

DISTANCE EDUCATION: A PLACE FOR FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES

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Distance education, in its many forms, has arrived in today's society. This paper will briefly discuss the history and current applications of distance education. The benefits and limitations of distance education are elaborated upon. In most cases, limitations can be overcome, related insights are shared. A brief description of the author's experience with a distance education course in Family and Consumer Sciences is presented. Related conclusions and implications for Family and Consumer Science professionals are drawn.

The discussion has been underway for some time now. Is distance education a good idea? Is it good for students? universities? professors? Family and Consumer Scientists? Before we begin the debate, a definition is in order. Distance education is "the process whereby the education of a student occurs in circumstances where the educator and the student are geographically separated, and the communication across the distance is accomplished by one or more forms of technology, typically electronic, such as television and computers, though, strictly speaking, not limited to these media" (Rubiales, et al., pg. 32). Essentially, distance education can occur in a variety of forms.

Proponents argue that distance education is a win-win situation for both faculty and students, while opponents say that distance education is a disservice to everyone involved. Many authors have pondered the subject, and most make valid points about the benefits and limitations of distance education. Despite the negative aspects of distance education, it is possible to provide a quality program while still maintaining academic integrity and preserving university faculty positions.

Educators within the area of Family and Consumer Sciences have traditionally used a variety of media to teach their courses. Uses of professional journals, videos, brochures, etc. have provided a multitude of valuable experiences for students. New technology now provides students with access to the Internet and an infinite number of online resources that relate to family and consumer issues (Reichbach, 1995). This technology, coupled with innovative instructional design, allows state-of-the-art education.

This paper will briefly discuss the history and current applications of distance education. The issues surrounding distance education are debatable and sometimes controversial, therefore, both benefits and limitations will be elaborated upon. It is probable that distance education will play an important role in the future of Family and Consumer Science education, as well as, higher education in the United States and the world. Related conclusions and implications for Family and Consumer Sciences will be shared.

A Brief History of Distance Education

It is not clear whether distance education is an outgrowth of technological applications to education, a result of the success of correspondence schools in the 1950's and 1960's, or an outcome of the commercialization of universities in the 1970's (Guernsey, 1998; Hains et al., 1999; Levin, 1998; Noble, 1997; Rubiales, et al., 1998). Perhaps it is some combination of the

three. Most experts agree that distance education is a close cousin to correspondence courses, which became popular with the rise of the modern postal delivery system and in the military (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Levin, 1998; Rubiales, et al., 1998; Yellen, 1997-98). Correspondence-by-mail courses offered course credit for assignments, exams, papers, etc. Distance education quickly evolved from the mail format to include radio, video-conferencing, courses on television, videotapes, and the Internet.

In the first online classes, course assignments and guidelines were presented on a “bulletin board scheme” over the Internet (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98). The next evolution brought faculty-student correspondence and assignments being transferred via e-mail (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98). Current online courses are becoming much more technologically advanced, integrating a variety of technologies, including combinations of teleconferencing, video and audio tape, discussion groups, links to “hot spots”, private and group e-mail, and online research (Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Eastmond & Lawrence, 1998; Hanna, et al., 2000; Leh & Som, 1999; Newman, 1996).

With the increased use of computers, modems, and now the Internet, the information super highway is growing faster than ever! Family and Consumer Scientists are increasingly using the Internet, e-mail, conferencing, and other resources as important teaching tools in the traditional classroom. Combine this rapid increase in the educational use of technology with the fact that Universities are being called upon to support themselves with external resources (e.g. outside grants, donations, etc.), and the “commercialization” of the teaching side of higher education may be considered a natural outgrowth.

Current Use of Distance Education

Regardless of the reasons, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of distance education courses offered in the last few years. Despite this massive expansion, the traditional University environment is still the place of choice for the majority of students. Traditional students outnumber distance education students six to one (Noble, 1997). The future ratios may look a little different. The number of college bound students is growing. It is estimated that approximately 20 million students will be college bound by the year 2010 (Rubiales, et al., 1998). Distance education courses may be one way to ease the potential overcrowding of already bulging campuses.

Already, the number of distance education courses is quickly multiplying; reflected in that is an increasing number of disciplines, programs, and degrees offered (Eastmond & Lawrence, 1997-98; Leh & Som, 1999). Both undergraduate and graduate degree courses are offered in distance education formats. Universities of all shapes, sizes, and reputations are developing and delivering distance education courses and complete degree programs (from Bachelor’s to Doctoral degrees). Prestigious universities such as Harvard and Duke (Newman, 1996) as well as stand alone “virtual universities” like the University of Phoenix and the New School for Social Research (Noble, 1997) offer courses over the Internet. In fact, eleven universities worldwide are solely distance-education based (Dunn, 2000). Other, traditional universities offering distance education courses include: Indiana University, Brown University, the University of California, California State University, the University of Colorado, Seton Hall, the University of Chicago, and Kansas State University, to name a scant few (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Boettcher, 1998; Guernsey, 1998; Hodes, 1997-98; Leh & Som, 1999; Newman, 1996). The actual number of Internet courses is impossible to obtain because new online courses are being added at a very rapid rate. A simple Internet search on the key words “distance education” will

produce an enormous list of resources, services, and Universities offering distance education education.

The growth of distance education is a worldwide phenomenon. Online courses are offered in countries around the world, including: the United States, China, Canada, Europe, New Zealand, Africa, the United Kingdom, Australia, Israel, and many others (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Boettcher, 1998; Hodes, 1997-98; Newman, 1996). Noble (1997) suggests that universities need to participate in distance education or get left behind; this is the pressure of progress. To assist this flow of progress, handbooks and guidelines have been developed which offer exemplary practices for distance education (Belanger & Jordan, 2000; Hanna, et al., 2000; Johnstone & Krauth, 1996; Leh & Som, 1999; Rubiales, et al., 1998; Western Cooperative, 1997).

What is the best way to serve students? Is distance education the wave of the future? Will it replace the traditional University setting or is it just a reasonable alternative to the traditional means of education? Is it simply another way for universities to make a profit? The answers are unclear. Some foresee distance education turning higher education into a high tech television station (Noble, 1997). Others think that the “Virtual U” (i.e. Internet-based education at the University level), in some form, is destined to thrive in the future of higher education. Customized educational software programs that help faculty develop online courses are numerous (Levin, 1998; Noble, 1997). Big name industries (e.g. Kodak, IBM, Microsoft and several publishers) are sponsoring such projects (Noble, 1997). Consortia of educational institutions, some partnering with corporate sponsors already exist (Eastmond & Lawrence, 1997-98; Noble, 1997; Western Cooperative, 1997). The commercialization and commoditization of education is upon us.

Positive Aspects of Distance Education

For the purposes of discussion, an overview of both the pros and cons of distance education will be provided. And while, in reality, limitations may not be as serious as some believe, the points made are valid and need to be considered by anyone involved in distance education.

Convenience is the biggest “pro” for distance education. Students report that they could not otherwise enroll in the class due to scheduling demands, work, and family obligations. This appreciation of the convenience that distance education provides may partially explain results reported by Yellen (1997-98) who reported that distance education students were more satisfied consumers of the same course taught in both traditional and distance education formats. The ultimate convenience of an online course, with access to course materials 24 hours a day, is that students can work at their own pace and on their own time schedule.

Another component of convenience is the “geography factor”. Students do not have to drive to commute to a campus and compete for a parking space. In fact, students do not have to live in the same state or country to take an online course. Physical access is an issue for people who are limited in energy or mobility. Persons with physical disabilities may greatly benefit from the distance education alternative, and consequently, a new audience may be reached. Distance education provides a great combination of accessibility and cost effectiveness (Dunn, 2000; Draper, et al., 1999; Guernsey, 1998; Hains, et al., 1999; Hodes, 1997-98; Leh & Som, 1999; Levin, 1998; Rubiales, et al., 1998).

Class size may be reduced in distance education classes. Boettcher (1998) suggests that the “unofficial” optimal number of students in a traditional classroom is between 25 and 30. To allow for greater interaction between professor and student, Boettcher (1998) proposes that the

experience in distance education is unique, and the optimal number of students may be between 12-20 students per online course.

Professors teaching distance education courses report that student interaction is increased. Furthermore, professors report they can provide deeper and more thoughtful responses to student questions via e-mail than would be possible with students in a classroom (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Boettcher, 1998; Rubiales, et al., 1998). Professors are able to ponder students' questions and provide better answers compared to situations in which they are approached without warning after an in-class discussion.

In addition to the increase in professor-student interaction, student-student interaction is enhanced. Students may take more initiative by asking questions and discussing items with their fellow students in this rather anonymous online environment (Barker, 2000; Boettcher, 1998; Eastmond & Lawrence, 1997-98). Students who hesitate to speak up in a traditional classroom, may not have the same apprehension at the keyboard.

Boettcher (1998) suggests that another benefit is that through distance education, outstanding professors can reach a broader range of student audiences. Professors noted in their respective fields, can convey their subject matter knowledge to students on and off their university campus. And while the number per class may be small, the potential, over time, of reaching a larger number of students around the world is evident.

Through distance education, new and heretofore un-tapped audiences are reached. Distance education has historically attracted adult learners, including military personnel, homemakers, etc. (Guernsey, 1998; Hains, et al., 1999; Hodes, 1997-98; Levin, 1998) and students who may have only had access to lower level or non-degree courses. The university, through distance education, is serving a formerly unservable audience. These students may not be "traditional" students who could be served in traditional classrooms. The increase in the number of total students served necessarily brings additional money to the university.

The issue of profit for the universities is of concern to many. Some feel that the university benefits disproportionately compared to the faculty member (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Hodes, 1997-98; Noble, 1997). Many distance education classes cost more than the same classes taught in the traditional classroom. While distance education certainly provides profit to the university, professors can earn additional income. In some cases, however, faculty are only paid a fraction of their regular salary to teach online courses (Noble, 1997). In other cases, professors are compensated up to \$150 per student or more, with additional money going to the college and department (Boettcher, 1998). Bonuses also may be given when registration rates are high (Boettcher, 1998). Of course, as stated earlier, enrolling more students is not necessarily better for course management and communication.

One often overlooked benefit of distance education is that there is a written record of all activity in the "classroom", including all exam questions, answers, and scores. In addition, there is a record of what everyone in the class has said via e-mail and discussion groups (Newman, 1996). Attendance, discussion and class participation points are more easily documented than in traditional classrooms.

Negative Aspects of Distance Education

Without a doubt, there are ethical, pedagogical, and logistical concerns surrounding distance education. The most commonly cited "danger" is that distance education threatens the traditional university setting, commonly coined the "fall of the ivy" (Ben-Jacob, 1997-98; Feenberg, 2000; Newman, 1996). Some opponents think that distance education will result in a loss of faculty positions. Others believe it is a new medium for and supplement to higher

education, not a substitute for existing means (Ben-Jacob 1997-98; Feenberg, 2000; Guernsey, 1998).

Of course, cost, or capital outlay is an important consideration. A lot of time and energy goes into transforming a traditional course into a distance education product. As mentioned previously, many companies offer easy to use software, which will assist in the layout of an online course (Levin, 1998; Noble, 1997). In many cases, Universities are using internal money to get distance education programs started. In other instances, outside grants can be obtained to get faculty started. With the profit that will come, these courses can be self-sufficient and the university will benefit.

Lack of face-to-face contact is another frequently touted drawback of distance education. When students rarely or never see their professors face to face, it is impossible to see the professors' facial expression, or detect the voice inflections when a point is being emphasized (Abram, 1999; Newman, 1996). It may be true that students rarely, if ever, will see a distance education professor in their office. However, let's consider how many students in a traditional classroom attend office hours? In either case, when students need face-to-face contact with nearby professors, they are likely to be accommodated.

It is understandable that some discomfort exists regarding distance education. A startling incident occurred at York University in Canada. Untenured faculty were asked to put their courses on video, CD-ROM, or the Internet or lose their jobs (Noble, 1997). A strike occurred as a result, and eventually faculty were able to resolve the dispute to their liking (Noble, 1997). When some faculty are forced to participate in distance education, the outcome is not a positive one. Distance education is not for everyone. Faculty must be given a choice regarding whether they participate in distance education.

Noble (1997) describes how one school hires outside contractors to design distance education courses. These contractors later release their rights to the course. This prohibits course creators from teaching these courses. Who has rights over the "intellectual capital"? What happens to the quality of the education? These two occurrences are a travesty to higher education, and should not occur.

Regardless of whether faculty are mandated or volunteer to teach a distance education course, an increased faculty workload is a probable result (Boettcher, 1998; Levin, 1998). Faculty may begin to feel that they must always be accessible to students. Obviously, faculty workload is positively related to the number of students served and to whether or not the distance education courses are offered during the same term as traditional courses. The time commitment from faculty is necessarily increased in the development stage when the traditional course is transformed into an Internet course. Time is also required for the maintenance and continual updating of existing courses. This is even more crucial for Internet courses, since links and web sites must be continually checked and updated. Draper et al. (1999), recommends that administration consider providing release time for distance education faculty.

How is the integrity and rigor of distance education courses maintained? For one thing, it is important that faculty not become overloaded with distance education courses (or their "traditional" courses, for that matter). Many Universities rightfully limit the amount of "overload" a faculty member can accept. Additionally, it is imperative that faculty work to prevent cheating and maintain the rigor of the online course in the same manner that traditional course integrity is enforced. Fortunately, with the advances in computer technology, there are ways to build in mechanisms to prevent cheating (e.g. randomized exam questions, passwords, time limits on exams and assignments, etc.). The situation is not unlike large lecture classrooms

where professors cannot be assured that the student is who he/she claims to be, unless student identification cards are checked.

Family and Consumer educators know that scams abound in daily life. Not surprisingly, Internet scams are one of the fastest growing types. Education fraud is not a new concept; but education fraud on the Internet is. How can students be assured that the course is offered through an accredited school and not a diploma mill? It is the responsibility of both the student and university to verify accreditation status, whether the course is degree-based, or whether the course is offered for credit or just for fun.

Finally, logistical concerns are inevitable. Students may feel it is difficult to get help when problems arise. System failures and computer glitches are legitimate concerns. Distance education professors need to maintain flexibility regarding classroom policies should a system failure prevent a student from accessing course assignments or exams. Fortunately, these “down times” can be easily documented and alternatives can be arranged.

Conclusions and Implications for Family and Consumer Scientists

Distance education, in its many forms, has arrived. Family and Consumer courses are among the many subjects that are covered in the plethora of distance education courses throughout the world. By incorporating the benefits of distance education, and simultaneously avoiding the limitations, valuable, rigorous, and timely family and consumer courses are viable.

As a professor team-teaching a distance education consumer education class in Family and Consumer Sciences, I believe that the benefits of distance education far outweigh the limitations. When technology is coupled with other innovations in teaching, a top-notch course can emerge. One innovative approach to teaching consumer education is using a team teaching approach. The Consumer in the Legal and Economic environment is a successful example of such a course on our campus. Because of the course’s long record of success, university personnel invited the co-instructors to participate in two types of distance education applications. The two mediums, distance education through videocassette and distance education on the Internet have provided students with options. Experiences have been primarily positive for students, faculty, and the university.

Students have raved about the convenience and timeliness of the Family and Consumer Science courses on our campus. The many benefits of referring students to current online scams, federal government agency activities, newspaper articles, etc., adds to the timeliness of the course.

Instead of berating distance education and worrying about the “traditional academic experience”, academicians need to work on strengthening the existing system. Implementing distance education with the high standards with which “traditional” courses are implemented is essential.

Ben-Jacob (1997-98) proposes that future economics will affect the ultimate future of distance education. As universities increasingly look toward profit making endeavors for their survival, the potential profit and loss will speak volumes about the future of distance education. However, it appears that the virtual university, in some form, is going to be around for a long time. Distance education most certainly will not replace the traditional university classroom experience. However, with the time constraints of students and adult learners, distance education is a desired commodity. This commodity could include courses for credit, or non-credit courses through extension programs. Family and Consumer Science is especially on track for offering meaningful, useful, practical courses to all kinds of people via the Internet. The field of Family and Consumer Science is one of general appeal and application.

Consequently, a large variety of Family and Consumer Scientists can participate in online distance education. Distance education is a timely, widespread, and far-reaching medium on which to “grow” Family and Consumer Sciences, and promote the discipline on a large scale. It gives Family and Consumer Science professionals the ability to reach a larger audience, proclaim what Family and Consumer Science is all about, as well as, bring in money to faculty, the department, and the University. With a watchful eye on faculty willingness, student reaction, and continual updating of the classes, distance education could be a win-win situation for the world of Family and Consumer Sciences.

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