Practices of Distance Education in the 21st Century: A Pragmatic Approach

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Most of us feel that distance education has facilitated the shift of education: i. from a teacher-centred to student-centred learning. ii. from passive to active and participatory learning, iii. from conducive to teamwork and collaborative learning, iv. from narrow-vision learning to global survival-vision learning, v) from home to open school, vi) from here to every where; and vii) from acquiring to creating paradigms of knowledge in this information society. Unfortunately, several objections have been raised that distance education lacks the richness of experience offered in a classroom milieu of co-learners. Practitioners of distance education believe that some modes of distance education can be structured to enhance interactive learning among student-student and student-instructor in a way that it can equate or exceed the amount of interaction, and a sense of co-learning can be developed as in the case of traditional classroom learning. The concern of distance educators is to facilitate the learners by adopting multiple and flexible learning strategies to develop learning environment in the following paradigm.

Encourage Faculty-learners Contact

Frequent student-faculty contacts help the learners to get through rough times; teacher-student contact boosts the moral, motivational and intellectual levels of the learners. Teacher-learner contact optimises the of learning outcomes. Therefore, distance education practitioners need to use the available technology resources to maintain and strengthen the contact by utilising the following facilities.

- *Encourage Students to establish E-mail Contact:* Distance learner's access to the distance educator via e-mail promotes interpersonal communication to overcome learning difficulties. Such communication is effective because it is more personalised, protected, and convenient and intimidating as in the case of face-to face interaction. The practice of e-mail exchange of the distance learners can prove useful if distance educators pay special attention to the language, tone and style of their feedback. Encouraging

reply-notes from the instructors help the students especially when they feel isolated in small communities away from their institutions.

- *Toll-free Telephone to contact Distance Practitioners:* Toll free telephone is another practice which can prove useful to promote learning among the distance learners because this practice helps in extending an important provision of free toll telephone access to their instructors to seek clarifications regarding assignments, examinations, study material, practical *etc*. Toll-free telephone number facility can further prove an effective practice to facilitate distance learners provided a clear message about the instructor's availability to talk with the students in times of need is communicated regularly.

- *Supply Summarised Answers of Frequently Asked Questions:* The practice of communicating answers of the frequently asked questions (FAQ) by the distance education practitioners has significant effect in mastering the concepts by the learners. For instance: many instructors can use technology to promote discussion among the participants in distance learning by providing them with case studies, field projects, study questions, quizzes or other stimuli. Distance educators can monitor the group discussion, examine the themes that surface, and can track who participates and who does not. On the basis of the observation, the instructor can evaluate the student and can send the responses of the frequently asked questions to facilitate the distance learners.

Develop Reciprocity and Co-operation among Students

Psychologically speaking, learning can be enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is a collaborative and social activity rather than working in isolation. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improve thinking and deepn the understanding of the learner. Distance learners are dispersed teaching groups, which

can be made to understand the value of teamwork and collaborative learning to develop cooperation and reciprocity in the following ways:

- *Begin the Classwork by inviting the Students to introduce themselves:* The practice of introducing the distance learners (Via e-mail, Internet conferencing, chatroom or ITV techniques) by the distance education practitioner develops collegiality of the course and helps to promote networking relationship among the distance learners. Having background information on those enrolled in the course allows the students to: a) identify their classmates with similar interests and backgrounds, b) design and carry out collaborative projects, c) exchange ideas about the materials being covered in the course, and d) respond to each other's questions as they arise.

- *Make a Class-list available to all the Students enrolled in the Courses:* The practice of coursewise circulating the e-mail and postal addresses of the distance learners allows the students to contact the classmates who live nearby or share common interests to encourage collaborative learning. Before circulating the addresses of the distance learners, the distance educator must seek the consent of the students otherwise the practice may prove counter productive.

- *Encourage Study-teams enrolled in the Course:* The practice of formulating study-teams by the distance educators makes the distance learners to express thier reactions towards readings of their courses, undertake collaborative projects, travel together for onsite meetings and support each other in many ways.

- *Orient Distance Learners onsite Interaction:* The practice of providing onsite orientation to the distance learners in discussing the course materials that had been sent to them in advance promotes the development and network relationships among the teacher-students. The practice of onsite session scheduled later in the course provides the students an opportunity to present their research, solicit suggestions for further research, and review the progress they have made with regard to the expected outcome of the programme as a whole.

- *Involve Students in sharing Reactions:* The practice of encouraging the students to present their viewpoints in the conference area of online course or in the discussion session of an ITV course, to form relationships that may continue long after they have completed the course.

- *Create Opportunities for Learning in Pairs:* The practice of encouraging distance learners to learn in pairs by distance educator is considered most useful because the distance learners do not have opportunity to interact with one another on a regular basis before, during and after the class meeting. The instructors in distance education courses may form dyads (groups) in which students ask and answer questions on commonly read books, journal articles, or other materials that they can summarise later in an assigned reaction paper.

Use Active Learning Techniques

Studies reveal that learning has activity as its base. In other words, learning is not a spectator sport. The students do not learn much just sitting in the class listening to the teachers, memorising packaged assignments and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn as part of themselves.

- *Incorporate Learning by Doing:* A Variety of methods practised for on-campus courses can be adopted to promote active learning in distance education courses. Students may be given an assignment that requires them to use the Internet together from the information not available in the local library. Working on this type of assignment allows them to: a) learn how to find information on a given topic; b) become aware of the differences in the quality of what is available; c) realise that some of these articles have not received the level of scrutiny that is given to manuscript accepted for publication; d) develop the criteria they will use to discriminate between poor and high quality material and; e) synthesise the findings from their search and present them in a systematic manner. Similar other practices can also be used to incorporate learning by doing through distance mode.

- *Design Assignments to promote Exchange of Ideas among Learners:* The practice is of asking the distance learners to read published articles, prepare critiques and share their drafts with a classmate for paper review. The practice allows them to discuss what they have written, obtain constructive feedback and reflect on the issues raised during the discussion and incorporate significant changes in the critiques they have prepared. These cognitive activities occur within student-formed learning pairs. students fax or mail their assignments to the study partners, exchange details of written contents and then discuss them on phone and receive feedback.

- *Invite Students to give a Demonstration of the acquired Skills:* Innovative practices adopted by distance educators can develop different skills through distance course, viz: a) a Social Work course requires that the students develop skills in conducting interviews with the clients representing, diverse backgrounds; b) a Psychology course includes administering an individual intelligence/personality test; c) a Chemistry course includes analysing a given sample of salt. The ability of the students to perform action to learn subject-based skills can be inculcated among the distance learners by adopting innovative approach and practices in education.

Give Prompt Feedback

The practice of immediate feedback facilitates learning and retention of the distance learners. The effect of prompt feedback is a welcome practice because many distance students experience limited face-to face contacts and they appreciate receiving timely, frequent helpful feedback regarding their progress toward the goals and objectives of the course. They hope to have their work treated with respect, to receive an explanation and justification given for the grade awarded, and to receive a clear explanation how they could improve. Distance learners rightly expect that the feedback will have helpful attitude and will provide them appropriate reassurance about their abilities. Sometimes the additional comments/ specific remarks on the assignments, response sheets, project works etc. enable the distance learners to understand their strengths and weaknesses and prompts them to make

necessary adjustments to achieve the expected learning outcomes. Continuous contact between the instructor and the students also contributes toward a high rate of course completion.

- *React to the Student's First Draft:* Detailed and prompt reaction from the instructor helps the students to learn to revise and rewrite their drafts. The practice of providing prompt feedback to every individual learner is a time consuming process. However, an instructor may save time by encouraging peer feedback, self-evaluations, and shorter papers. The strategy is to create dyads or sub-groups of three or four students and have each pair read and comment each other's papers using the criteria suggested in the course assignments/projects.

- *Encourage Use of Portfolios Document Technique for the Courses:* The practice of providing portfolio to the student is an excellent means of demonstrating what has been accomplished through time, systematic use of portfolio as a practice in distance education enables the students to monitor their progress during the course. The practice of monitoring portfolio of the students academic activities contributes subsequently to increase the student's self-awareness help them monitor their own progress, and enhance, their ability to learn and think. These are indeed important skills that help students become active participants in their own learning.

- *Create Simulations and Quizzes with Inherent Feedback:* Distance learners commonly express lack of awareness of how well they are performing in the course; what concepts and principles they are learning, what areas they are having difficulty in mastering, and what knowledge and skills they are developing. In addition to it a need for self-assessment and prompt feedback, these students also express a need for learning activities that give them an opportunity to apply the abstract concepts and principles covered in the course. To address these problems of the distance learners the instructors should consider using instructional materials that include learning activities such as study questions, case studies with questions, quizzes, review tests

etc. The practice to create simulation conditions in most of the distance education courses can facilitate the comprehension and mastery level of the distance learners by using coursewares.

- **Use E-mail for Person-to-person Feedback:** The e-mail in the practice of prompt feedback is a speedy and economical technological tool in the hands of distance educators. E-mail communication allows instructors to respond to their questions, address their individual learning needs and respond to the concerns that may arise, it does take a considerable time. For this reason, it is wise to create some guidelines to learn to use e-mail to facilitate distance learning courses.

Emphasise Time on the Task

The practice to learn how to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Allocating realistic amount of time means effective learning of the students and effective teaching for faculty.

- **Orient Learners to use Technology to access Learning Resources:** New technologies can dramatically improve student efficiency in performing various tasks. Many students, however, need to train themselves to use technologies to facilitate learning through distance mode.

- **Include Effective Study Skills:** Distance education practitioner needs to suggest the distance learners how to study independently, how to manage time and stress, how to find study buddy and how to make contact with the instructor and the sources available via Internet, libraries or bookstores to improve their performance.

- **Communicate High Expectations:** The practice of communicating high expectation on a continuing basis play a crucial role in sustaining the level of motivation of the distance learners because they do not see instructors on a regular basis and may not be aware of their standards. The practice of communicating high expectations to the distance learners is imperative because: a) the course goals established by the instructors, the instructional materials they select, the teaching method that they use and the assignments they design are not known to the students, b) the goals influence all the activities in the course, and c) encourage the students to show/share rough drafts to the instructor electronically for a useful feedback. Communicating high expectations from distance learners is also important because instructor in distance learning is engaged in self-learning, self-reflection and self-evaluation. The more the students know about themselves as learners, the better they will be at guiding their own learning (Angelo and Cross 1993).

- **Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning:** Principles of psychology speak that different students have different talents and styles of learning. The knowledge of student's current strengths, knowledge and learning preferences will be helpful in selecting the learning resources, methods of delivery, design of assignments, and assessment procedures of the learners, course content and its outcomes. The constrains faced by the instructors also affect the selection of the instructional resources and delivery system. Taking all these factors into consideration it is imperative to mix teaching tools and teaching technology to serve the talented learners through distance mode.

Conclusion

The efficiency of distance education tomorrow will be technology based. Distance education system of today is a separate silos of information which must give way to Internet-centric, process-oriented, systems enabled by workflow and founded on best practices (i.e., a collection of tasks or service that represent the most efficient and effective way to accomplish what must be completed). Net-centric systems would allow for self-service provided through the World Wide Web, as Web browsers (such as Microsoft's Internet Explorer) are intuitive to the ultimate degree (i.e.; they have a zero learning curve). Process-oriented systems like the self-service approach and enabled by workflow analyses, founded on best practices, to support all major on-and-off campus constituencies. Students may be registered for classes, apply for admission, update their personal information, or review degree information. Employees can access class information, submit grades, or advise and register students. Alumni check events, find a classmate, review their pledge history, or check the status of a compeer. ❑