Characteristics of Successful Adult Distance Instructors for Adult Learners

by Nora N. Smith

Return to Contents Page

Abstract
Smith probes the relationship between the characteristics of older adult learners and the teaching success of distance educators.

Why Should We Study About Adult Distance Learners?

It is imperative that we study adult distance learners because the majority of distance learners today in the United States are adults. In this age of rapid technological and economic change, life-long learning is becoming a way of life. The average age of students will become greater. Participation in learning activities by learners 18 and over increased from 38 percent in 1991 to 50 percent in 1999 (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 1999). As the population seeks more education, there will continue to be an increase in the number of adult distance students, which means that more instructors will be needed to teach them.

According to Grill (1999), we will continue to see more distance courses being offered by colleges, government agencies, and private agencies. The plans to offer distance education courses are often top-down mandates from administrators. The actual development of distance education Web courses is most often left up to the classroom faculty. This means that course development is a bottom-up process (Wilson 1998).

Understanding the Nature and Philosophy of the Instructor for Adult Distance Education

For distance instructors, knowing how computers operate and understanding how educational technologies operate is not adequate preparation to work with adult learners. According to Olcott (1995), technology itself does not ensure high-quality teaching—only the creative talents of the instructor can. According to Raths (1999), what constitutes an ideal instructor in Web education remains debatable. Raths asserts that instructors who thrive in the distance environment combine the skills of a traditional classroom instructor with those of a technical support representative—they engage students and spark their curiosity, and they are also responsive, well-organized,

courteous, patient and flexible. Overall, the instructor in distance education is a mentor and a facilitator of knowledge. This dualistic role of the instructor is critical to students. While distance students may be more self-directed, they need to know that there is a person who knows the subject and is capable of replying in an articulate, professional manner on the receiving end of their input. The most important factor for successful distance learning as noted by Sherry (1996) is a caring, concerned instructor who is confident, experienced, at ease with the equipment, uses the media creatively, and maintains a high level of interactivity with the students. Older adult students tend to be more unsure about their technology capabilities and feel they need more access to instructor support than younger adult students.

Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, and Marx (1999) found that faculty who felt major obstacles to teaching via distance were developing effective technology skills along with obtaining necessary assistance and support. The added workload, even with added resources, is probably among the toughest issues in distance learning because the load is ultimately on the instructor. Usually, there is no recognition for the extra effort needed to teach in this format, meaning it does not typically contribute to promotion and tenure decisions (Sherron, 1998). More incentives are needed to encourage classroom instructors to become distance instructors.

Designing Interactive Courseware to Match Technology Capabilities

Distance instructors have to be learning constantly. Distance education instructors often find that to be effective, they must acquire a different set of skills than they use in a traditional classroom. For example, planning must be conducted in advance, materials must be made to conform to the standards of the technology being used, and lectures must be designed to be interactive enough to hold the students' attention when they do not have an instructor directly in front of them.

A well-planned distance learning course can overcome many barriers to learning, but the experts state that this takes a clearly organized, learner-centered approach and ample technical and administrative support (Moore & Kearsley 1996). Technology is only one of many tools for teaching and learning. Without technical assistance and properly trained instructors, even the best technology can prove almost worthless.

Evaluations of coursework have shown that there are few differences in the outcomes for students who participate in coursework through various modes of distance education such as interactive video, audio conferencing,

videotapes, or the Web (Collins, Hemmeter, Schuster, & Stevens 1996). To ensure student success, adult distance instructors need to realize that distance students sometimes experience feelings of isolation. It is difficult for the students to feel as if they are known by their instructor. Distance learning students miss being able to put a face on their instructor and classmates. Frequently, students in online courses work alone, often at home in the evenings or weekends. However, it is difficult for students who work under these conditions to resolve some of the kinds of potentially frustrating problems that can typically be discussed and resolved more readily in a face-to-face class meeting. A solution for conquering feelings of isolation is for the students and instructor to rely upon e-mail as a primary means of communication and to engage in discussion groups (Hara & Kling 2000).

The instructor must find a way for the students to have access to technical support. Sometimes distance students become frustrated with technological problems and the absence of personnel to provide technical support (Hara & Kling, 2000). Generally, students who do well in distance learning courses are usually comfortable contacting the instructor as soon as they need help with the course.

Identifying Distance Learner Characteristics

To help make students more comfortable in distance learning environments, adult distance instructors need to be able to identify learner characteristics. Many adult students resist computer technology, perhaps because they frequently feel some degree of anxiety when they are trying to learn new technologies. It is the responsibility of the adult distance instructor to design courses with this phenomenon in mind. The instructor should have specific strategies for identifying anxious learners, as well as strategies for easing their anxieties. One example of a strategy for dealing with fretful learners is the instructor who found a way to combat computer anxiety by telling the students to use name-calling. "Call the machine names!" she urged (McKenzie 1998). The body language of the learners relaxed dramatically as they came to view the machine as a person or animal instead of some all-powerful, technological marvel. Another technique to reduce students' anxiety is to have them think of the computer as having a personality rather than being just a machine. The student should be told, "the computer is waiting for you to tell it what to do." The emphasis to the adult student should be that the computer is not to be feared and is ready, willing and waiting for someone to give it a command.

The adult distance instructor should plan for learner comfort. Pacing in delivering the material is essential because adult students reach an early saturation when covering new ground. An example is in teaching word

processing. It is wise to teach four or five commands in the first lesson, just enough to support the students in creating an impressive document. Once the adult learners understand the commands, they should practice until they feel that the commands are easy to do. McKenzie (1993) believes additional commands or skills should be introduced in small doses to maintain the confidence of the students. Adult skill learning is facilitated when individual learners can assess their own skills and strategies to discover inadequacies or limitations for themselves. Adequate time should be allowed for the adult students to evaluate their skills.

The adult distance educator should use multiple modes of presentation, such as visual, verbal, and auditory. In selecting the presentation mode, the adult distance instructor should provide written material to the verbalizers and provide pictorial presentations to the visualizers, such as pictures, diagrams, charts and graphs (Riding & Rayner 1995). Sonnier (1991) believes distance instructors should use visual aids in every step in instruction of specific content. The content should be thoroughly and linear-logically explained. The distance instructor should use a combination of various instructional design and teaching techniques, and modes of presentation such as multimedia presentations, videos, lectures, and discussions.

Furthermore, Eastmond (1998) affirms that supporting online teaching demands that instructors actively guide the online discourse in a caring, stimulating manner. Online instructors can use a variety of techniques to enliven courses, such as small group discussions, role-playing, student presentations, brainstorming, and simulations. Effective distance teachers give individual attention in private messages and provide summarizing comments in the general discussion to keep the conversation on course.

Characteristics of the Instructor

Clearly, developing and using online instruction is not an easy task for the distance instructor. Teaching online courses requires more time, patience and understanding than teaching a traditional course. The instructor must have advanced technological knowledge, or the instructor will be dependent on a computer technician to answer the simple questions from students. This type of learning can be frightening for the instructors (Perrin, 2000).

Understanding the nature and philosophy of distance education is a skill that Schlosser and Anderson (1994) identify. Their research indicates that instructors must learn this skill as they assume the role of distance educators. The best adult learning programs must place a high priority on developing the students' confidence, comfort, and calm

along with competence. For many of the adult student techno-holdouts, emotions play a very serious role in blocking acceptance of information technology. They ask questions such as, "What if I look foolish in front of my colleagues? What if I cannot make this program work? How long will it take before I feel like an expert? How do I fit this course into my already crazy schedule?" (McKenzie, 1998; Blackhurst and Collins (1996). Following are some guidelines for the adult distance instructor.

To ensure the success of older adult students, distance instructors should use assessments. Assessment measures what and how the students have learned in the distance classes. According to Jegded, Aylor, and Okebukola (1991), these tests should have maximum validity, feasibility, and objectivity in order to meet the characteristics of all the students. According to Bloom, Englehart, Furst, Hill and Krathwohl (1956), the content of the assessment tool should include the following six aspects: (a) knowledge, (b) comprehension, (c) application, (d) analysis, (e) synthesis, and (f) evaluation. The assessment tool can take many forms, including regular assignments, individual or group projects, online quizzes, and take-home exams. The formats of the tools should be appropriate and include filling in the blanks, multiple choice questions, identification of terms, short answer and essay questions, and writing papers. The instructor should provide appropriate hints, such as diagrams and tables for different assessment instruments.

Collins recommends that future teaching ventures can be improved by collecting evaluation data from the students (Collins, 1996). The Syracuse University Adult Education program recommends identifying the learner characteristics at distant sites and customizing the lesson to the audience. This can be accomplished by the use of surveys. The instructor should know the composition of the audience as to (a) their preferences, (b) their interests, and (c) their styles. The more complete the picture of the needs of the students, the better the match between lesson design and enthusiasm for learning.

Planning is necessary for the instructor to translate new concepts into familiar terms in order to successfully develop unit and lesson plans. The adult distance instructor can customize the lessons to create a match with the needs, the preferences and capabilities of the adult learners if there is sufficient time to plan. When an instructor plans a lesson, it is an invention. Invention is one of the most powerful learning experiences of all. When we invent, we also own the product and are more likely to carry it through to the end (McKenzie, 1998).

Strategies suggested by Kubula (1998) for an effective distance educational format include:

- Have the course materials prepared and loaded by the beginning date of the class. Distance students often like to obtain all materials, including their lecture notes, readings, supplementary materials, etc., prior to the beginning of the course.

- Check into the class at least once daily. Criticisms of distance learning often focus on a lack of interaction and feedback from instructors.

- Develop activities that promote interactivity and socialization among students. With lack of face-to-face contact, such activities are important to the success of the class.

- Make sure that students receive timely announcements and news. The feeling of isolation and disconnection can grow quickly.

- Provide feedback and responses to questions in twenty-four hours or less. If the instructor will be off-line for longer than a day, he or she must be sure to notify the students. The distance instructor should provide appropriate timely feedback regarding the results of assessment outcomes, such as exams, assignment, projects, and papers. The feedback should be primarily positive and encouraging.

Types of Effective Training for Distance Instructors

Training for distance instructors is a continuous process. There must be support and opportunities for practice. The technology changes often. One-on-one training is probably the most effective for most distance instructors because they are able to progress at their own pace, while having support. But one-on-one training is costly and expensive. Group workshops hold down costs and provide a chance for a sharing of ideas. Other types of training include (a) Web-based tutorials; (b) printed materials; (c) listserves; (d) use of mentors; (e) monthly discussion sessions among peers; and (f) observation of other distance courses.

Beginning distance instructors should be given an opportunity to address concerns and receiving training which includes (a) distance learning technology and its impact on learners, (b) availability of administrative and support services, (c) fundamentals of and assistance with course development and adaptation, (d) techniques for encouraging interaction, (e) development of backup and contingency plans, (f) how distance instruction ties in with the institutional mission, and (g) copyright and other policy issues (Clay, 1999).

Keeping up-to-date on distance–learning topics

While there are many basic issues involving adult learning styles and instructional planning and delivery, the very nature of distance learning requires that instructors must continue to learn new technology and new concepts in their field. A distance instructor's own education and training is never really complete. Reading broadly (Classroom Connect, 2000) and attending conferences are good strategies for keeping up to date on changes. Distance instructors should keep up to date on the current professional literature. Hundreds of articles on distance education topics are published yearly and offer much insight on what is and is not effective. Participating in hands-on training for personal development is wise. The focus should be on what is readily applicable rather than theoretical. Listed in Table 3 are some suggestions for online educational technology journals and newsletters to peruse.

Table 3

List of Educational Technology Journals and Newsletters

Name	Description
Open Learning Agency http://www.ola.bc.ca	Articles related to information technologies, online courses, training in the workplace.
EDTECH DISCUSSION LIST (US) http://h-net.msu.edu~edweb/list.html	Brings together faculty, educators, students and "interested others" in the field of educational technology to share ideas and information: subscribing, how to post, tips & guidelines, listserv commands.
Horizon, The Technology Source (US) http://horizon.unc.edu/TS	Assist educators in integrating IT tools in teaching and managing educational organizations: vision, cast studies, development, commentary, virtual U, letters to editor, critical reading, archives.
Journal of Computing in Higher **Education** (US) http://www.unix.oit.umass.edu/~carolm/jche/	Essays, books and product reviews, reports, research articles contributing to understanding of issues, problems and research associated with instructional technologies and the integration of technology into the learning and teaching process.
Journal of Instructional Science & **Technology** (AU) http://gort.ucsd.edu/newjour/msg02702.html	E-Journal (full text articles), international, multi-faceted publication with materials of interest to practitioners, policy makers and academics.
Training & Development Resource **Center** http://www.tcm.com/trdev/	Resources for training & development and human resources professionals.
T.H.E. Journal (US)	T.H.E. Journal Magazine: full text articles, current and back issues, feature, editorial, applications, broadband, calendar, edunet, educator's evaluation, industry

http://www.thejournal.com/   perspective, news, products, software/courseware.

U.S. Department of Education Office of   Information about the Department's programs and events
Vocational and Adult Education   in Adult Education and Vocational Education
http://www.ed.gov/office/OVAE/
Adult Learning Theory   Includes links to information on the characteristics of
http://www.cln.org/inservice/itpd/alearn.html   adult learners and learning theory.

The Online Chronicle of Distance   *The Chronicle* is the electronic source for information
Education and Communication   about distance education produced by Nova
                                                                  Southeastern University. *The Chronicle* appears
http://www.nova.edu/fcae/disted/   quarterly and provides an information exchange related
                                                                  to distance education and online communication.

Looking at Common Mistakes of New Distance Instructors

Just as it is important to know what is effective, distance learning instructors should also be aware of some common mistakes that can occur. For example:

- Some instructors will use cutting-edge technologies when a simpler method is better. An example is when an instructor put PowerPoint slides on Internet courses when text alone will accomplish the same goal. While PowerPoint may work really well on fast campus networks, it often runs very slowly for students using home computers with modems. The use of fancy graphics, audio, or video can be frustrating for students.

- Textbooks should not be placed online. Instructors should not force students to read long pages of text on a computer screen. The Internet should be used as a means of interaction and resource sharing. There is also the issue that copyright laws may be violated.

- Students must receive clear requirements from their instructors. Saying, "students must post their lesson review answers to the bulletin board by Thursday of each week" works better than saying, "turn in your work on the bulletin board."

- Some instructors do not take the time to learn the technology. Students learn more effectively when the instructor has the confidence to answer most of their questions and understand their concerns. Instructors will also save time in the long run because they can quickly make adjustments to their course.

- There must be interaction and follow up with the distance students. Students feel more connected with instructors who participate regularly in bulletin board discussions. Students also expect their e-mail and phone calls to be answered within a day or two.

Conclusions

As the demand increases for distance learning, particularly among adult learners, it is incumbent on distance learning instructors to understand the unique needs of the adult student population. Building on sound pedagogical theory, distance learning instructors can successfully create new learning opportunities that are effective without making adult learners feel overwhelmed.

References

Blackhurst, A. and Collins, B. (1996). *Special Education Doctoral Program in the Delivery of Distance Education*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky.

Classroom Connect. (August 25, 2000) E-Testimony to the Web-based Education Commission. http://www.Webcommission.org/director .

Clay, M. (Fall 1999) Development of training and support programs. *Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, Vol II, Number III.

Collins, B. C. and Hess, J. M. Hess, University of Kentucky Teacher Education Associate editor Column   *Journal of Special Education Technology*. http://jset.Unlv.edu/l5.4/asseds/smith.html .

Collins, Hemmeter, Schuster, & Stevens, (1996). Using team teaching to deliver coursework via distance learning technology. http://serc.gws.uky.edu.www/people/schuster.html .

Collins, Schuster, Hall & Griffen. (1999). http://www.com.unisa.edu.au/cccc/papers/refereed/paper17/paper17-1.htm .

Eastmond, D. (1998). Adult learners and Internet-based distance education. In Cahoon, B. (Ed.), *Adult learning and the Internet (33-41)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Grill, J. Access to Learning: *Rethinking the Promise of Distance Education*. http://web5.infotrac.galegroup.com/litw/iarticleA6700049 .

Hara, N. & Kling, Rob. Students' Distress with a web-based distance education course: an ethnographic study of participants' experiences. *Information, Communication & Society.*

Holloway, R.& Ohler, J. (1991). Distance education in the next decade. In G.J. Anglin, (ed.), *Instructional technology, past, present, and future* 259-66.

Holt, L. (1992). *Barriers to quality distance.* Metropolitan Universities, 31 (1), 43-50.

Jegede, O., Taylor, J. & Okebukola, P. (1991) Knowledge engineering: an alternative approach to curriculum design for science education at a distance. *Research in Higher Education, 21*, 198-207.

Kubula, T. (1998). Addressing student needs: Teaching on the Internet. *Technical Horizons in Education Journal, 25*, (8) 71-75.

McKenzie, J. (February 1993) Creating Flexible District Technology Plans from Now On The *Education Technology Journal, Vol 3 No 6.*

McKenzie, J. (March 1998). Secrets of success: professional development that works. *ESchool News.*

Moore, M. & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view.* Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.

New teachers are no better prepared to use technology than experienced Teachers. (October 1999). http://www.schooldata.com/datapoint38.html .

Olcott, D. Jr. & Wright, S. (1995). An institutional support framework for increasing faculty participation in postsecondary distance education. *The American Journal of Distance Education, 9 (3)* 5-17.

Perrin, K. (Winter 2000) The reality of designing and implementing an internet-based course. *Journal of Distance Learning Administration, Vol III, No IV.*

Raths, D. (June 1999). Is anyone out there? *Inside Technology Training*, 32-34.

Riding, R. & Rayner, S. (1995). The information superhighway and individualized learning. *Educational Psychology, 15 (4),* (365-378).

Rockwell, S., Schauer, J., Fritz, S., & Marx, D. (1999). Incentives and Obstacles Influencing Higher Education faculty and Administrators to Teach via distance. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 2 (3).* Available: http://www.wesga.edu/~distance/rockwell24.html .

Schlosser, C. & Anderson, M. (1994) *Distance education: review of the literature.* Washington, D.C: Association for

Educational Communications and Technology.

Sherron, T. (1998). In support of distance learning. *Syllabus 11(7)*, 44-47.

Sherry, L. (1996) Issues in Distance Learning. International Journal of Educational Telecommunications, 1 (4), (337-

365).

Wilson, C. (Fall 1998) Concerns of instructors delivering distance learning via the WWW. *Journal of Distance Learning Administration. Vol 1, No. 3*

Nora Smith works with Virginia Western Community College's Learning Technology Center.

Return to Contents Page

Return to Contents Page