Final Project: Ten Guiding Principles of Distance Education

by

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Introduction

This paper and the culminating project will present the ten principles viewed as most important by this researcher. A definition of distance education is quoted from Simonson, (2003) as well as principles which target the individual learners and their learning style, the use of media, the interchangeability of media, transactional distance, as well as distance education course design and a systems approach to distance education.

The Ten Guiding Principles of Distance Education

1. Establish Communication as most Important Element
2. Know Your Learners
3. Achieve the Right Balance in Transactional Distance
4. Build Online Communities
5. Deliver Useful Instruction to Students
6. Implement a Systems Approach
7. Develop Course Designs for Distance Education
8. Apply Media as Interchangeable
9. Build upon Theory and Research
10. Maintain Institutional Support for the Student
A Definition of Distance Education

Simonson (2003, pg. 32) as cited in Simonson, Smaldino, Albright and Zvacek (2006), defines distance education as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors".

Ten Guiding Principles of Distance Education

1. In distance education teaching is performed apart from the learning and therefore, communication between the student and the teacher, and the student and other students must be made possible by other means; as either through printed material, telephone, teleconferencing, or computer meditation (Moore, 2007).

   The communication between the students and the teacher must be specified in detail ahead of time. Because students may feel alienated, a detailed description of what is expected and when it is expected is a must (Simonson, et al., 2006). A syllabus, guidelines, calendar, and detailed expectations should be provided to help reduce student anxiety due to distance. Furthermore, timely responses and frequent feedback by the distance education professionals is very important for student success.
2. Know your learners (Smaldino, Lowther, & Russell, 2008).

What is your target group? Are they adults, teenagers or children? Are they in training for a specific business or career path? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What are their individual learning styles? Are they auditory, visual or kinesthetic learners? All these factors will affect the type of instructional design needed for maximum learning.

Different learners have different learning styles. According to Moore 2007, as early as 1969, Wedemeyer proposed that a variety of media should be used to address the differences in student learning styles thus allowing students to choose their preferred media based on their individual needs (Moore, 2007).

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Individuals are presently using the different media and tailoring it to their needs or napsterizing (Dede, 2005). This emphasizes how accurately Wedemeyer understood media even then and how media needs to be selected for optimal presentation and dependent on learning style differences.
3. **Transactional distance** can be described as the distance ascribed to the degree of communication between the learner and the teacher, the learner and the content and the learner and other learners (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Transactional distance has to do with the relationship of dialogue and structure. Increased dialogue with decreased structure produces little transactional distance which tends to favor individual students with less autonomy. Decreased dialogue and increased structure produces higher transactional distance and tends to be favored by the more autonomous learner. Therefore, the amount of communication and structure must be evaluated in terms of the type of learner (Moore, 2007).

4. Online students are in danger of feeling isolated. Therefore, it becomes very important to build online learning communities to increase support for the students, decrease feelings of
isolation and increase retention rates (Fisher & Baird, 2005).

5. The learners need to understand the reason why they are participating in a learning activity. Students need to look upon the instruction as useful Morrison, Ross, and Kemp as cited in (Clark, 2001) pg. 127.

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6. A systems approach to distance education

In a system all parts are interconnected and work together for a clear goal (Dick & Clark, 2009). According to Simonson, et al. (2008), Distance Education itself is a system and the course designs must follow a systems approach and be divided into modules. According to Kaufman, Watkins, and Leigh (2001) useful educational results should follow a systems approach and therefore be based on strategic thinking.
7. The design of the online learning course is crucial for meaningful learning to take place (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005)

Goals must be sequenced from the general to the most specific and the course design must be well organized especially because of the separation of instructor and class members (Clark, 2001). Though the goals may not change from a face-to-face course design to a distance course design, the goals are extremely important in a distance class and must be well thought out and presented clearly to the students in the course materials. As stated by Simonson et al. (2006, pg. 129) "Specifically, objectives should state the conditions under which learning should occur, the performance expected of the learner, and the standard to which the performance will be matched”.

Additionally, according to Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) student interaction should be built into the course design and requires effective leadership to guide the students' so that important valuable learning to take place.
8. Research shows that the media is not what causes a significant difference in learning, it is the lesson (Clark, 2001). Media cannot make up for a poorly designed lesson and should not be used simply to add technology. Careful thought as to why it is a good media for presentation as well as its cost effectiveness must be considered.

The goals and objectives of the lesson must be the guides to media selection (Simonson et al., 2006). The media must match the learning objective and because of the distance between the professor and student's, media and visuals are important and require planning.

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9. Distance education instruction must be based on sound theory and research in distance education (Simonson et al., 2006).

Distance education instructors should not be transferring face-to-face instruction to the on-line classroom. They need to be trained in distance education theory and be knowledgeable of the research in order to design and provide effective instruction.
10. The institution must support the student (Simonson et al., 2006).

Students must have access to resources to support their efforts and to assure them that they will be able to meet their class obligations without undue stress. They need a wide array of support resources which should include the proper equipment, library access and support personnel, and technology support personnel. This is especially important to alleviate the feelings of separation and anxiety that students may feel due to distance.

Summary

Distance education is not the same as face-to-face education and requires a thought out systematic approach based on research and best practices. Instructors must be trained in effective distance education practices to avoid student feelings of isolation that may lead to retention problems. Following basic principles based on research will increase course effectiveness.
References


