The Instructor's Changing Role in Distance Education

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The emergence of increasingly student-centered learning activities in the 1970s, facilitated by new instructional technology introduced in the 1980s, is contributing to a dramatic evolution in faculty roles, and raises fundamental questions within the professoriat about how it will contribute to the teaching-learning process in the 1990s and beyond. In particular, the likelihood of significant increases in distance learning enrollments within the next decade will have a profound impact on faculty members' instructional roles.

Distance education revolves around a learner-centered system with teaching activity focused on facilitating learning. The teacher augments prepared study materials by providing explanations, references, and reinforcements for the student. Independent study stresses learning, rather than teaching, and is based on the principle that the key to learning is what students do, not what teachers do. It is a highly personalized process that converts newly acquired information into new insights and ideas. The institution's function, and the task of its instructional personnel, is to facilitate and enhance that process - despite the distance - to achieve optimum learning outcomes.

Rather that transmit information in person, many faculty will have to make the adjustment to monitoring and evaluating the work of geographically distant learners. Those faculty accustomed to more conventional teaching modes will have to acquire new skills to assume expanded roles not only to teach distance learners, but also to organize instructional resources suitable in content and format for independent study. A course previously designed as an intimate round-table seminar involving a dozen students known to the faculty member will have to be reconfigured for use by perhaps several hundred students who may never meet the instructor or one another, although all will be exposed to the same course material and will complete the same assignments and tests through the use of distance media. Further, faculty engaged in distance education must be adept at facilitating students' learning through particular attention to process, unlike classroom-based teachers whose traditional role is largely confined to selecting and sharing content.

This represents a major shift from the European model of the teacher as the exclusive source of information to being one of several resources available to learners who become more active participants in the process. This is a difficult and threatening situation for teachers, most of whom are themselves products of classroom-bound education and whose professional identities are linked to the traditional image of the teacher at the front of the classroom and at the center of the process.

The teaching function is not becoming obsolete, but the role is being transformed dramatically. In addition to being adept at both content and process, faculty must recognize the role of instructional technology as a learning resource. The teacher is increasingly an intermediary between students and available resources. Teachers must know something about the potential of technology to facilitate learning and to enhance their own effectiveness. They must come to recognize how technological applications can create greater access to education by overcoming time and distance problems, and how it provides for diverse learning needs because it has the capacity to deliver material in many different formats.

Information technologies can assume many of the roles that instructional staff have traditionally played, thus freeing them for new roles in assisting students. But faculty often do not understand partnership roles they can play when allied with technology in the teaching-learning process. Indeed, many simply conclude that technology has usurped their function as educators. Faculty need assistance in order to understand and adapt to new roles; if they resist, the technology probably will not be used effectively and learning goals will be compromised.

Despite significant progress in the use and suitability of technology for educational purposes - computers are more user friendly and more compatible; there is more available software and increased access, etc. - technology still remains complex, especially when media are combined (e.g., visual, text, audio, data). Significant difficulties remain, particularly for those new to these modes of instruction, in effectively integrating the latest technologies with pedagogy and curricula. Most educational administrators have no sense of the implications of, or possibilities for using technology to teach, and the majority of faculty remain resistant to, or ignorant of, the computer as an instructional tool (McNeil 1988). Conversely, some faculty become overly dependent on technology. For example, some typically overuse tape or broadcast video, or do not know how to meld such resources with their own materials in a planned, purposeful way that supports their learning objectives. The medium too often assumes a causality of its own, supplanting the teacher and resulting in technology-bound activity that is debilitating to both teaching and learning.

The task of the distance instructor or mentor is much more than merely grading students' submitted material. Ideally, the instructional process involves:
- Diagnosing the student's readiness to learn,
- Monitoring student progress toward objectives sought,
- Recognizing and discovering a student's learning difficulties,
- Stimulating and challenging students to further efforts,
- Evaluating the quality of a student's learning, and
- Assigning a grade to estimate learning outcomes (MacKenzie, Christensen and Rigby 1968, 137).

Because the distance factor minimizes dialogue between teacher and learner and imposes a relatively high degree of structure in order that learning goals be met, it is alleged by critics of independent study that distance education fosters dependence rather than develops critical thinking and self-directed learning as claimed by its proponents. Some argue that the chief skill acquired by the distance student is the ability to provide perfunctory answers based on readily apparent information contained in the course material. One view contends distance education is rigidly prescriptive and creates dependency; another argues that it promotes autonomy and encourages self-directed approaches to learning.

There are many prevalent myths that haunt distance educators and serve to call their credibility and effectiveness into question: distance learning is too impersonal, there is minimal need for faculty, and there is an absence of quality control, to name a few. In fact, despite the distance factor, off-campus students are much more likely to develop a productive one-to-one relationship with a teacher than is the average student attending campus-based classes. Students studying independently, but receiving periodic contact from support staff as well as detailed evaluations and feedback from instructors supervising their work, are far more likely to feel a bond with their institution than is the student commuting to a campus one or two evenings a week, sitting anonymously in a classroom of 40 or 50 students where interaction with the teacher is limited despite their physical proximity to one another.

Although independent study is subjected to a good deal of criticism within the academic community, the auto-didactic mode of learning is typically the most common means adults utilize for acquiring information. Given proper resources (e.g., effective instructional guides, appropriate

texts, adequate faculty communication, and strong support services), independent study is actually a comfortable mode of learning for most adults who have been long absent from any formal educational situation.

Facilitators of self-directed learning must understand their role at the outset of the process and make it clear to learners. Self-directed learning does not mean that learners have complete control over the choice of content, methods, purposes, and criteria. If this were so, the educator would play no meaningful role in the educational equation, becoming only of marginal value in learners' efforts. Instructional personnel must interact in a transactional manner if a genuine teaching-learning process is to be present. Because the concept of self-directed learning implies empowerment of learners through lessened dependency on teacher direction, skeptics assume this mode of teaching is less time consuming than the traditional lecture-discussion format. However, instructional tasks associated with self-directed learning are generally more time consuming than working with standardized curricula and learning formats.

Adult educators who readily subscribe to the aim of increasing learners' self-direction will be most effective in contributing to that goal if they ease participants into self-directed modes of study, rather than presuming that this capability already exists. Students may have only vague notions of what self-directed study means and of their own capacity for working within such a format.

Learners are in varying stages of cognitive and psychological readiness for self-directed learning activities and, while for some the format seems familiar and comfortable, for others the prospect of studying in this way is intimidating. If given to them prematurely to become immure independent will likely serve as an impediment rather than as a stimulus for their learning (Brookfield 1988, 30).

To provide the critical elements of dialogue and direction essential to support and sustain the distance learning process, most educational institutions that sponsor independent study programs utilize some combination of full- and part-time faculty, although few distance education programs employ full-time instructors exclusively engaged in supervising off-campus learning activities. Many programs also employ appropriately credentialed practitioners who may have little previous teaching experience. Although the acceptability of utilizing practicing professionals as distance learning mentors is increasingly recognized, the credibility of such programs still rests upon involvement of "regular" faculty, even if only in limited capacities and in small numbers.

It is unlikely that independent study programs will be able, for the most part, to recruit more than a few faculty who have previous experience teaching within a distance learning context. Accordingly, it becomes necessary to provide orientation and training to enable new instructors to become acclimated to the unique requirements of distance teaching. Attempts to provide faculty with assistance or advice designed to acquaint them with program procedures and student needs may be resisted by some faculty who will interpret such efforts as telling them how to teach. But, it is essential that expectations be made clear from the outset, lest faculty assume whatever previous experience they may have had with adult learners will carry them through this new assignment when, in fact, their new instructional roles may require drastically different activities and approaches.

Administrators seeking resources for the establishment of a distance learning program must take pains to cultivate the support and interest of faculty. Many educators are familiar with the concept of independent study, but may be unfamiliar with how it actually works. They may be especially skeptical about how distance learning approaches can be properly arranged in such a way as to create an academically sound, degree-granting program. Indeed, the idea of anyone actually acquiring a baccalaureate degree through off-campus study is outrageous to many traditional educators. A common refrain is: "Well, those new techniques may work in some other disciplines, but they certainly won't in mine."

Various studies conducted for the purpose of ascertaining faculty receptivity toward external degree programs have determined most respondents were either apathetic or hostile toward such non-traditional programs. Participating faculty tended to be positive, while skepticism tended to increase with lack of experience with such programs, especially among tenured faculty. Even among those who were inclined to support off-campus study, the majority still had reservations about correspondence courses and other independent study approaches (Johnson 1981, 229). Such alternative delivery systems are generally misconstrued as guises to make college-level work easier for adults.

Among specific approaches to consider in attracting faculty and increasing their effectiveness as distance educators are:

1. Involving faculty in program planning and curriculum development: Their input can be encouraged through meetings, committee work, and contact with teaching colleagues, administrators, and others who plan, manage, and evaluate new program initiatives.

2. Training faculty to work effectively with adult learners: There is little, if any, orientation provided in mentoring techniques for supporting distance students or in the psychology of adult learning. Exposure to recent literature in the distance learning field can also be helpful.

3. Developing more adequate support systems and a more equitable salary structure for faculty. Instructional and operational costs are generally lower for distance education units, yet their faculty receive less; their unique role and contribution must be recognized and rewarded.

What Do Faculty Do?

The question is frequently asked, "Just what do faculty teaching at a distance do?" The teacher's or tutor's role depends on how a distance learning unit decides to define this particular function. Among the decisions to be made with respect to instructional personnel are (1) should they be employed full- or part-time, (2) are they to be centrally or regionally based, (3) are they to be contracted on a long-term basis or paid for each course on a "piece-work" basis, (4) what is the appropriate teacher-student ratio, (5) will faculty have a counseling role or will they provide instruction only? (Kaye and Rumble 1981, 151).

Typically, duties of faculty supervising and evaluating independent study work include the following activities:

1. Grading, after evaluating all student materials, preferably within three to five working days after receipt of students' work;
2. Maintaining regularly scheduled office hours once or twice weekly to initiate, receive, and return messages to and from students;
3. Collecting incoming assignments and returning corrected assignments. at least on a once-a-week basis;
4. Advising program staff of any problems requiring follow-up action;
5. Maintaining current course materials (i.e., syllabi, videotapes, exams) and updating course content as appropriate;
6. Preparing suitable supplementary materials to accompany course text(s) and other learning resources;
7. Developing alternative syllabi and examinations as needed.

The phenomenon of syllabism is an ever-present threat to the success of independent study outcomes. Syllabism is the tendency for students to work in a "syllabus bound" manner; i.e., to focus study only on what is prescribed in the syllabus rather than pursuing new ideas. Isolated

learners working with printed instructional materials are particularly vulnerable to this approach to studying as they may feel obligated to follow the prescribed content and format without any deviation. The Outcome may be a series of assignments that satisfy course requirements, but which have resulted in very little actual learning. Students may be tempted to be only superficially involved in the ideas and issues of a course, or they may become so dependent on its content as to develop a rigid and mindless compliance to what is presented. Students thus develop perfunctory answers to questions based solely on self-contained knowledge of the material, in which case the teacher is simply paid to check that the rules of the exercise are adequately followed.

Despite the distance, students should see the teacher's comments as a dialogue rather than a directive. This exchange between student and tutor should reflect not only how the student comes to adjust his or her views in light of the tutor's comments, but also arrives at clearer reasons for keeping his or her own views (Harrison 1974, 4). When real learning takes place, a tension is felt between the learner and the source of new information - a dynamic that demands an engagement between student and stimulus, which is at the very crux of the learning process.

Effective instructional materials assist the distance learner, having reflected on acquired knowledge, to proceed independently to the next stage. If independent study resources do not develop in participants the capacity to carry on self-directed learning, then this particular method of study has failed to meet the basic goal of producing a truly educated person able to function effectively in his or her respective environment (Kaye and Rumble 1981, 57).

Changing Faculty Attitudes

What can be done to aid faculty in modifying conventional teaching behaviors and acquiring the skills necessary to become effective distance educators? First, the transition to alternative delivery systems must be aimed at securing a commitment from all levels, especially top administration, to overcome resource limitations, remove structural constraints, and combat attitudinal barriers. Second, in-service programs must offer convincing, no-nonsense and on-going training that deals with how to teach at a distance, not merely how to manipulate new instructional technology.

Specific content areas might include: methods to establish and maintain effective communication between teacher and students and increasing interaction among students; strategies for encouraging individual and group motivation to learn at a distance; planning and managing organizational details, and developing an awareness of the time demands of distance delivered courses; techniques for adding visual components to audio courses; how to access information from various sources, e.g., external data bases, library resource systems; training in desk-top publishing, spreadsheets, data bases, and word processing (Office of Technology Assessment 1989, 95).

Other approaches (noted from the growing number of in-service programs offered in the United States) that can reduce faculty resistance and enhance receptivity toward distance education technology, materials, and methods are (1) permitting faculty to take computers home, allowing them to test the functionality of pre-packaged products and to develop facility in producing their own courseware, thus developing a sense of ownership in both process and product; (2) exposing faculty, who are accustomed to working alone, to collaborative teaching arrangements, including team teaching with some combination of master teachers, student teachers, paraprofessionals, and others who can serve as classroom facilitators; (3) involving faculty, as their expertise increases, in previewing, purchasing, and evaluating materials appropriate to the instructional technology available to them; (4) engaging them in pilot projects to test alternative delivery systems; (5) exposing them to case studies of successful distance education activities; (6) encouraging faculty to attend state, regional, and national distance education conferences and fa-

miliarize them with the increasing number of new journals specializing in distance education; and (7) establishing an academic computing services team or advisory board across departmental lines to keep information and training current.

In addition to on-going training opportunities for distance educators, adequate support services must be in place to sustain faculty motivation and satisfaction. This is especially critical for computer-assisted programs. These services include information about updated hardware and software, technical assistance, maintenance and repair of equipment, communication with vendors, acquisition and cataloging of materials, demonstrating new hardware and software, and establishing standards and procedures (McNeil 1990, 13).

Ultimately, it is the opportunity for meaningful involvement, professional development, and institutional support that are the key factors in promoting faculty receptivity and significant contributions to distance education programs. A national system of teacher training emphasizing distance education should be considered, and mandatory training in distance education theory and practice should be instituted as a condition of employment for new and continuing faculty. The myth that there is a minimal need for strong faculty in such programs must be dispelled. It is precisely in the design and delivery of these new learning modes where the participation of competent and committed faculty, whether full-time or part-time, is most critical.

As a profession, distance education has not been clearly defined and established. Educators are not likely to consciously plan a career as teachers or administrators within distance learning programs. Additional job opportunities are essential if this is to become a recognized field with expertise that is valued and accomplishments that are rewarded. Distance educators must also establish linkages with corporate, political, social, and educational sectors and increase awareness of the philosophy, methods, and efficacy of distance learning and its suitability for diverse segments of the adult population.

Thousands of adults worldwide have already been served through distance education for many decades. But there are countless others who could also benefit from such efforts, and it is the further growth and systematic development of credible distance education programs that will best meet the need. This goal can be achieved only if distance educators are strengthened through a more distinct identity within higher education, and if faculty and staff now engaged in this important work arc able to establish principles of good practice through increased collaboration, advocacy, and articulation of their past accomplishments, present roles, and future goals.

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