ABSTRACT
        Rogers State College, Tulsa (Oklahoma), has devoted
considerable energy and funds to the development of alternative
delivery systems for academic courses. These include telecourses,
independent study designs, computer-delivered courses, and multimedia
instruction, for both entire courses and course modules. The college
has a coordinator of distance education who assists in planning and
administration of distance courses. Access to students and financial
reasons have been clear motivators for the college. Rogers State
College has its own television station, which has spurred the
movement to television delivery. Experiences so far have indicated
that one of the most serious problems with distance education is the
student's high level of uncertainty regarding teacher expectations
and student responsibility. The college is addressing this through
careful planning and the use of an initial face-to-face orientation
for each course. Developing courses that are relevant to students and
allow for high levels of interaction is proving challenging but
necessary. (SLD)

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ASSESSING THE NEED

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Assessing the Need

Rogers State College has for the past six years devoted
considerable energy and funds to the development of alternative
delivery systems for academic courses. These include telecourses,
independent study designs, computer-delivered courses, and multi-
media instruction (either entire courses, or modules for in-class
courses). The college now has, for the first time, a "Coordinator
of Distance Education" who assists faculty and administrators in
planning for telecourse, computer, and multi-media instruction,
who organizes and implements training for faculty members
inexperienced in these forms of delivery, and who, as a former
faculty member herself, understands the importance of maintaining
high academic standards in whatever course delivery we choose to
develop.

The reasons for concentration upon "distance education" at
Rogers State College are readily identifiable:

For one thing, distance education courses help us to reach
some students who would otherwise be lost to us. Our potential
student population includes large numbers of "place-bound"
people, many of whom live in isolated areas or are working at

full-time jobs, or are women living alone with children, but are
still impatient to get on with their education. These people, by
enrolling in a telecourse or a computer-delivered course, can
satisfy requirements for core courses in a chosen program, may be
encouraged to begin to view themselves as bona-fide college
students and after a semester or two of telecourses, may make the
transition to campus. Others will never be able to become
campus-located students. For these, possibilities for education
will be limited to what they can gain by means of the telecourse
or computer-delivered course. Each semester, these students are
finding entire programs of study available to them via these
methods of course delivery. Still another group will use
telecourses in a supplemental way--their principal course
enrollments will be in campus-located courses, but from time to
time they will choose to take a telecourse when scheduled campus
courses do not fit their needs or when they want to step up the
pace of progress toward completion of their program.

A second reason for distance education at our college is
clearly financial. Delivery of courses by technological means is
expected to be capable of generating a high level of revenue for
the college, since more students can be accommodated in
telecourses or computer courses than could ordinarily be
accommodated within a college classroom. Naturally, conversation
about great numbers in a course makes most faculty members
nervous, especially teachers of writing, who are acutely aware of
the work involved in the teaching of composition. It is easy,

however, to see the attractiveness to budget managers of a scheme to increase class size numbers. And in the present budget predicament that most colleges are experiencing, budget managers have a very loud presence and voice in institutional planning.

Finally, Rogers State College has its own fully-equipped television station, with professional studio capability, with a broadcast range of at least 75 miles, carried by 60 cable channels, and with distance "sites" to which videotapes can be shipped for student viewing. It would be remarkable if the college did not move aggressively into the use of the television capability for delivery of courses.

Still, faculty members in the division of Arts and Humanities were not the first passengers on the train of distance education. Traditionally, in teaching composition, literature, humanities, speech, language, and art, we have placed an extremely high value upon what happens within the classroom between students and teacher. We think, for instance, that the student best learns to write well when his or her writing is a part of the classroom process, open to the scrutiny of teacher and fellow students, when class discussions can lead to greater understanding of possibilities for paragraph and essay development, and when questions of all kinds can be immediately responded to.

But we operate as a division within a system, and the system within which we operate, having made serious commitment to distance education, expects separate academic divisions to

produce distance education courses of the highest possible quality. The most recent Academic Plan, filed with the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education in July of 1993, states that "The College currently has 15 of its own telecourses and will have an additional twenty courses available in this format by the end of the decade." Each academic division at our college will be required to produce five additional telecourses in the next five years.

In our case, one of the five would have to be Composition I, since this course is a requirement in all of the college's academic programs. The student opting for telecourse instruction for any of the reasons listed above, could not reasonably be denied access to this one required course when all other required courses were readily available.

Faced with the college's expectation that the Division of Arts and Humanities make available a telecourse in Composition, the entire writing faculty began to examine the issue together. First we considered what was already available for lease. For several semesters, we had offered "The Write Course," produced by Dallas Community College, as our telecourse in Composition I. But although "The Write Course" is engagingly developed, we have found that it does not meet the needs of our students. Our student population is made up to a considerable extent of Native American students, and/or of underprepared, rural, or otherwise socially disenfranchised students for whom the context of a "The Write Course" is one they cannot readily relate to.

To make this distinction does not at all suggest a lack of ability of the students in Northeastern Oklahoma who look to us for courses they can relate to; it does suggest a difference in social context, for some of the students above mentioned. We would need a course with which they could connect.

As soon as we determined that our best plan would be to develop a course of our own which we could confidently recommend to our students, we gathered data about the succ:ss level for other telecourses that had been developed at Rogers State College. We started with recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of telecourse instruction for our particular students. In order to have empirical data, we studied a wide variety of student evaluations of existing telecourses. These evaluations showed that convenience of the telecourse was the one advantage most often cited by students. A telecourse can fit in with a variety of work and commitment schedules--students can set their own pace, within limits, and make the telecourse serve their needs. This response has shown up semester after semester in evaluations, since the first RSC telecourses were offered in 1988.

But a major misperception becomes clear. too, as these evaluations have accrued over the semesters. Many students seemed to expect that the telecourse would not take so much of their time for reading and learning--in fact, an advantage students may have anticipated was precisely that the course would be "easier." "The course took too much time," said 60% of our respondents, or

"It was too hard." That last comment was usually completed by ". . . to understand," or " . . . to keep up with." When we looked at syllabi, it seemed to us fairly obvious that teachers who had planned telecourses had done a better than average job of being clear with course design and expectations. So we concluded, in our unscientific way, that the "too hard" meant "I was disappointed that I was expected to do a bunch of work." Many of the students who took telecourses appeared not to have been ready to take serious responsibility for their course learning.

On the other hand, it seems obvious to all of us who have taught that, for students to manage their own functioning within a telecourse, they will have to be highly motivated for success. They will have to accept even more responsibility for their learning than would usually be the case. They will probably have to work harder, and will have to do most of it on their own.

But students do not typically think about these responsibility issues the first time they enroll in a telecourse. In those evaluations we reviewed, the most often expressed dissatisfaction with the telecourse was something like "I could have done better in a real classroom," or "I needed more help from the teacher." Students missed the very thing that the telecourse design seemed least likely to give them--personal experience with the teacher. Surveyed students became heated in their responses when a teacher who was supposed to be available by telephone "never returned my calls," or when the teacher's response to a submitted piece of work was not helpful to them.

Lacking the three-times-a-week chance to ask for clarification, the student most often seemed resigned to living with a high level of uncertainty regarding the teacher's expectations or student responsibility.

From the beginning, we have recognized, with most authorities about distance education, that bridging that need for student-teacher interaction would be one of the most serious challenges in developing a successful telecourse. The Annenberg Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) project places class meetings and communication with the student integrally in the course design. The compelling question is, how do we do that? One of RSC's experienced telecourse developers and teachers, Emily Dial-Driver, is acutely aware that this need for interaction between student and teacher is a constant issue for most telecourse students. A telecourse instructor, therefore, must make the most of available communication. Under the instructor's control are the syllabus, course outline, perhaps a study guide, and the mechanical tools of communication--mail, telephone, and in some cases, computer network. The challenge is to make these tools as vital to the distance student as possible. We now know that a great deal of intention has to go into the design of a successful telecourse, even more than what goes into traditional classroom course design. What I have had to realize is that a lot of what I do in the classroom is dependent upon what I know and who I am. I rely a lot upon my ability to be creative with my students at the "learning moment." In telecourse

teaching, these "learning moments" are not generally so satisfying, because they are not so spontaneous, and sometimes I will not even know about them. Every hoped-for outcome has to be provided for, so far as that can be done, before the student enrolls in the course.

For one thing, the instructor of the telecourse must become a reality for the student. We know how to do that in our classrooms, but with the telecourse, opportunities are fewer, and almost nothing can be left to chance. We will begin with a required face-to-face orientation session. At this session, the instructor communicates an attitude toward the student and toward the course material. Students become real to each other too. This personal contact can set up the possibility for later communication between and among students, and between student and teacher, when the memory of the face-to-face contact contributes roundness and life to the more mechanical modes of communication that constitute the bulk of the exchange. When the student refers to the syllabus, for instance, he/she will remember points of emphasis the instructor made at the orientation session. Such exchange is not unlike what happens when two people, who have had a short time to become acquainted and then rely entirely on letters and phone calls for every communication, find their relationship deepening and becoming more clarified with every letter. Especially if the letters and phone calls occur with a reassuring frequency.

A good deal of responsibility for the frequency and quality of exchange between student and teacher rests, of course, with the student. But the responsibility is quite real for the teacher as well. An unreturned telephone call or a cursory response can well be the principal reason for a student giving up on the course entirely.

What we learned, then, from looking at evaluations, was that there are some very real difficulties and limitations with telecourse teaching, most of which we had anticipated. These had to do primarily with what is lost in student-teacher interaction over the course of the semester's or the quarter's work. When we thought about the course we wanted to develop for Composition I, we knew we had to think of ways to enhance this interaction.

But we were not content with what we learned from evaluations from students who had taken a telecourse. We also wanted to survey area college English departments and find out what they would like to see in a telecourse. The results from our survey were instructive. Many respondents were clearly excited that we were going to undertake such a venture and they gladly answered our questions about what they would like to see included in a composition telecourse, how much attention should be given to particular content, and how best we could provide useful feedback to students' writing. But we also got at least one response from a teacher who apparently shared our own unease about teaching composition at a distance: This person wrote that he found the whole undertaking "ludicrous," and

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encouraged us to familiarize ourselves with a well-known
authority on the teaching of composition (George Hillocks) who
maintains that the best composition teaching involves "high
levels of student interaction."

We took that responder's input quite seriously, because
frankly to many of us the undertaking had seemed at first totally
ludicrous. How could we make teaching composition by telecourse
less " ludicrous"? But we also took quite seriously the detailed
input from other English composition instructors across the area
who puzzled, at our request, over what point in the course to
assign the writing of an essay, how best to introduce rhetorical
modes into essay writing, how many essays to assign, whether to
concentrate on multiple essays or upon multiple revision, how
much attention to give to paragraph development, whether every
writing assignment has to be graded. We collated the responses
(the collation is available for your review if you are
interested) and in one long meeting made decisions about these
questions. In several cases, our responders raised issues we had
not thought about. The discussion we had that day as we digested
the input, thought about our own attitudes toward the questions,
compared, argued, and negotiated was one of the most stimulating
experiences I had ever had as a teacher of composition. I found
I was thinking about the process of teaching the course in new
and exciting ways, and started to gain a valuable investment in
the production of the telecourse.

We had travelled a considerable distance from the time we had first heard about the virtual mandate that we produce a telecourse to this point when we had totally rethought the process of teaching composition and were ready to begin the development of the course. I know that all my colleagues would agree with me when I say that we never expected it to be easy, but we never thought it would be quite so much work as it turned out to be. Still, all of us value the experience this brought to us, however reluctant we were.