

E-Learning: Design, Quality, Student Support, Solutions

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Preface

During the last ten years, the Internet and the Wide World Web have fundamentally altered the practice of distance teaching and learning. Nowhere is this fact more evident than in the transformation undergone by single-mode distance universities as they seek to apply the benefits of emerging information communication technology (ICT) infrastructure to their core business, with a view to improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of the learning experience afforded their students.

However, acknowledging complexity does not excuse inaction. Distance educators, students, administrators, and parents are daily forced to make choices regarding the pedagogical, economic, systemic, and political characteristics of the distance education systems within which they participate. To provide information, knowledge, and, we hope, a measure of wisdom, the authors of this text have shared their expertise, their vision, their concerns, and their solutions to distance education practice in these disruptive times. Each chapter is written as a jumping-off point for further reflection, for discussion, and, most importantly, for action. Never in the history of life on our planet has the need for informed and wisdom-filled action been greater than it is today. We are convinced that education—in its many forms—is the most hopeful antidote to the errors of greed, of ignorance, and of life-threatening aggression that menace our civilization and our planet.

In sum, the book is neither an academic tome, nor a prescriptive “how to” guide. Like a university itself, the book represents a blending of scholarship and of research, practical attention to the details of teaching and of provision for learning opportunity, dissemination of research results, and mindful attention to the economics of the business of education.

In many ways the chapters represent the best of what makes for a university community. The word “university” comes from the Latin *universitas* (totality or wholeness), which itself contains two simpler roots, *unus* (one or singular) and *versere* (to turn). Thus, a university reflects a singleness or sense of all encompassing wholeness, implying a study of all that is relevant and an acceptance of all types of pursuit of knowledge. The

word also retains the sense of evolution and growth implied by the action embedded in the verb “to turn.” As we enter the twenty-first century, the world is in the midst of a great turning as we adopt and adapt to the technological capabilities that allow information and communication to be distributed anywhere/anytime.

“Part 1: Design and Development of Online Courses” is concerned with the two following segments of the organization’s online learning value chain: operations and outbound logistics. Four chapters are organized to shed light on these processes. Chapter 4 describes the role of instructional design, multimedia development, and editing in the design and development process by describing a professional role that has been developed to accommodate all these functions—that of the Multimedia Instructional Design Editor (MIDE). Mainly, this role is concerned with facilitating communication between the author and the learner, and between the author and the technical staff who create the multimedia tools and instructional technology used in course delivery. The MIDE brings together elements and participants in the value chain, and adds value to the course development process by enhancing the ability of other participants to produce effective online learning experiences. One of the MIDE’s most important contributions to the course design and development value chain is quality control. The quality control function has become more critical as courses have come to contain multimedia components and have begun to move into the online learning environment.

Chapter 3 deals with another aspect of design, development and quality control in online courses: copyright. Copyright, in Canada and throughout the modern technological world, is described as being in a state of flux. Advances in information and communication technologies are stressing existing copyright Acts, and forcing changes to them. As they embrace new electronic technologies, online educators are in a position to lead advances in copyright law, and to help ensure that the rights of both users and creators are respected, and that the intellectual property ownership issues that are emerging in the electronic world are widely understood and respected.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the process of developing effective instructional materials. Chapter 1 presents the role of instructional media developers in the course development process. These professionals are involved from the beginning, to consult with and advise course team members on development-related topics as they arise. The author presents pedagogical standards designed to help all those involved in online instructional development to ensure that their efforts are rewarded, ultimately, with satisfied learners. Chapter 2 describes several experiences in developing

knowledge of team dynamics and communications, and accomplishing team project work, in an online environment. In describing aspects of teaching and applying team dynamics online, the authors highlight the unique values and capabilities of an online learning environment.

“Part 2: Delivery, Quality Control, and Student Support of Online Courses” is concerned with the last two parts of the organization’s online learning value chain: delivery and service. Chapter 11 focuses on the role of the teacher or tutor in an online learning context. It uses a theoretical model that views the creation of an effective online educational community as involving three critical components: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. The chapter provides suggestions and guidelines for maximizing the effectiveness of the teaching function in online learning.

Chapter 6 presents the call center concept for course delivery and student support in online courses. In distance education in particular, the call center can be an effective communication tool, enabling the institution to provide and improve service to students in many areas, including instruction. This chapter describes how the call center concept is used at Athabasca University and how it has proven to be effective in three areas: increasing student service and retention, allowing for direct marketing, and enhancing management information and learner feedback.

Chapter 7 discusses the library support needed by online learners. It examines how libraries are responding to the challenges and opportunities of delivering core services to online learners. This chapter portrays some of the library practices and technologies now being applied in the construction of virtual libraries. The authors stress the importance of providing support within a collaborative environment, which considers human factors, such as communication and interaction.

Chapter 8 continues this discussion by stressing the importance of setting up a supportive learning environment for online learners, and provides some practical advice. Underlying this advice is a philosophy that encourages an environment that aims to develop the learner’s independence, while ensuring that supports are readily available when needed. Student supports that are flexible, clear, and continually available are described, and best practices outlined.

Chapter 9 provides a discussion of the contexts of quality assurance activities in higher education in general, and of the competing paradigms highlighted by online learning. The author notes that the greatest challenge for trying to define quality is that quality remains a relative experience, realized in large part through an individual’s level of expectation. On the basis of this insight, the chapter goes on to examine quality standards that

have been proposed for the delivery of online instruction in four jurisdictions: Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

In chapter 10 a case study based on the experiences surrounding a distance-learning module in the area of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) that includes a creative multimedia component as an integral part of its teaching and assessment. The module requires that students engage in multimedia production to articulate their ideas and understanding of technology-related concepts, in contrast with the text-based assessment practices that are more commonplace in technological subjects. Open Educational Resources (OER) form an integral part of the module both in its delivery and assessment: whilst open-source software and media are used within the teaching materials, students' multimedia work submitted for assessment has the potential to become resources for their peers. This chapter examines the challenges encountered in developing the module and provides a preliminary discussion of views, concerns and potential issues faced by students, drawing upon the experiences of the module development team and the first cohort of students enrolled in the module. Whilst providing an overview of these experiences, the text explores issues pertaining to the integration of creative work into a domain where creativity has not been traditionally seen to play an explicit role. The module sits within an undergraduate ICT degree offered by the UK Open University (UKOU).

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