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ABSTRACT

A Teaching/Learning Conference addressed the challenge of facilitating learner adjustment to distance learning. By understanding the concerns of both students and faculty regarding the distance learning environment, professional development specialists may find ways to ease the transition from traditional teaching/learning environments to the "virtual environment." Students take distance education courses because of conveniences in time and location. Apprehensive at first, students soon develop coping mechanisms and learning strategies. However, to make this adjustment, they must have supportive faculty who involve them in the learning process as much as possible. Faculty, in turn, must acquire skills that help them adjust to new teaching surroundings and deal with fears regarding interpersonal shortcomings, job security, and the use of new technology. Faculty must realize their integral role in distance education, overcome their fears--which are often magnified in new environments, and develop these skills through training and practice. Distance education guidelines and training components are included in the appendices. (YKH)

Facilitating Learner Adjustment to the Distance Learning Environment

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FACILITATING LEARNER ADJUSTMENT TO THE DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: Teaching/Learning Conference, Ashland, Kentucky
October 10-11, 1997

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> *The most significant influence on the evolution of distance education will be not the technical development of more powerful devices, but rather the professional development of wise designers, educators, and learners.* (Dede, 1996)

Distance learning is a relatively new teaching methodology which seeks to provide education at a distance. Inherent in this telecommunications technology is the introduction of activities, tools, and instructional designs for which the adult learner may have no frame of reference. The normal model of one teacher and a single class of students in the self-contained classroom does not fit the distance learning training model. The television camera provides the teacher a view of multiple classrooms in which various kinds of learning media must be implemented. The old four-wall classroom configuration--the lecturer reaching a finite number of students--does not apply in a situation where the teacher only has face-to-face interaction with students via the television screen. Student and teacher learning and interactions are changed (or, at the least, modified) in the distance learning environment.

Eastmond (1995) has suggested that there are factors which influence one's accommodation to technology. These factors may include prior experience, the role of the support person, a frame of reference, relationships between and among students and teachers, acclimation to information and sensory overload, role of participation, and processing the small picture.

The purpose of this session was to report on findings of research conducted by the authors and to suggest that the importance of the research rests with understanding how both students and faculty cope in the distance learning environment so that instructors and professional development specialists can develop, as Dede has suggested in the opening quote, "wise designers, educators, learners," [and consumers--authors' comment].

Students as Learners (Everett)

For students to make a successful adjustment to the distance learning environment, they must have support from faculty who have been made aware of the mechanisms, motivations, frames of references, and methods that students use to adapt to a technology-rich milieu. From previous research conducted by the authors (Everett and Grubb, 1997) and experience teaching in the compressed video classroom, the following recommendations are offered to assist faculty in facilitating students' adjustment to an environment where face-to-face instruction is not taking place.

Main reason for taking the distance learning course. The results of the research question related to why students take distance learning classes revealed that the course was convenient in time and location and fit to schedule. Students are able to "learn locally and compete nationally", as one graduate student stated to the author. In the regional, four-year university where the research is taking place, students attend the site closest to their homes. The service area of this regional university is quite large and includes many small, extremely remote locations. A service-oriented attitude toward reaching students who would not have the opportunity to attend college without distance learning technology can help instructors

cope with the environment, as well as empower students to overcome feelings of isolation and unconnectedness.

Feelings toward the distance learning environment. On the first day of class, students indicated that they felt *apprehensive* and *curious*. By taking time to answer students' questions about the technology, content, and delivery of the course, faculty will assist students to make the adjustment to a new learning environment, so that on the last day of class, students feel comfortable. Suggestions for helping students make the transition from the traditional "star" classroom to the distance learning classroom may include the following:

- Be prepared to answer the questions students commonly ask the site facilitators: How does this stuff work? Are on "on" yet? Can they see us? Are we muted? Have you gotten anything in the mail from the instructor?
- Use an icebreaker to get students in front of the camera individually at the console. In this way, they learn the camera placements, where the controls are for the cameras and other equipment, and what it feels like in front of the class.
- Share how **you** felt the first time in the distance learning classroom: nervous, apprehensive, excited. What were your tips for adjusting to the new classroom where "eyes" were upon you and the television cameras extend the classroom into cyberspace via satellite?
- Get each distance learning location involved from the first day of class. Go "around the horn," so to speak, so that all students begin to feel a part of one large, but separated, classroom.
- Provide guidelines for how to "act" in the distance learning environment. See Appendix A for a suggested set of distance learning classroom guidelines which this author uses in distance learning classes.
- Send a weekly email message to the facilitators so that the team-orientation in the distance learning classroom is enhanced. Facilitators have a wealth of knowledge about their classrooms and can prove to be valuable resources.

In addition to these specific suggestions, students in the research study also indicated that being encouraged to participate, being given explicit directions, being provided on-site facilitator support, and being called by their names by the instructor assisted in their adapting to the environment.

By taking the time in the beginning of the class to help students become acclimated, instructors will hasten the feeling of comfort. The authors' research shows that by the third week of class, students indicated that they were feeling *comfortable* in the environment.

Coping mechanisms students use to adjust to the distance learning environment. Regardless of everything the instructor does, students will use their own coping mechanisms in new environments. This research has shown that students will take responsibility for and monitor their own learning, use prior experience with distance learning, ask questions, and, when encouraged, reflect on their learning in this environment. Instructors can use this knowledge of students' coping mechanisms to refine their own teaching and learning styles and philosophy so that the distance learning class is a significant learning experience for students.

Faculty as Learners (Grubb)

For faculty to successfully help learners adjust to the distance learning environment, they must have support and professional development that help them to adjust to new teaching surroundings. Overcoming fear and developing computer-based technology competencies are the first steps to developing wise educators.

Gray (1997) suggests three stages of faculty evolution in the instructional implementation of computer-based technologies. These stages must be addressed when designing successful faculty training. The stages suggested by Gray include the following:

1. Work through unfamiliarity with, and oftentimes, phobia of computers and their use as productivity tools.
2. Use computers as delivery systems.
3. Use computers as cognitive tools.

This portion of the session discussed the observed fears faculty experience prior to and during training, and suggests training responses to help faculty work through those fears. The content of this portion of the session was drawn from actual training experiences with faculty and follow-up interviews with 50 faculty members over 2½ years at a regional, four-year institution. The primary distance learning delivery system was compressed video. To help the reader better understand what is involved in distance learning faculty training created by this author, please see Appendix B which describes the training components and expected learning outcomes.

Training faculty in distance learning techniques and new pedagogical strategies requires thought to the first stage of Gray's (1997) model which addresses the fears, or phobias, faculty experience and the necessary training responses to those fears. When trainers of distance learning faculty are working toward breaking the barriers of unfamiliarity and phobia of computers, trainers must understand this is the most intense time for faculty and is the time when the majority of fears are likely to arise and be overtly expressed. If the trainer is not successful in helping the faculty member work through his or her fears and phobias, it is unlikely the faculty member will be able to move through stages two and three of Gray's model. That is, if they cannot successfully move beyond their fears and grasp how the computer is a productivity tool, they certainly will be uninterested in the computer as a delivery system or as a cognitive tool.

Seven recurring fears were identified in training sessions and through the follow-up interviews. Each will be listed and briefly discussed. All of the fears are of equal importance and are intimately tied together. Each is individually identified and discussed only for the

purpose of making them visible in this presentation. When trainers are designing professional development experiences for faculty, it is important to address the fears holistically.

The first fear that was identified by faculty in training is "I will look bad on TV." This fear arises when the delivery of distance learning programming occurs primarily over compressed video, satellite, or cable. The appropriate training response is to embed various delivery approaches over television so faculty can begin to choose a particular style that will fit their individual teaching styles. For example, the trainer can deliver information sitting among the students, standing behind the podium, and standing off to the side of the podium. Providing a variety of visual delivery strategies and implementing various technologies reassure the faculty members that there are choices, and the variety allows them to identify and begin practicing the approaches that feel most comfortable to them.

Once the faculty have had the opportunity to observe modeled delivery methods, it is also critical to have them deliver a short mini-teaching lesson so they can experience the process, technology, and what they look like on television. This component is critical to working through the fear of looking bad on television. Once the faculty member presents the content visually, he or she typically will respond with "that wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

The second recurring fear that was identified by faculty in training is "my web page will look ugly, stupid, or make no sense." Many faculty members have not begun to develop web pages to enhance instruction and support distance learning student needs, nor have they spent substantial amounts of time investigating what their peers are doing online. Faculty must not only design the content of their web pages but must also develop competencies in

HTML editing. Due to the lack of HTML editing skills, the fear level is fairly high among individual participants. The appropriate training response is to provide multiple web surfing activities for participants. These activities should include assignments to critically assess web pages for good graphic guidelines, content presentation flow, and crucial content that should be included in an instructional web page prior to asking them to create their own. Creating these types of activities allows the faculty members to develop a sense of what they like in web pages and the critical content they need to include in their own pages.

A third fear identified by faculty in distance learning training is "people will find out I don't know PC file management or how to surf the World Wide Web." This fear is closely tied to the second fear and typically becomes evident when working with faculty in uploading web pages to a server, or when downloading software or files off the web. If the faculty member has not had a lot of experience with file management and file transfer, this process will be quite foreign to them. Providing experiences where faculty create a document, create a new folder on their desktop or on a disk, and then place the document in the new folder helps faculty better understand file management and file transfer. Concise step-by-step instructions in print help the faculty person feel more confident about his or her file management and file transfer skills development.

The fourth fear is "I will not be able to deal with the facilitators." At each compressed video site, a facilitator is present with distant students to assure proper equipment operation, provide technology support, and assist students when questions need to be addressed. Developing a strong team-oriented approach between faculty members and site facilitators is a foreign idea. Prior to distance learning, the faculty member retained control of the learning

environment and could restrict observation of his or her instruction by closing the classroom door.

In the distance learning environment, the faculty members and students often will experience unannounced visits, and typically the instruction is videotaped and, therefore, documented (potentially to be viewed by others). This is a significant change in the environment and can make the faculty member very uncomfortable. Additionally, technology problems at delivery and receive sites can occur. All these changes in the learning environment must be explored during training so faculty are prepared to understand the ways in which the site facilitators can help by alerting the instructor to unannounced visitors or technology problems that may arise.

Also, the faculty members need to be made aware of the fact that facilitators see a variety of teaching styles and ways technology is being implemented and can provide valuable support and suggestions. Training responses to this fear can include modeling positive team-oriented relationships with site facilitators, role playing positive troubleshooting techniques during technology failure, and making sure quality site facilitators are participating in the training environment so faculty can begin developing positive relationships with them. Allowing experienced facilitators to offer presentations during training that reflect their own recurring problems and concerns about the distance learning environment are very valuable. These presentations allow the faculty to see the instructional environment from the facilitators' and students' points of view.

The fifth fear identified by faculty in training is "communicating with students electronically will not work." In other words, faculty tend to be concerned about their ability

to create an electronic environment that encourages significant discussion. An offshoot of this fear is the sixth concern faculty have identified as "electronic student discussion and synthesis of material will not work." A powerful training response to this fear is to design engaging training content that must be accessed and critically discussed electronically. By placing a portion of the training content on web pages and requiring faculty to read material, complete assignments, and discuss training content with peers via computer conferencing, the faculty can begin to see how activities, discussions, and significant content synthesis can occur electronically. Moderator skills also can be modeled while addressing the fear of electronic communication. Trainers have the opportunity to become part of the electronic discussion, as the instructor would in a class, and can model positive moderator behaviors, such as affirming learning when it occurs, keeping the discussion on task, and squelching negative or derogatory discussion that can impact learning.

The seventh and final fear is "all this distance learning technology is being promoted in order to make me dispensable." This fear was normally heard prior to participation in training. Once faculty realize that the distance learning environment must be finely orchestrated (by them!), the concern about being replaced tends to morph into the prior six fears. When faculty realize they will not be replaced by technology but, in fact, are expected to become facilitators of technology-rich instructional delivery, they begin to focus on their lack of skills. The crux of all seven fears is based on the realization of the level of skills required of exemplar distance learning faculty, and the secret fear of not being able to develop the skills required.

Quality training is developed and delivered with these fears in mind. Being mindful of faculty concerns and understanding the training experience from the faculty member's perspective allow the trainer to be prepared for moments of fear during the training process. By being prepared, the trainer can respond positively to the faculty member and stay connected interpersonally, sustaining a positive learning environment and helping the faculty member develop confidence and competencies crucial to distance learning delivery.

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APPENDIX A

DISTANCE LEARNING CLASS GUIDELINES

1. Be prepared to participate in class discussions. You will be called on at least weekly. (You do not need to be called on to participate.) If you want to join the discussion, be sure to give your name and location. In this way, we can get acquainted with each other faster. This applies to the students in the main campus classroom, also.

2. Learn and use email *immediately*. Access your email at least daily. Your facilitator will show you how to access msuacad, and get into Pine mail to compose, view, and reply to your email. We will approach the use of the other technology in the classroom as we need it.

3. Please sit in the front rows and together so that the camera can focus on you easily.

4. The facilitators will have the handouts for each class period or on a weekly basis. Please turn in your assignments to the facilitators to be mailed to me. Be sure your name is on the assignment. Any extra credit that you want to turn in (after you have shared with the class) must be submitted in written format with your name on it. Give your extra credit work to the facilitators to be mailed, also.

5. If you have to miss a class with a legitimate excused absence, please arrange to obtain the videotape for the class you missed from the facilitator. Videotapes are kept for one semester.

6. To receive library resources for your written report, call 1-800-555-5555. Identify yourself as a distance learning student in this class. Be very specific with your request. DO NOT EXPECT THE LIBRARIAN TO DO YOUR RESEARCH FOR YOU.

7. You are sitting in front of an open microphone; be careful about side conversations and turning pages. Others can hear you. If you cough, shuffle papers, or whisper, we can hear you and the camera shot switches to the site making noise. If critical information is being presented, this may disrupt the flow of thinking and concentrating for other students. Mikes can be muted at all sites except the site from which the information is being presented. It is especially critical for students at the presentation site to be careful about making noises.

8. Please email me or call me with your concerns. I check email at least two times a day.

9. In the event of a technology failure, **DO NOT LEAVE THE CLASSROOM**. Most technology failures can be corrected within 10 minutes. **Use the time to work on your group project**. In the event that the failure cannot be overcome in this time frame, the instructor and the facilitator together will make the decision whether to continue the class. The instruction will not continue until all sites are online.

APPENDIX B

Faculty will participate in virtual learning environments via the World Wide Web and in face-to-face sessions to develop specific competencies. The following list identifies the training components and expected learning outcomes of the participants.

1. Graphic Guidelines
   - Demonstrate effective use of visual material for compressed video and World Wide Web delivery.
2. Compressed Video Classroom Technology Negotiation
   - Utilize the document camera, podium computer, VCR playback, and classroom cameras.
3. Library On-line Resources
   - Access on-line library resources.
   - Demonstrate use of resources to students.
4. World Wide Web Navigation and Searches
   - Locate and reach URL's.
   - Complete a WWW search.
   - Utilize WWW search engines and directories.
5. Faculty/Site Facilitator Relationships
   - Understand possible problem areas that may arise with site facilitators.
   - Understand their responsibility as faculty members in sustaining positive and active faculty/site facilitator relationships.
6. Global Distance Learning
   - Define distance learning in several forms.
   - Develop electronic network of peers who are teaching similar courses via distance learning technologies.
7. E-mail
   - Send and receive attachments.
   - Create a distribution list.
   - Store addresses.
   - Save a message to a folder.
   - Subscribe to newsgroups and listservs.
   - Create a signature file.
8. Technology Failure
   - Create a valid backup plan in case of complete technology failure during class.
   - Successfully troubleshoot minor technical problems.
9. Multimedia Software
   - Identify the difference between presentation and authoring software.
   - Develop a storyboard for a multimedia instructional component.
10. Distance Learning as a System
    - Comprehend distance learning as a system and understand how the components fit together for instructional use.
11. Web Page Development
    - Design web pages for instruction.
    - Upload the web pages to the server.

12. Downloading Software
    - Download and install software from the World Wide Web onto personal computers.
13. PC File Management
    - Navigate Windows '95 operating system.
    - Utilize Windows Explorer to manipulate files and create desktop icons and folders.
    - Utilize copy and paste.
    - Work between multiple documents and/or software packages.

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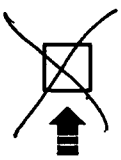

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