

Distance Ed for Dummies: A Love-Hate Relationship!

**A Presentation for the National Education Conference of the
Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network
November 3, 2009**

**Susan Kincaid, Ph.D., HS-BCP
Assistant Professor, Western Washington University**

Tips for Success in an Internet Setting

1. The Internet is not stagnant. The Internet is not stagnant. The Internet is not stagnant.
2. Know the players. Instructor... Learners... Technology
3. Maximize the flexibility provided by the Internet.
4. Turn the key, start the engine, and drive the technology.
5. Adjust information and assignments for the technology, time factors, and the distance between learners.
6. Stay with the syllabus! Be organized and stay organized!
7. Engage with learners.
8. Rules for reading.
9. Don't forget other ways of communicating.
10. Set boundaries!

Topic 1: Challenges of facilitating online courses such as group and individual counseling to maximize learning and provide assessment of student learning

Examples of Difficult Content

- Group facilitation
- Counseling
- Diversity & social justice (story - prejudice)
- Story: tying to learning outcomes

Four questions to ask:

- a) Do I have to be in the room for the student to master the outcomes?
If the answer is "yes," don't offer the course or offer it as a hybrid.
- b) If I do not have to be in the room, then what has to be available to the student to learn?
- c) What is in proximity to the student that can be brought into a virtual learning environment?
- d) How will I assess student learning / outcome mastery?

Topic 2: Hybrid formats - combining fact-to-face seat time with other models of learning, particularly web-based models.

If the instructor needs to be present for student mastery of outcomes, consider a hybrid course that combines face-to-face with online learning.

- TIME: Evenings, late afternoon, weekends
- PLACE: Campus, proximity to students, group geographically
- CONSIDER: Study groups, stipends for instructors or mentors at multiple locations
- TECHNOLOGY: Telephone conference calls, 2-way interactive TV, SKYPEs, Combining (e.g., telephone with students at their computers viewing slides embedded in courseware)

Topic 3: Factors that Facilitate and Hinder Learning in Web-Based Format

Delphi Study published with UMI Dissertation (see reference at end). Three groups, one of faculty, one of students, one combined. Faculty participants had taught an average of more than six sections of web-based courses, and student participants had taken an average of nine web-based courses from seven different instructors. Participants were students and faculty in a totally web-based human services program. Factors are divided below into three tables separating students, instructor, and pedagogical issues.

Student Traits and Behaviors That Facilitate or Hinder Learning in Web-Based Courses

Facilitate

- Students are self-directed, motivated, enthusiastic learners, and proactive in taking responsibility for the learning environment.
- Students are actively and frequently engaged in discussions.
- Students read and respond to instructor postings and directions in a timely manner.
- Students integrate information from course resources and texts in their postings/dialogue.
- There are no silent observers; every student participates and can set or influence the direction of the conversation.

Hinder

- Students lack skills, experience or aptitude in technology, and are focused on learning the technology instead of the course content.
 - Students express negative attitudes about feeling forced to take web-based courses in order to complete degree requirements.
 - Students are not aware of services provided by the institution such as the library, writing center, disability services, and technology support.
 - Students feel isolated and lack acknowledgement or interaction with peers and/or instructor.
 - Students and/or instructor use such poor spelling and grammar that it is difficult to determine the meaning of postings.
 - Physical limitations such as fatigue, backaches, and eyestrain.
-

Many of the factors cited for students and instructors are identical or at least similar to issues in face-to-face settings. One advantage in face-to-face settings is the culture of learning and the expectations of students and instructors for how to be and behave in a classroom setting. The space itself has a long tradition of desks, chairs, and whiteboards. In other words, students entering a physical classroom space do not need to be told to sit in a desk and look at the whiteboard when the instructor is using it. Students know where to look and how to listen.

Instructor Traits and Behaviors That Facilitate or Hinder Learning in Web-Based Courses

Facilitate

- Instructor is actively and frequently engaged in dialogue and responds promptly, appropriately, and thoroughly to student inquiries, questions, and comments.
- Instructor provides prompt feedback on assignments and required participation.
- Instructor facilitates a learning environment that is based on respect for diverse personalities, experiences, backgrounds, and knowledge of students including open and honest communication, creativity, imagination, collaboration, and courtesy.

Hinder

- Instructors lack the skills, experience, or aptitude in technology to manage/teach the course.
 - Instructor is not available by email, chat, phone or face-to-face for one-to-one meetings with students.
 - The instructor changes his or her expectations during the quarter.
 - Instructor fails to focus and direct the class around course content and competencies.
 - Instructor fails to manage the course website in a consistent and timely manner.
 - Instructor is overly critical of some students, overly involved with some students, and non-responsive or under-involved with others.
 - Students and/or instructor use such poor spelling and grammar that it is difficult to determine the meaning
-

- of postings.
 - Instructor imposes arbitrary rulings such as when students can post and whether they can edit their comments that stop students from working at the best time of day for them or in the best way for them.
-

In web-based courses, the instructor must not only teach the course, but also build a culture of learning and learning community in an unfamiliar setting. It is clear that students feel the more organized the instructor is, the easier it is for them to learn. Participation is stronger, both in quality and quantity, when students are specific in what they require and when they require it. It is possible to be intentional in building a culture where students learn from each other and assist each other with the technology.

It is interesting that students rated instructor feedback fairly low in facilitating their learning, but they rated instructor engagement in dialogue as one of the three highest factors that facilitated learning online. What is the student paying for? What is the instructor paid to provide? It is also important to note that instructors who do not understand the technology and how to effectively organize and use it were considered hindrances to learning. Properly used, technology is effective in facilitating learning. The less students have to think about the technology, the more effective they rate the instructor.

In our program, we had norms for “listening” online. Any time students or faculty were offended or had a negative emotional response to the comments of others, both students and instructors were encouraged to read the comment aloud using different tones of voice until they found one that was not offensive to them. The tone with which we read comments is generally more about the reader than the originator of the comment.

Some issues are more related to the technology and courseware than to the actions of students or instructors. Students want to know how the courseware has been used to organize materials and they do NOT want changes during the quarter. Successful web-based students are themselves extremely organized and carefully plan how to balance school with other commitments. One might conclude that the more invisible the technology is, the easier it is to learn.

Pedagogy, Instructional Design, and Technological Factors That Facilitate or Hinder Learning in Web-Based Courses.

Facilitate

- The format of threaded forums allows time for individual reflection before responding without interrupting, over-talking, and/or regard to physical attributes or stereotypes.
- The instructor manages the course space to maximize the quality of student participation (i.e., dividing the class into smaller discussion groups, limiting the size of postings and the number of forums in which participation is required, and providing a separate forum for socializing that is not related to the course content).
- Web-based learning is combined with face-to-face meetings. (rated lowest).
- Assignments include reflection on face-to-face contextual learning experiences such as community service, skill practice, internship, or work.
- Guest speakers are used to provide additional content.
- Assignments are directly linked to the course objectives and competencies, and require critical

Hinder

- The workload is not adjusted to compensate for the additional time spent reading and writing online.
 - Small group projects are assigned that are complicated, take too much time, and divert attention from the course content to technology.
 - There is a lack of adequate technical support including downtime of servers and limitations of software.
-

thinking skills such as problem-solving, investigation, interviewing, and analysis.

- Small group assignments are used to increase learning, cohesion, and connectedness among class members.
- Additional websites are used as a resource to increase visual stimulation, supplement reading, and to provide current and diverse information and research.

Topic 4: Ideas to facilitate effective supervision of internships that are part of on-line courses or programs.

- Handbook including necessary forms and concepts, essential skills, and other information.
- Make the handbook available online in PDF format so student can download and give to field instructor.
- Use of contracts that are specific in what is required of educational institution and instructor, student/intern, and field instructor.
- Build relationship with the field instructors.
- Perform site visits by phone, one before contract is finalized.
- Have an online seminar class attached to the internship where students are required to check in weekly to report what they have been doing and engage in dialogue with each other. Protect confidentiality by requiring students to use pseudonyms.

References

American Distance Education Consortium. ADEC Guiding Principles for Distance Teaching and Learning. http://www.adec.edu/admin/papers/distance-teaching_principles.html

Kincaid, S. O. (2003). Web-Based courses in human services: A comparison of student and faculty perceptions of factors that facilitate or hinder learning. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64 (07), 2403. (UMI No. 3098041)

Kincaid, S.O. (1999). *Teaching Difficult Content on the Internet*, Paper (7 pages) presented at the annual international virtual conference, Trends and Issues in Online Instruction, Conference proceedings. Available December 11, 2007, at: http://kolea.kcc.hawaii.edu/tcc/tcc_conf97/pres/kincaid.html

No significant difference Phenomenon, *Thomas L. Russell, emeritus, North Carolina State University*, Available at: <http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/>

Susan.Kincaid@wwu.edu

Presenter: Susan Kincaid, Ph.D. Susan Kincaid, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Human Services Program at Western Washington University where she initiated and served as director of the Cyber Site (web-based) human services program for 13 years. The Cyber program was a baccalaureate degree completion program with less than a 1% attrition rate. Students from across Washington State were enrolled and successfully completed. Dr. Kincaid has a professional background in felony case management, chemical dependency counseling, family and youth counseling, and narrative therapy for families with victims of homicide. She teaches Diversity and Social Justice Dynamics, Organizational, Community, and Global Systems; as well as courses in case management, counseling, and interviewing at baccalaureate and master degree levels. Her research interests include narrative and social justice, as well as uses of technology in human services and learning. Research and publications include an extensive Delphi study on factors that facilitate and hinder learning in web-based environments, a CSHSE monograph on technology and human services, and a national survey regarding technology in human services. Dr. Kincaid also serves as Vice President of Accreditation for the Council for Standards in Human Service Education.