Digital Media Studies

In Your Face in Cyberspace - New Paradigm for Online Learning

Thesis Project Proposal

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Project concept

The promise of new technologies and the digitization of knowledge are having a major impact on education. Traditional universities and new dot-com companies are jumping on the distance education bandwagon, competing to develop distance education programs that take advantage of new and improved methods of distance education delivery. Technology enthusiasts predict that as the trend toward the digitization of knowledge continues, the move from campus-based learning to Web-based distance education will be inevitable (Leonard, 2000).

My project will explore distance education in higher education, from its origins in text-based correspondence courses, to its current foundations in digital technologies. Community colleges and university educational outreach units have been delivering courses via a distance for decades. The "digital revolution" is having a major impact on traditional educational systems, as well as the creation of new "virtual universities" and for-profit educational institutions. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) most recent survey on distance education reported that from 1994-1995 to 1997-1998, the number of distance education degree programs increased by 72 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The goal of this project is to create an online distance education course based on proven educational models and sound instructional design. I will present my research on distance education in the form of a web-based course. The course will be entitled "Introduction to Distance Education" and will incorporate best practices of web-based pedagogy while providing an introduction and overview of distance education.

This project will incorporate the critical, graphic design, and technical skills gleaned from my coursework through the creation of the course content, and the design and development of the course website. The target audience will be faculty and staff from

community colleges, universities, and for-profit educational institutions throughout the United States and Canada. The course will be created based on the assumption that students will be geographically dispersed and unable to meet at a specific location. Course development will begin with the following traditional course planning tools:

- Course description
- Syllabus
- Course Objectives
- Learning Outcomes
- Lesson plans and Implementation
- Course web site design and development
- Assessment

The course will be delivered online primarily through a central course web site. Although many educational institutions have online courseware (Blackboard, WebCT, e-education, etc.) options to help faculty create an online course, I will develop my course without the benefit of commercially developed software. My goal is to exploit the power of the Internet by integrating institutionally independent courseware tools that are available on the Web. Because students enrolled in this course will be affiliated with different educational institutions, I will build my online course with tools that are available to everyone for free, or at a nominal fee, regardless of their institutional affiliation. The same tools used in this online course can be applied to any distance education system.

The course web site will be designed to provide a blended learning approach, which integrates a variety of media to deliver the content and create opportunities for student interaction. The following tools will be integrated into the web site to facilitate learning, communication and collaboration:

- Weekly hypertext lectures
- Weekly summary of student tasks/objectives
- Online interactive quizzes and exercises
- Guest speakers
- Group and team projects
- Asynchronous and synchronous Class Discussions

- Participation in Epic Learning Live Online Seminars (synchronous online courseware)

In addition to weekly hypertext lessons and custom course readings, the following two textbooks will be required:

Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education, Smaldino, Albright, Svacek, Simonson, Prentice Hall, 1999.

Issues in Web-Based Pedagogy - A Critical Primer, ed. Robert A. Cole. The Greenwood Educators' Reference Collection, 2000.

Students who take this course should be able to:

1. Define Distance Education
2. Explain the history and theories of distance education
3. Compare and contrast different modes of distance education delivery
4. Describe current debates in the distance education field
5. Name major players involved in distance education
6. Compare and contrast course management platforms
7. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of distance education
8. Discuss current issues and challenges facing distance education
9. Effectively communicate and collaborate at a distance

Personal Statement of project goals

The overall goal of the project is to present a comprehensive overview of Distance Education through the development of an online course about distance education. The course will apply the basic principles of adult learning theory, and focus on student-centered activities. The course will incorporate proven examples of web-based teaching strategies specifically designed for the online education environment. It will provide ample opportunities for student-to-student and faculty-to-student interaction. Assignments will be designed to provide students with collaborative and interactive learning activities.

I have worked in higher education for the last twelve years and have personally experienced the opportunities and challenges that new digital technologies have had on education. My interest in distance education began with my involvement in a project from my "Critical Approaches to Digital Media" course. In that course my group researched and designed a web site on technology in education.

I have been an active member of a major distance education organization, Telecommunications Cooperative of Colorado (Telecoop), since 1998. As a member of Telecoop, I meet monthly with distance education representatives from community colleges and universities in Colorado to discuss distance education issues. I have attended the last three annual Telecoop Distance Education conferences. I have also attended the past three Teaching with Technology (TWT) conferences sponsored by the University of Colorado. My participation in Telecoop and these conferences has contributed to my knowledge and expertise in the field of distance education.

Through my courses in Digital Media Studies, I have used distance education as a research topic for course projects. I developed a paper and did a class presentation on distance education for my "Technical Foundations of Digital Media" course.   Most recently, I created an online Distance Education Documentary for my final project in my "Web Building and Site Management" course. Two courses I took in education, "Use of Technology in Postsecondary Institutions" and "Using Technology to Maximize Student Learning," also provided a foundation for this project.

I have also experienced distance education as a student. I have taken two web-based distance education courses, one from a private university and the other from a community college non-credit program.

Finally, my experience as an instructional designer in the University of Denver's Office for Educational Technology will assist me in the development and design of this project. My job is to help faculty effectively integrate technology into their teaching at the university. I am responsible for much of the system administration and training of the university's online course management system, Blackboard. I am familiar with other commercially developed course software, and informed about current educational technology trends and tools available for use in higher education.

Project outline

Proven strategies about how to create a successful distance education course will be integrated into this course. Anecdotal evidence and studies indicate that online courses have higher dropout rates compared to traditional, campus-based courses. Several administrators concur that completion rates for distance education courses are generally 10 to 20 percent

lower than in traditional face-to-face courses (Carr, 2000). There are many theories about why drop out rates are higher for distance education courses. Some distance educators attribute higher attrition rates in online courses to demographics, distance education students are often non-traditional students who have family and work obligations that detract from their courses. Experts speculate that first-time distance education students drop out due to the unexpected rigor of an online course. Other common reasons cited for higher drop out rates in online courses are technology problems, lack of support, poor instructional design, lack of interaction, lack of personal ties to others students and the instructor, poor use of media, and inexperienced instructors. (Frankola 2001, Powell 2000, Carr, 2000).

I plan to address many of these issues in the development and design of my course. A high level of communication and collaboration will be a very important element of this course. Chickering and Gamson note that good practice encourages cooperation among students, and that sharing one's ideas and responding to others' improves thinking and deepens understanding (Testa, 2000). Students will work together on group and team projects and be expected to regularly participate in both synchronous and asynchronous class discussions. I will build multiple opportunities for student-to-student and faculty-to-student interaction and communication.

Personal feedback from the instructor was NYUonline students' top choice of what they thought would help them complete an online course (Frankola, 2001). I plan to devise a system that will automatically generate personal feedback to students based on how much time students spend on assignments, participate in class discussions, etc. Telephone, e-mail, one-on-one chat sessions, and fax technologies will be used to enhance faculty/student interaction. Self-assessment tests and interactive exercises will provide immediate feedback to students.

The course will be presented using a blended approach to distance delivery. Print, video, audio, animation, hypertext, synchronous and asynchronous class discussion, and email technologies will all be utilized to teach the course. I will take full advantage of resources and information available on the Web. Several distance education experts will participate in the course as virtual guest speakers. Guest speakers will be scheduled to talk to the class about distance education issues, through the discussion board or the real-time chat room. Finally, students will be required to participate in live online seminars about distance education. The live online seminars are presented free on the Web from epiclearning. Examples of possible seminar topics include:

- Maintaining a Student-Centered Focus in a Web-base Learning Environment
- Preparing Yourself to be an Online Teacher
- Building Learning Communities in Virtual Spaces

Students will also be required to review and discuss one of epic's archived seminars.

The project title, "In Your Face in Cyberspace – A New Paradigm for Online Learning" illustrates my plan to significantly increase the amount of communication and interactivity that will be built into this course. Fax, phone, chat sessions, and email will be used extensively to keep in constant touch with the students in an effort to increase faculty-to-student communications.

In addition, more opportunities for student collaboration will be integrated into the course compared to most other campus-based and online courses. Many students who take this course will be non-traditional, so constructivist-learning approaches will be used to promote extensive dialogue and community building among students in the class. Students will be encouraged to share their personal experiences and learn from one another. Students will be expected to work with other classmates on team and group assignments throughout

the duration of the course.   These collaboration and communication strategies will be used to create a robust and connected virtual learning community within the course.

Although many web-based courses incorporate similar strategies and tools to increase feedback, communication, and collaboration within their online courses, this course will go beyond "traditional" methods.   Course statistics will be utilized to automatically generate messages to students based on the amount of time they spend within different areas of the course. For example, if a student doesn't complete a quiz within the established timeframe, an automated email from the instructor will be sent to that student to remind them to complete the quiz. Automatic reminders will be sent to all students prior to due dates for each assignment. This "in your face" communication strategy may help alleviate the feeling of isolation many distance education students sometimes experience.

Providing students with clear, concise instructions on how to navigate the course web site is critical in the design of an online course. Using explicit criteria for grading online interactions, providing feedback to the students on their participation performance, and a well-organized and consistent online discussion and chat room policy will be developed to help students effectively participate in class discussions (Rutenbeck, 2000).

Because students may have different levels of technology experience, one goal is to create a course orientation that explains site navigation and reviews the technology requirements for the course. A welcome video will also be included in the orientation section so students have the opportunity to hear and see their instructor. The course will offer a wide range of low and high bandwidth options to access course materials to accommodate students with varying Internet speeds and processor capabilities. Students will have the option of downloading printable-friendly versions of course content. My goal is

give to students all the tools and direction they need to help them succeed in an online course. (See Site Map).

The following topics will be covered in the course:

Session 1   Foundations of Distance Education
- Definitions, History and Theories of Distance Education

Session 2   Research and Distance Education

Session 3   Instructional Design for Distance Education
- Overview of Learning Theories
- Strengths and Weaknesses of Current Practice

Session 4   Current Issues and Debates about Distance Education
- Digital Diploma Mills/Lack of creditability of distance education programs
- Copyright and Intellectual Property Issues

Session 5   Current Distance Education Players & Platforms
- Modes of delivery
- E-business/Virtual Universities
- Platforms

Session 6   Assessment Issues for Distance Education

Session 7   Web-based communication and collaboration

Session 8   Challenges of Distance Education
- Lower Retention Rates
- Digital Divide

Session 9   The Future of Distance Education

Session 10   Summary/Group Presentations

The technical skills required to complete the project include:

- Macromedia Dreamweaver
- Macromedia Flash
- Adobe Photoshop
- Adobe Premiere
- Adobe Fireworks
- Experience managing discussion board and chat room

Research Sources

- *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education.* Smaldino, Albright, Svacek, Simonson, Prentice Hall, 1999.

- *Issues in Web-Based Pedagogy - A Critical Primer***,** ed. Robert A. Cole. The Greenwood Educators' Reference Collection, 2000.

- *Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, Trends and Opportunities.* Lau, Linda. Idea Group Publishing, 2000.

- Educational and Technology Journals/Periodicals

- Interviews/conversations with distance education practitioners and students

- Conference materials and online seminars

- Web sites

- White Papers on Distance Education

- Other distance education courses

- Commercial online course management tools

Project timeline:

Phase 1: Develop and submit Project Proposal (Summer/Fall 2001)
Phase 2: Research subject matter and develop course materials (Summer/Fall 2001)
Phase 3: Design web site (Fall 2001)
Phase 4: Proposal Presentation (November 2001)
Phase 5: Apply for Graduation (November 2001)
Phase 6: Mid-project update (December 2001)
Phase 7: Complete Post-Production Evaluation (January 2002)
Phase 8: Project Presentation (Mid February) - ***Graduate March 2002***

References

Carr, Sarah, "As Distance Education Comes of Age, the Challenge is Keeping the Students." *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* 11 February 2000.

Frankola, Karen, "The e-Learning Taboo: High Dropout Rates in Online Courses." *Syllabus*, June 2001, Vo. 14, no. 11, p. 14-16.

Leonard, David C. "The Web, the Millennium, and the Digital Evolution of Distance Education." *Issues in Web-Based Pedagogy – A Critical Primer.* Ed. Robert A. Cole. Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., 2000. 23-34.

Powell, Al. "Keeping the Students." E-mail to Telecoop listserv. 14 February 2000. (Al is the Director of Distance Education Development at CSU).

Rutenbeck, Jeff. "Teaching Issues - Center for Teaching and Learning Blackboard Workshop." 3 Nov. 2000. http://www.du.edu/~jrutenbe/ctl/teaching.htm.

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