Distance Learning: The Future is Here

Distance Learning, or Distance Education, refers to an educational impulse that has a long history and that can be usefully divided into three broad phases. "Correspondence" schools, operating largely through the postal system, have been in existence in Europe and North America since the late 19th century and were the norm in distance learning until the middle of the 20th century. The second phase in distance learning involved the application of mid-century developments in radio and television broadcasting technology to the field. The current, and rapidly expanding, phase in distance learning is closely tied to innovations in internet and world wide web technologies over the past twenty years, and according to some predictions may fundamentally change the way our educational system works.

While the term "distance learning" is applied to numerous pedagogical scenarios, it generally involves two related features. First, first distance learning implies a pedagogical interaction in which the student and teacher are separated by time and/or space. Second, this separation requires a mediation of the teacher-student relationship by some sort of technology. Familiar forms of technological mediation include: web-based instruction and evaluation, two-way interactive video, and broadcast or closed-circuit television. The most common criticism of such relationships, in terms of the student-side of the equation, is that the "distance" between instructor and student is alienating and potentially dehumanizing, and provokes images of an anonymous educational system in which students simply "plug in" to an overwhelming flow of information. What many proponents insist on, however, and what would thus distinguish the current phase of distance learning from earlier phases, is the high level of interactivity available through these technology-enhanced relationships. In this sense, supporters argue, distance learning models can actually provide closer and more successful pedagogical relationships than traditional models: "when students do not take interest in their learning and are not engaged in a dialogue with educators there is tremendous distance between them, even if they are under the same roof. If teaching is structured to afford students respon-

Grant Deadline Extended

The application deadline for $1000 Curriculum Development Grants, offered by the Graduate School-New Brunswick and the Rutgers Citizenship and Service Education (CASE) program, has been extended to November 27th, 2000. The grants are associated with the launch of a new course in the Spring 2001 semester, Introduction to College Teaching, that will provide a comprehensive overview of the essentials of good teaching and civic engagement. The course will be listed on graduate student transcripts, but will incur no tuition costs or additional student fees. For a full description of the course, consult the October issue of TapTalk or visit the grant website: http://gsnb.rutgers.edu/civic_grant.html. The grant application is also available on the website.

TA Forum

This month’s issue of TapTalk includes the first installment of the TA Forum, a feature we hope to provide regularly in these pages. If you are interested in contributing to the forum, please contact the editor.

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sible, creative and meaningful dialogue with educators, distance decreases."
Ideally, then, distance learning opens up new educational opportunities for students who, for whatever reasons, cannot or do not participate in the "bricks and mortar" college campus.

For many instructors and students, distance learning is easily perceived as something that is perpetually "on the way" but never quite here, an image of higher education at some point in the future. In actuality, the ideas and technologies that drive distance learning already have a major effect on day-to-day college life:

In the 1997-98 academic year, just over one third of the approximately 5,000 two- and four-year postsecondary institutions in the U.S. offered distance education courses, while another fifth planned to do so.... Nearly 80% of the public, four-year institutions and over 60% of the public, two-year institutions offered distance education courses. Rutgers is no exception to this trend; here, as at many institutions, distance learning takes place in a range of formats. At the more familiar end of the range, conventional courses (lectures, discussions, classroom meetings) can be supplemented with elements from the new technologies. The Rutgers Teaching Excellence Center (http://teachx.rutgers.edu), for instance, offers WebCT (or "Web Course Tools"), a set of tools that allow instructors to present course materials online, to set up email and forum groups, and even to offer quizzes and surveys online. At the more transformative end of the range, internet and telecommunications technologies have advanced to the point that entire courses and degree programs are now being offered at a distance. Many colleges and universities now have "virtual" campuses in which students and instructors never meet face-to-face. Rutgers itself has recently launched its own version of this virtual campus: called Rutgers Online (http://ce1766.rutgers.edu/online), the program offers several undergraduate and graduate courses online.

As future faculty members TAs will inherit both the possibilities and the problems that distance learning presents. Several individuals and organizations (including the American Association of University Pro-

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Forum: That TA Feeling...

by Liz deBeer

A friend of mine once attended a workshop entitled, "If Teaching Is Supposed To Feel So Good, Why Do I Feel So Bad?" I can't remember what my friend reported about the workshop, but I still think about the title because teaching does involve coping with some unpleasant feelings.

While I hate to appear ungrateful, there are some aspects of being a TA in particular that make me feel bad. For starters, I feel confused and misrepresented by my job title. There are many Rutgers TAs who, like me, may not really be assisting anyone, but are often solely responsible for preparing lesson plans, delivering lectures, facilitating discussion, and grading papers. Some may even select course materials without direct supervision. I'm not sure what title would make me feel better, but deleting the word "assistant," and highlighting the word "teacher," would be a good start.

As a veteran TA (this is the second degree program where I have taught solo with the title of Teaching Assistant), I also feel bad about teaching classes I have never even taken as a student; I suppose these feelings relate to pure insecurity and my desire to do a good job. The first time that happened, I panicked. Then a senior faculty member reminded me that I knew more about the subject than anyone else in the room, and pointed out the work experience, outside readings, and knowledge I had gained from taking similar courses. His encouragement helped me shift my perspective from intimidation to confidence. Clearly one way to feel better about teaching is to find a good mentor who will offer occasional kind words and good advice.

When I first started teaching, a chill would go down my spine whenever I faced a stack of student essays. I knew which were the best and which were the worst, but differentiating an A from a B+ or a B was unnerving. Experience has eliminated this dread, for I learned to reward students with points based on a finite number of qualities. For example, I might give 25 points for each of the following categories: mechanics, creativity, organization, and following instructions. Students can be forewarned of this rubric, and the results can be educative. While I won't suggest I enjoy grading stacks of papers, my system helps me feel more in control.

Probably most TAs (and perhaps all instructors) fear being "unmasked" in front of a class of young scholars, being revealed not up to the task of teaching. Misspelling a word on the blackboard, or worse, balking at an undergraduate's question, are just two examples of situations where one can appear unqualified and potentially lose authority. Having taught college classes for several years, I have learned to accept that no one is truly a sage. Further, I feel that it's OK to admit your ignorance as long as you're willing to get the answers by the next class. In fact, I have learned to share my own quest for knowledge by showing students how I found out the answer to their tough questions. I don't feel great when I make a mistake, but I don't feel like a complete failure either. Of course, this philosophy works as long as instructors are not stumped too often.

I feel bad about many more things, including students who complain about their grades or the boring readings, or students who cut my classes. But, as the title of the workshop suggested, there are parts of teaching that honestly do feel pretty good. I enjoy the thrill of instructing bright students in courses that encourage mutual creativity. I actually have fun devising lesson plans, and I truly enjoy, and benefit from,
the challenge of devising much of my course material. I am proud of the job I do. At the end of each semester, I love reflecting on what my students have learned from me as well as what I have learned from them. In all, teaching is something I value, and thus the good feelings generally outweigh the bad ones; it’s my dissertation that really gets under my skin.

Liz DeBeer is a graduate student and TA in the Department of Teaching and Learning, Graduate School of Education.

TAP Calendar

11/9  Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 10:00 a.m.¹
11/9  Civility in the Classroom - Workshop at the Graduate School-New Brunswick, 12:00 noon, 25 Bishop Place, College Avenue Campus
11/21 Change in Designation of Class Days: Thursday Classes
11/22 Change in Designation of Class Days: Friday Classes
11/22  Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 1:00 p.m.¹
11/23-11/26 Thanksgiving Recess
12/5  Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 1:00 p.m.¹
12/13  Regular Classes End
12/23  Winter Recess Begins
1/16  Spring Semester Begins
1/24  Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 10:00 a.m.¹
2/8   Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 1:00 p.m.¹
2/20  Dissertation and Thesis Workshop: 10:00 a.m.¹

¹ Please call 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.

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