

0Providing Student Support

Courtney J, Ware

The University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract

Distance Education has grown immensely since the dawn of the twenty first century. No longer are the days of bulky books, pen, paper, and traditional classroom setting in order to learn. Now we have computers, Microsoft Office, and distance learning. Instead of the traditional face-to-face setting, distance education can be delivered through asynchronous and synchronous courses. Distance education offers an opportunity for learners to complete courses with less restraints thanks to the flexibility distance learning provides. Through my experiences with distance education, I have encountered issues due to the lack of interaction on all levels of support. The importance of student support in regard to successful distance learning includes many different essential functions. The ability to provide support to students in a distance education environment allows for student growth and performance. Without adequate support students may fail to perform, lack motivation, lose enthusiasm for learning, and fall behind.

Student Support

The issue of a lack of student support services is nothing new to distance learning. Once distance education took off, one of the main concerns was the lack of student support and social interaction. By ensuring successful student support, the school and instructor need to be involved with all aspects of online learning (Reiser & Dempsey 2018). Students want to feel as though they belong and are receiving a valuable education. Students often express the lack of social interaction with their instructor. This can include when they have questions or having the ability to converse with other students. Other issues relate to prompt feedback from the instructor and technical support when technical problems occur, especially with the learning management system (LMS). All of these factors can hinder a successful online learning experience for the student and hinder distance education success.

Student support is important because the many different types of learners distance education accommodates. With distance education the visual, kinesthetic, auditory learners can all have their needs met if the instructor creates proper assignments (Beaudoin 2016). Distance education is valued because of the flexibility of location, time, and the absence of the traditional classroom commitment. The ability to access an online course day or night is appealing to those who have other personal and professional commitments. The fact that online courses can be accessed anytime and at any geographical location, as long as internet and a computer are available, can also have a downside. Students living in rural geographical areas may suffer from the lack of adequate internet and equipment. Also, student support in a distance learning setting requires quick access and responses from their instructors, other students or the schools iTech helpdesk. Students may also lack technological skills or have a basic skillset, but need support in

the form of extra course tools such as skype with the instructor, a phone call, tutorials, or an online tutor. The fact that distance learning is completed away from an actual school setting opens the doors to massive support barriers. Many students who have taken part in distance learning say the difficulties that alter their thinking of online education and learning could be managed by adequate student support systems.

Availability

First, availability of two-way communication between instructor and student in distance learning is essential to achieve adequate student support because communication is key to advancement of society as a whole. Communication is vital for successful learning outcomes. Without communication in distance learning, there is no way to receive support via feedback or announcements (Veletsianos 2010). Having lines of communication from instructor to student and student to student allows for relationships to grow. It is important for the instructor to always provide all means of communication and hours of availability to the students at the beginning of the course (Beaudoin, 2016). The feeling of being a part of something as a whole is important to students of online learning. The ability to communicate with the instructor gives them a feeling of importance and the feeling of knowing your instructor takes the time to answer, truly cares and understands, allows for students to open-up and become more motivated and active in their learning.

Other factors of communication can include psychological perceptual issues. Students often say they feel aggravated, confused or worried when they cannot get an adequate response from their instructor. Students report that by the time they received a response it was too late, or they sat around waiting for feedback when they could have been working on the assignment if they just had the answers to their questions. All students and instructors should feel included in

the distance learning environment to create a feeling of a tight knit community to which the students feel they have a support system. The comfort of knowing you have others who can help you instead of feeling isolated and lost is important to anyone.

The absence of social context clues can cause communication barriers from online learning since there is no way to read body language or expressions. Due to the emotional aspect missing, some forms of communication can become misconstrued or perceived in the wrong way, causing issues. Miscommunication through emails or misinterpretation through group discussions can be caused by many factors. Cultural diversity, language barriers, and lack of technological skills are a few.

The workload on instructors of distance education can be immense. It is hard for the instructor to be available all times of the day and night because they too have families, careers, and commitments just as students do. The problem is the face-to-face aspect of the classroom is missing so students seem to think the instructor should be readily available for access at any time. For this, instructors must create course content and critique it to fit an online format while taking into account the learners abilities or lack thereof without ever “meeting” the students. This adds more pressure on the instructor. Often students expect instructors to give rapid responses to messages or emails because of the flexible like structure online learning portrays. Distance learning instructors must limit their availability to certain hours just as they would for traditional courses and make sure the students know these times of availability (Seiter, Peeples & Sanders 2018).

The advancement of new technologies, adequate training for faculty of distance education, staying current with cyberculture, including many lines of communication among the instructor and students are a few ways that communication barriers in the distance education

setting can be . Online classrooms should offer more than one way for students to connect with the instructor. For example, phone, email, text, skype open discussion boards for students to post questions or concerns, and in recent years the use of facetime to actively promote all lines of communication. Instructors can provide clear expectations and offer detailed instructions to the students, so they can know what is expected of them and the proper steps to take if they encounter a problem. Providing additional materials to support the assignments such as tutorials or examples can be helpful to the online learner and often answer questions. Finally, the instructor can create methods of communication between the student and their peers via group projects and discussion boards. This would give the students the opportunity to get to know their classmates, open-up and feel more comfortable with each other which will open the barriers of communication.

Collaboration

Second, collaboration learning in a distance education setting is important. As long as distance education continues to expand, students will need new ways to work with their peers despite the distance factor. Educational pedagogy refers to collaboration as a means of interaction for learning purposes. A direct approach form of collaboration gives the students the opportunity to work together for an assignment or group project, this type of collaboration allows for the students to work together for one common goal. Each participant can contribute something with everyone's ideas and thoughts bouncing off each other with each student aiming for the same objective. With distance education, working together allows for a more positive learning outcome and hinders the possibility of student disengagement (Pozzi & Persico 2011).

Instructors can include different types of collaboration in their lessons during the planning stage. Peer assessment or review is a form of collaboration through the means of members of a group “helping” out other members by reviewing their individual assignment or a part of an assignment. For example, in a course I took we had peer review of the learning objectives for an assignment. Before the objectives were turned into the instructor, our group members had to review them with a rubric and submit it to the instructor. This form of collaboration gave the students the ability to apply their prior knowledge and skills learned from previous chapters and work with other students in the process. This allows for the instructor to use the layout to ensure all forms of learning are reached through at least a few means of collaboration. The use of different technologies can alter the use of collaboration with some including more collaboration than others and that is ok. Not every student excels when working with others. Some students like the feeling of security of sitting behind the computer screen and not having to deal with the pressure that collaboration can bring to those who have anxiety but it is important to practice those socializing skills (Veletsianos 2010).

Collaboration between student to student, student to instructor, and instructor to student is important for many reasons. The social aspect of collaborative learning is important. It supports social interaction and facilitates growth among the creation of meaningful relationships and cooperation among other students to create an effective means of collaboration (Pozzi & Persico 2011). These steps all require everyone working together for a common goal or outcome. It opens effective lines of communication and interaction between all parties. All parties must accept their part in creating an active learning environment with respect for each other a priority. Collaboration cannot be a success if students are hesitant to express their feelings, ideas, or opinions. The hesitancy can be caused by lack of respect for different cultures or ways of

thinking. Building a sense of community during collaboration experiences can be a valuable tool in distance education if used properly. Interactions with negative or degrading humor can hinder a student from becoming too involved in the collaborative setting. The fear of rejection, ridicule or lack of respect can make the use of collaboration ineffective. Every student should feel as though they are equal in the collaborative setting. I think instructors should always include themselves in the online collaborative settings. That way they can observe progress, leave feedback and read the group discussions. The instructor can also see who is making contributions and who is not.

Feedback

Offering meaningful online feedback when it comes to distance learning is a complicated subject. The ability to offer real-time answers or ask questions in the classroom results in feedback. There are many different types of feedback. Informative feedback, positive feedback, informational feedback, and corrective feedback can be used (Savvidou 2017). For example, the notes a teacher writes on a test can offer feedback. If a student is writing a research paper, the teacher can provide feedback for each step of the process as it is turned in.

Feedback in a synchronous course is important because of the setting of the learning environment. Synchronous courses are when all students and instructors are online meeting in the virtual classroom at the day and time. The requirement of a headset which includes the ability to have a conversation between everyone offers quick feedback. The instructor can answer questions or ask questions for the students to answer with the instructor having the ability to include feedback immediately (Higley 2014).

Asynchronous courses have no set day or time for students and instructor to meet for class, instead the students log into the LMS and complete their work by the due dates. Feedback in this learning setting is much more important because of the lack of communication and collaboration between students and instructor. The feedback sometimes can take a day or so due to the instructor managing multiple online courses and answering students emails by the order they were received. This can leave a student in limbo and frustrated. With the face-to face ratio absent from distance learning and the environment of an online setting, adequate and quick feedback should be provided so the student can access their progress and know where they stand in the class (Higley 2014).

Meaningful feedback is crucial because if it is not provided in a quick manner, it can affect the student's other assignments. Instructor feedback provides the student with important information. The student could continue to make the same mistakes over and over again and not even know it. The learner's performance outcomes can be affected by pre-test feedback such as brainstorming or post-test feedback (Savvidou 2017). It is important in synchronous and asynchronous distance learning settings to provide effective means of feedback to the students.

Feedback can be delivered from other sources such as the students themselves. Peer review feedback offers a review of work by another student instead of the instructor (Higley 2014). Students are far more likely to ask each other questions before asking the instructor out of fear of looking silly. Peer review assignments or open group discussions can alter student's hesitation to ask for help. I think it is a good idea for the instructor to create an open discussion board for student issues or questions. Throughout the course the students could post their question or thoughts for everyone to see. Other students can reply, and collaboration/communication begins.

If the teacher provides guidelines for the reviewer, such as a rubric, the reviewer can provide feedback by following the rubric specifications and not their own opinion, which can sometimes appear as condescending or be misinterpreted. The peer review feedback offers the students the chance to get to know each other. It also nurtures mentoring abilities by means of practice (peer review). The learner can provide each other with areas of improvement by completing the role of instructor. The ability to practice leadership roles in assignments or group work facilitates growth of leadership skills which an enrich future endeavors. This also allows them to access areas of prior and current knowledge. The instructor can provide means of collaboration by facilitating peer review assignments or putting the students in groups for the entire course, especially with distance learning.

In conclusion, student support can be provided in many different forms. ITech is crucial for students who need technical support services such as computer problems, password reset, forgot password, installing software, connecting devices, issues with LMS, web-browser issues or basic computer questions. Availability in education and distance learning should have no barriers for communication. The need of the student to be able to contact the instructor in a distance education setting is one of the most important factors for successful learning. The availability of the instructor needs to be consistent and known by the student. Communication allows for connection between instructor and students or students and their peers, which facilitates learning and growth. Collaboration is important because collaborative learning provides participation, which is lacking in distance learning due to the absence of face-to-face experiences. Social interaction in distance learning facilitates growth, problem-solving skills, provides meaningful engagement with peers, and attributes to overall successful academic achievement (Beaudoin 2016). Lastly, the contribution of meaningful feedback along with

technical support, availability and collaboration creates the platform for an effective and productive learning environment (Anderson, T., & Zawacki-Richter, O. 2014) Without feedback, students have no information on their progress. Students need to receive feedback in order to reflect and correct their work, which also facilitates growth and learning overall.

References

- Anderson, T., & Zawacki-Richter, O. (2014). *Online distance education: Towards a research agenda*. Edmonton: AU Press.
- Beaudoin, M. (2016). Issues in Distance Education: A Primer for Higher Education Decision Makers. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2016(173), 9-19. doi:10.1002/he.20175
- Higley, M. (2014, July 02). Benefits of Synchronous and Asynchronous e-Learning. Retrieved October 07, 2018, from <https://elearningindustry.com/benefits-of-synchronous-and-asynchronous-e-learning>
- Online Discussion Boards: Strategies to Ease Instructor Burden and Promote Student Learning. (2018, May 02). Retrieved from <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/online-discussion-boards-strategies-ease-instructor-burden-promote-student-learning/>
- Pozzi, F., & Persico, D. (2011). *Techniques for fostering collaboration in online learning communities: Theoretical and practical perspectives*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.
- Reiser, R. A., & Dempsey, J. V. (2018). *Trends and issues in instructional design and technology*. New York: Pearson.
- Savvidou, C. (2017). Feedback Given, Feedback Received: Lessons From A Distance Learning Course. *EDULEARN17 Proceedings*. doi:10.21125/edulearn.2017.0643
- Seiter, J. S., Peeples, J. A., & Sanders, M. L. (2018). *Communication in the classroom: A collection of G.I.F.T.S.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martins.
- Teaching College Courses Online vs Face-to-Face. Retrieved from <https://thejournal.com/articles/2001/04/01/teaching-college-courses-online-vs-facetoface.aspx>
- Veletsianos, G. (2010). *Emerging Technologies in Distance Education*. Athabasca University Press.
- Venturing into the world of online learning: Is it for everyone? (2018, October 10). Retrieved from <http://blog.myaone.my/general/venturing-world-online-learning-everyone/>