Challenges of Distance Education

Educators face numerous challenges when implementing distance education programs. Copyright, intellectual property rights, technology issues, digital divide, student services, assessment, retention rates, resistance, faculty workload and compensation, and legitimacy issues are just a few of the challenges associated with developing distance education courses and programs.

This lesson summarizes the following key challenges associated with distance education:

- Copyright challenge
- Student services challenge
- Retention challenge
- Legitimacy challenge

Copyright challenge

A major challenge of instructors and others involved in developing and offering courses at a distance is deciphering current US copyright laws. Online educators must be informed about what external material they may legally include in a distance education course and be cognizant of current copyright laws.

In a traditional course, many faculty create course packs, a collection of journal articles and book chapters the students purchase at the bookstore. Someone at the university is responsible for obtaining permissions from publishers for using this material for educational purposes. In an online course, instructors may want to make these materials available to the students in a digital format. Do the same copyright and fair use guidelines apply to materials posted digitally?

Instructors also want to add other types of instructional media to an online course such as video, audio and images. Recognizing what materials may be used on the Internet without permission, and what requires copyright approval, is a challenge for distance educators.

Below are some common copyright myths outlined by Simonson in chapter 5:

Myth 1: A work has to be published and registered with the U.S. Copyright Office to receive copyright protection.
Myth 2: If it does not have a copyright notice, it is public domain.
Myth 3: Anything on the Internet is public domain.
Myth 4: A work copyrighted in another country is public domain in the United States.
Myth 5: The doctrine of "fair use" means that copyrighted materials can be used in an educational setting without permission.
Myth 6: A teacher can use videotape in a distance education course under "fair use."

The U.S. Congress recently addressed copyright issues in distance education with the passage of the TEACH Act. The TEACH Act specifically addresses educators rights to display works for digital distance education. The TEACH Act enacts many of the recommendations from the Report on copy right and digital distance education conducted by the Copyright Office which applied mostly to closed circuit television environments and did not fit the present distance learning technologies.

Janis Bruwelheide shared a few highlights from the TEACH Act in a November 4, 2002 email:

- The new, improved 110(2) permits performance and display of almost all types of works. For distance learning situations, think "clips and snips" which represent "reasonable and limited portions" for audiovisual works and dramatic, musical works.

- The receiving location language has been expanded and no longer limits transmission of content to classrooms devoted to instruction and similar sites. Distance learners may be reached at any site by accredited nonprofit institutions as stated in the language that the benefits apply only to a "government body or an accredited nonprofit educational institution."

- Digitization of analog works in order to facilitate digital transmission is permissible for some digital works IF the work is not available already in digital format and as long as it is free from TPM (technological protection measures) prohibiting Section 110 applications.

- TEACH allows retention of content and student access for a time and allows for the copying and storage needed for technical maintenance for digital transmissions systems.

- TEACH clarifies that participants in authorized distance learning situations and programs are not liable for infringement for anytransitory or temporary reproductions that happen in the automatic technical processes of digital transmission.

The TEACH Act is not the final word regarding copyright guidelines for distance education. There are still options to be explored outside of the TEACH act which might apply to situations not covered by the act. These include previous educational copyright protection laws such as fair use and permissions, and creative use of library resources.

The copyright issue is still very complex and instructors need to be careful when using copyrighted materials in their distance education classes. Refer to the links at the end of this lesson for more detailed information on the TEACH Act.

Student services challenge

Providing adequate support systems for distance students is a struggle for many institutions. Distance students are often at a disadvantage because they may not have access to important student services such as the campus bookstore, financial aid, registration, tutors, orientation, library services, and academic advisors.

UCLA Extension has an extensive students services area on their web site where students can login and access a software orientation, textbook information, and a step-by-step guide to get started.

Each online course at UCLA Extension has its own Course Manager who acts as a primary contact for questions or problems that involve the mechanics of taking an online class. UCLA extension also provides live, 24-hour free technical support available by phone seven days a week.

Colorado Community Colleges Online (CCCOnline) offers their student's access to SMARTTHINKING, a web-based tutoring service. The SMARTTHINKING service supplements their existing academic support services by offering real-time online tutoring and homework help for core courses and skills 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

University of Maryland University College has built extensive financial aid resources online. Students can apply for financial aid online and search for scholarship opportunities. UMUC also provides an extensive distance education orientation for their online students.

The student services challenge in distance education was addressed by a FISPE-funded LAPP (Learning Anytime, Anywhere Partnership) grant entitled "Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-based Student Services for Online Learners." The purpose of the project was to develop homegrown and commercial student services online. The project developed a comprehensive list of student services resources hosted on the WCET web site. The project focuses on the following core student services:

- Academic Advising
- Orientation
- Career Planning
- Financial Aid
- Library Services
- Tutoring
- Personal Counseling

This site also includes resources on student services and guidelines for creating student services online. It is critical to provide these web-based student support systems to distance students who are unable to visit the traditional brick and mortar student services on campus.

Retention challenge

Anecdotal evidence and research 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.

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.

Gibson reported three categories of factors that may explain and predict attrition in distance courses:

- **Student factors**: educational preparation, motivational and persistence attributes, student academic self-concept;
- **Situational factors**: family and employer support, changes in life circumstances; and
- **Educational system factors**: quality and difficulty of instructional materials, provision of tutorial support

According to some researchers, the higher dropout rates in distance courses suggest academic failure. Many educators imply that the high drop rates should disqualify online education as a high-quality option to traditional education.

Diaz argues that the mere fact of high drop out rates is not necessarily indicative of non-success. He notes that online students often outperform traditional students when success is measured by overall classroom performance.

Diaz doesn't believe drop out rates should be a measure of success or failure. He contends that higher drop out rates may be due to the typical demographics associated with online learners (older students who often have outside work and family obligations). He argues that more research needs to be done on why students drop out of online courses, and that until then, researchers should not use drop out rates to discredit online education.

Legitimacy challenge

The debate of the legitimacy of courses delivered at a distance has been a major challenge since the early days of correspondence education. Distance educators have struggled with the issue of legitimacy because the reputation of distance courses have been tarnished due to problems with many fly-by-night distance programs that offer bogus degrees and certifications.

Distance education has recently gained a more favorable reputation with advances made in communication technologies. The ability to move from strictly text-based correspondence courses to more interactive online courses has greatly improved the status of distance education.

Critics still argue that a quality education is not possible in a distance environment. Often, distance education is viewed as a second-class education compared to the traditional face-to-face educational model.

Distance educators continually must address the respectability and image of distance programs. During the dot-com boom, many new players jumped onto the distance

education bandwagon. Accredited academic institutions supported many of these new online ventures.

However, many were not affiliated with legitimate educations institutions and used unscrupulous methods to recruit students. David Noble coined the term "Digital Diploma Mills" which he defines as the distribution of digitized course material online, without the active participation of the professor. He argues that the automation of education is a regressive trend in higher education.

The term digital diploma mill has been used to describe online distance providers that are actually online businesses who have no background or affiliations with an institution of higher learning. Diploma mills often prey on international students who may not understand how accreditation works or its importance.

Many states are trying to regulate online colleges and programs that lack accreditation. Regulators are struggling to crack down on these unaccredited institutions because they can relocate quickly. As distance education continues to move into the mainstream of accredited and prestigious educational institutions, the questions about the legitimacy of distance education should diminish in importance.

Lesson Five Links:

>   Readings Summary Slideshow
>   Self-assessment quiz
>   Lesson three assignments

Supplemental Online Resources:

Changing Landscape of Distance Education

Teach Act Resources:

- National Education Association
- Copyright Crash Course

References

Bruwelheide, Janis. "Teach Act." E-mail to WCET listserv. November 4, 2002.

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

Diaz, David P. "Online Drop Rates Revisited." Technology Source, May/June 2002.

Library of Congress Copyright Office. "Copyright and Digital Distance Education. <http://www.copyright.gov/disted/>

Noble, David. "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education." <http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue3_1/noble/>

Simonson, Michael, & Smaldino, Sharon, & Albright, Michael, & Zvacek, Susan. Teaching and Learning at a Distance, Foundations of Distance Education. Prentice-Hall Inc. 2000.

The Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET). "Beyond the Administrative Core: Creating Web-based Students Services for Online Learners." Last Updated: 4/10/03. <http://www.wcet.info/projects/laap/index.asp>