recordings and audio clips, these are not sufficient to master the competencies.
- They are able to remain on task in spite of relentless distractions, such as frequent interruptions while learning at home.

Distance Learning at Old Dominion University

Old Dominion University's Distance Learning program began more than 10 years ago by providing synchronous, interactive satellite course delivery from the main campus in Norfolk, Virginia, to distant site locations in Virginia. In recent years, the university has expanded its use of other delivery modes, including two-way video, the Internet, CD-ROM, and video-streaming, to provide access alternatives to students across the Commonwealth of Virginia and throughout the United States.

For delivery via the Internet, Old Dominion University uses the Blackboard® Learning System, a virtual teaching tool that is considered to be the "leading provider of Internet infrastructure" (Fryer 2001). The product offers user-friendly capabilities in three main areas: instruction, communication, and assessment. Using tools that enable both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, the instructor can create learning content, and students can participate, communicate, and collaborate. Instructors can deliver automatically scored assessments and surveys, thereby giving students immediate feedback (Blackboard 2004).

Old Dominion University's Department of Early Childhood, Speech-Language Pathology, and Special Education (ESSE) offers several courses through alternative delivery formats—face-to-face or online—including a course required for all undergraduate or graduate education students entitled Human Growth and Development. Based on the face-to-face course, the online section was developed with the goal of personalizing the curriculum and structure so that it would be as effective as traditional instruction.

Course developers were mindful of literature documenting student complaints about the impersonal nature of online courses and the lack of opportunity for discussion (Waldman, Alexander, and Zhao 2002; Sunal et al. 2003). However, developers also were mindful of the research attesting to the effectiveness of distance education as compared with face-to-face instruction when certain factors were present: learner-content interaction; learner-instructor interaction; and learner-learner interaction (Gordon, Ferguson, and Caris 2001). In addition, other factors deemed crucial for a successful online education course included method and technologies appropriate to the instructional tasks and timely teacher-to-student feedback.

ESSE 413: Human Growth and Development

The curriculum for this course explores all aspects of development from infancy through death. Within each stage of development, students examine the areas of language, cognition, social emotional growth, and physical health. To give students a better understanding of the areas of human development, emphasis is on the dynamic forces influencing growth and change. The course includes brief video clips and PowerPoint® presentations.

The online version of ESSE 413, with interactive activities developed using Blackboard, is structured around specific projects that students are required to complete and submit to the instructor, which in turn are graded and returned to the students. This project-based approach strives to relate content to activities in real-world situations. For example, every week students are required to read material about a certain stage of development and discuss with peers a given topic related to their readings, such as whether genetic or environmental factors are most important in the course of human development. In addition, students are required to observe an individual at a certain stage of development and write an essay relating their observations to the literature they read. Students also have an opportunity to consider the major ideas and concepts from several sources as they relate to an activity. This approach allows students to practice and develop the ability to apply what is learned to practical, real-life situations.

My Personal Account as an Online Instructor

When I began teaching at Old Dominion University in the fall of 2004, one of my assignments was the online section of ESSE 413. I was not daunted, as I had previous experience with the Blackboard online programs at Southeastern Louisiana University and the University of Texas.

I open my virtual courses with an introduction, including my short résumé, some personal information (hobbies, my background), and a picture of myself. Prior to accessing the course content, my students are required to engage in the Blackboard tutorial. I set up a discussion area where they can post questions and comments, and I let them know of the assistance available through the university's technical

assistance program. The students' first assignment is to enter their own introduction on the discussion board and, if they wish, submit a picture. I encourage students to respond to at least two of their peers.

After that brief orientation, I discuss the syllabus and the projects that students are expected to complete. For ESSE 413, they are required to read the chapters in their text, as well as any additional reading in their weekly outline. I try to relieve their anxiety by assuring them that I am willing to assist them and guide them through the course. I encourage them to approach this new and exciting learning experience with a sense of adventure.

Following are some strategies I have adopted over the years to ensure a successful distance learning experience for students:

- Provide a timely response to students' questions and acknowledgment of discussion entries.
- Turn around assignments within four days.
- Provide individual attention to needy students.
- Be flexible with timelines, but expect the work to be completed. In the case of chronic problems, keep in touch with the student via e-mail or telephone, and together find a solution to the problem.
- Familiarity does not breed contempt online. My students fondly call me Dr. Rita. An instructor can project a warm and friendly online atmosphere and still expect quality work.
- Include a personal note commenting on the strength of each assignment. My students ask for their "smiley face" whenever I forget to add one.

Student Responses

At the conclusion of the ESSE 413 course, data was collected from 65 students who participated in four different online sections. The number of participants in terms of gender was not surprising: 52 were females, and 13 were males. In the student introductions on the discussion board at the beginning of the course, students had identified their career goals and current occupations. For a majority of the students (87 percent), teaching was a second career. Thirty-seven (50 percent) were already teaching and were working toward licensure.

In an evaluation of the online learning experience, students were asked to rank 12 components of the course in order of importance. The mean ranks of the course components ranged from 5.31 for observations to 11.73 for exams to (see Table 1). Lower mean ranks indicate a higher value than higher mean ranks. In order of importance, the participants placed greater importance on observations, discussions, and instructor's personal touch; and low importance on essays/reports, reading assignments, and exams.

Table 1.
Ranking of Course Components (n=65)

Rank	Components	Mean	SD
1	Observations (of individuals at different stages of development)	5.31	3.49
2	Discussions (of 8 identified topics on discussion board)	6.31	3.89
3	Instructor's Personal Touch (through announcements, e-mail contact, personal attention)	6.79	4.12
4	Flexibility of Schedule (of assignments)	7.00	5.06
5	Instructor's Feedback (on assignments and discussions)	8.15	4.98
6	Assignment Turnaround (the speed of the instructor in returning assignments)	9.21	4.36
7	Content (information and knowledge of human development)	9.34	4.28
8	Technical Assistance (support and solutions to technical problems)	9.39	3.95
9	Course Calendar (schedule of assignments and due dates)	9.73	3.76
10	Essays/Reports (including 8 essays and reports of observations)	10.02	5.31
11	Reading Assignments (textbook and article readings)	11.26	5.57
12	Exams (online multiple-choice midterm and final exams)	11.73	4.55

A comment section was included to collect student feedback and suggestions. Some of the comments follow:

- "I like the fact that I have the flexibility of working on this course at 11 p.m. after everyone is asleep and my connectivity is operating at maximum capacity. The only thing I did not like about the course was the massive reading that we had to do."
- "The aspect I liked best about the course was observing people and writing about them from a theoretical standpoint. The aspect I liked least about the course was the exam."
- "The schedule was manageable with my full-time work. I thought the structure was on target. The weekly discussions and observations created a solid framework."

- "The area I liked best was the discussion board. We all shared and maybe even disagreed with a mature attitude that helped us to explore, learn, and respect each other's beliefs."
- "I enjoyed the observations the best. I observed close family and friends. It was fun and gave me valuable insights in human nature."
- "I do enjoy the interaction of face-to-face meetings, but I thought that the structure of the class made up for any shortcomings in that area."
- "Even though I have never met my fellow students face-to-face, I feel like I have gotten to know each one on a personal level through the discussions."
- "The discussion board was a wonderful tool in corresponding with others; it helped me feel a part of the whole. Everyone's insights about the topics were interesting, and I especially enjoyed envisioning others as they gave their opinion and shared experiences."

Reflections on Distance Education

The comments from the majority of the students indicated that the observations of individuals in their various stages of development were their favorite projects. Students appreciated the discussion board interactions with their peers, the special attention from their instructor, as well as the flexibility to set their own schedules. They valued their instructor's feedback and receiving their graded assignments in a timely manner. Most were comfortable with the structure of the course and its aspects of relating theory to practical application. Their least favorite activities were the required reading assignments, the long exams, and the occasional technical problems.

Highest student ratings went to the personal components of the course. Personalizing the online learning experience builds community and contributes to student success. For example, the last discussion of the spring semester was on death and dying, and coincidentally occurred at the time when the media carried the death of Pope John Paul and Terri Schindler Schiavo's case. The topic became a reality to the students, as reflected by one discussion participant's comment:

I never met any of you personally, but we know each other because we shared many personal stories. Everyone knows his or her day will come; no one knows how or when. I think that is the biggest fear. Because some deaths are untimely, people should live every day to the fullest and attempt to accomplish everything that makes them happy! It is important to let loved ones know how special they are. You are all special."

One statement is certain about the future of distance education, it is here to stay. As of 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (Waits, Lewis, and Greene 2003) reported that credit-granting distance education courses were offered at the graduate level by 52 percent of institutions that had graduate programs. Credit-granting distance education courses at either the undergraduate or graduate level were offered by 55 percent of all two-year and four-year institutions (Waits et al. 2003).

> "Personalizing the online learning experience builds community and contributes to student success."

Our society is changing rapidly, and educators must plan to meet technological needs in education without sacrificing quality. The most important factor to consider is designing instruction to meet students' needs. Instruction must be relevant and activities devised cognitively and behaviorally to enable learners to master the subject matter. Like face-to-face instruction, distance courses can be effective or ineffective. When online courses are personalized, both students and instructor share in their success. ■

References

Arbaugh, J. B. 2000. An exploratory study of the effects of gender on student learning and class participation in an Internet-based MBA course. *Management Learning* 31(4): 503–19.

Blackboard. 2004. Advanced teaching and learning with technology. Available at: *www.blackboard.com/docs/AS/Bb_Learning_System_Brochure.pdf.*

Conrad, D. 2002. Engagement, excitement, anxiety, and fear: Learners' experiences of starting an online course. *American Journal of Distance Education* 16(4): 205–26.

Elkins, V., C. Rafter, R. Eckart, E. Rutz, and C. Maltbie. 2002. Investigating learning and technology using the MBTI and Kolb's LSI. Paper presented at the 2002 ASEE Annual Conference and Exposition, June 16–19, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

Fryer, W. A. 2001. Online courseware options. *TechEdge* Fall issue. Available at: *www.wtvi.com/teks/01_02_articles/onlinecourseware.html.*

Gordon, G. G., D. Ferguson, and M. Caris. 2001. Teaching college courses online vs. face-to-face. *THE Journal* April: 1–6. Available at: *www.thejournal.com/articles/15358.*

Hanson, C. M. 2000. Silence and structure in the classroom: From seminar to town meeting via Post-Its. *National Teacher and Learning Forum* 9(6): 1–4. Available at: *http://fdc.fullerton.edu/teaching/learning/increasestudparticip.htm.*

Hara, N., and R. Kling. 2000. Students' distress with a Web-based distance education course: An ethnographic study of participants' experiences, Working paper. Bloomington, IN: Center for Social Informatics. Available at: *http://rkcsi.indiana.edu/archive/CSI/WP/wp00-01B.html.*

Jorgensen, D. 2002. The challenges and benefits of asynchronous learning networks. *Reference Librarian* 37(77): 3–17.

Ladyshewsky, R. 2004. Online learning versus face to face learning: What is the difference? Paper presented at the 2004 Teaching and Learning Forum, February 9–10, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia. Available at: *http://lsn.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2004/ladyshewsky.html.*

Littlefield, J. 2005. Is distance learning right for you? New York: About, Inc. Available at: *http://distancelearn.about.com/od/isitforyou/a/considering.htm.*

Meisgeier, C., and R. C. Richardson. 1996. Personality types of interns in alternative teacher certification programs. *The Educational Forum* 60(4): 350–60.

Perreault, H., L. Waldman, M. Alexander, and J. Zhao. 2002. Overcoming barriers to successful delivery of distance-learning courses. *Journal of Education for Business* 77(6): 313–18.

Sunal, D. W., C. S. Sunal, M. R. Odell, and C. A. Sundberg. 2003. Research-supported best practices for developing online learning. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning* 2(1).

Verduin, J. R., and T. A. Clark. 1991. *Distance education: The foundations of effective practice.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Waits, T., L. Lewis, and B. Greene. 2003. *Distance education at degree-granting postsecondary institutions: 2000–2001.* Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.