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Describe your learning process throughout the course by stating in what way your understanding of DE has changed.

First Person

“Distance Education: The exchange of information from teacher/tutor to student/learner and vice versa using communication tools specially designed to help bridge a physical distance gap and enrich the education process.” (Donoghue, 2008)

As is the case for many new students of distance education, an initial understanding of its concepts can be a fairly broad and commonplace one. While this understanding may not be technically or perceptually inaccurate, it is frequently simplistic in how it attempts to define the complex subject. Arguably, the definition may be appropriate for the everyday person looking for a simple understanding of DE, but it is by no means inclusive of the education each student receives from the course through its extensive use of online discussions, readings, and research.

It is not only coursework that provides students with the background of how distance education is formed. The actions associated with taking the *Foundations of Distance Education* course also provide them with the insight to review its materials with a truly “hands-on” approach. Signing up and “experiencing the moment” for a program is a form of precursor to the class encounter itself, providing the building blocks in which attendees can become educated on basic DE principles and learn the mechanics of what they will absorb throughout the course.

Modules

Through the *History and Principles of DE* module of the course, the information provided students with the essentials for them to discover that while there is a historical context in which distance education was formed, its principles have been maintained and only evolved over time. The learning methodologies associated with the different delivery methods are varied, but they too are designed to bring about similar results.

This was an important introduction of DE to students in that it showed them how, despite the grandiose nature of online learning, it is just another tool of educational delivery. It was a lesson in perspective as well as direction in that students learned of how an empathetic approach to distance education is considered “central to distance education” (Holmberg, 2005, p. 38). This particular information provided a form of revelation in that it showed a “more human” side to what might off-handedly be considered to be a “less human” educational process.

An overriding concept that students gained from their experience in the *Pedagogy of Distance Education and Theoretical Approaches to Distance Education* module of the

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course was the individuality and independence that was at the core of distance education's pedagogical model. Responsibilities for success in a program of study rest much on the student to complete assignments and perform other work, but there is also an element of this responsibility that educators share in providing and presenting a class.

Though it has the capacity to be managed by providers as a mass-produced product with distribution channels (Peters, 2001, p. 110) distance education is considerably more dependent upon the actions of individuals to make it a worthwhile endeavor. It is important to not only acknowledge the efforts of each student and their singular dedication to complete what is necessary for a class, but also to recognize the distinctive work of instructors who make this possible through autonomous learning (Peters, 2001, p. 88).

In the third module, *Institutional Aspects of Distance Education*, a combination of readings, discussion, and practical research gave students the opportunity to review the true worldwide impact of DE and its practice is "a very international field" (Moore, 2005, p. 257). The different institutional classifications and modes examined presented a foundation in which students evaluated the course providers under various analytical microscopes, giving real scenarios in which to examine these distinctions at work.

As part of the "experiential" process, it was also necessary to engage students in a collaborative process – demonstrating to them another level of the distance education methodology. The education received there was another means through which interaction and shared work towards a common goal showed them the energy and concentration necessary in DE as well as the difficulties and conflicts they would encounter.

Conclusion

Preconceived notions are one way in which we attempt to enter unknown situations and define what is needed and what to expect. We draw upon our individual and/or collective knowledge and references in an attempt to construct cause and effect circumstances that we use to project a degree of confidence when faced with the unfamiliar or, as is necessary in an educational setting, know how to seek and build understanding.

Students of this course that had no foreknowledge of the material and thinking themselves familiar with the basics of distance education quickly became educated on the complexities associated with it. Regardless of the additional more mainstream attention it has attained due to the online learning component, class attendees came to realize that DE is more than a "point and click" learning process and that its pedagogical framework has many levels in which to comprehend it.

While it does emulate traditional educational models in many ways, distance education contains aspects that will always make it somewhat of an enigma since it is an evolutionary creature, adapting to the needs of students and technology at an accelerated

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pace. This makes it an extremely interesting field of study since it is so dynamic and does not stay still for long periods of time.

References

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