Mike Donoghue
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How to support distance students' learning

For the people who have sought to improve themselves and their abilities through education, there have been many avenues available to them. Various institutions exist that provide all forms of degrees and certifications as well as training in a number of academic and professional fields. For the students who find it necessary to perform their learning from a distance however, there are some different and sometimes significant hurdles that other learners do not face at traditional "brick and mortar" institutions.

The current day distance student is somewhat autonomous, directed perhaps by coursework guidelines and deadlines, yet as Otto Peters (2001) puts it "they approach their studies quite differently, have a different attitude and assess it differently" (Peters, 2001, p.13). Additionally, states Börje Holmberg (2005), they are often individuals that have many responsibilities outside the boundaries of their learning process, seeking to acquire education "beside work and family life" (Holmberg, 2005, p.11) and enrich themselves.

In order to make each student's distance learning experience a positive and productive one requires a commitment to provide a degree of support from the very organizations that supply this form of education.

Substance

When developing a course, special considerations need to be made to engage students. The subject matter itself may attract them initially, but without a context in which it can help learners, the material does not motivate a true desire to absorb more than what is presented and reflect on their experience (Holmberg, 2005, p. 47-49). They instead become committed to rote learning methods and plough through material rather than pause to cogitate about its message.

It is essential in the creation of distance learning programs that course information be designed to nourish the mind and intrigue it. While this may be a difficult task for the conveyance of some content, there are some means through which this interest can be fostered.

Exchange

Communication on many fronts is vital to the success of a student's distance learning experience. For the scholars that are enrolled in today's distance education offerings, their achievement requires interaction, not just for its social importance, but to build bridges that help create links from course content to mental application. Learners need to have exchanges with instructors, fellow students, and student-support counselors so as to

construct a bond that provides a foundation of reinforcement for their educational experience (Moore and Kearsley, 2005, p.16-17).

This interaction creates a connection and an empathic, personal relationship between learners and teachers that encourages learning and is of great importance to the distance learning environment (Holmberg, 2005, p.38). In a technologically entrenched program, the interactive process generates noteworthy results based on the degree of interactivity that occurs (Moore and Kearsley, 2005, p.141-144).

Oversight

Communication in a distance learning setting creates connections that help learners to become engaged with educational programs which in turn are also designed to encourage exchanges. This structure then must be assisted by an administrative force that watches over and supports instructors, students, and integrates their efforts into a cohesive front.

To create a successful distance learning experience for students requires a sufficient amount of planning where, as Holmberg (2005) writes, "without a proper infrastructure catering for course development, undelayed tutorial work, counseling and administration, any distance-education activity is doomed to fail" (Holmberg, 2005, p.43-44).

Having a proper administrative process in place supports the needs of the body of its distance learning courses, as well as the faculty, tutors, and instructors that are integrated with teaching the material. It also serves to provide a framework that works to ensure a collaborative environment that ultimately helps to improve standards for the benefit of all. By doing so, it enriches the experience and gives structure to the distance learning experience, enhancing the desire for students to return for other courses.

References

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