

Profile of the Distant Student

The primary role of the student is to learn. Under the best of circumstances, this challenging task requires motivation, planning, and the ability to analyze and apply the information being taught. In a distance education setting, the process of student learning is more complex for several reasons (Schuemer, 1993):

- ❑ Many distance-education students are older, have jobs, and families. They must coordinate the different areas of their lives which influence each other — their families, jobs, spare time, and studies.

- ❑ Distant students have a variety of reasons for taking courses. Some students are interested in obtaining a degree to qualify for a better job. Many take courses to broaden their education and are not really interested in completing a degree.

- ❑ In distance education, the learner is usually isolated. The motivational factors arising from the contact or competition with other students is absent. The student also lacks the immediate support of a teacher who is present and able to motivate and, if necessary, give attention to actual needs and difficulties that crop up during study.

- ❑ Distant students and their teachers often have little in common in terms of background and day-to-day experiences and therefore, it takes longer for student-teacher rapport to develop. Without face-to-face contact distant students may feel ill at ease with their teacher as an "individual" and uncomfortable with their learning situation.

- ❑ In distance education settings, technology is typically the conduit through which information and communication flow. Until the teacher and students become comfortable with the technical delivery system, communication will be inhibited.

Distant Students' Development as Learners

Beginning students may have some difficulty determining what the demands of a course of academic study actually are because they do not have the support of an immediate peer group, ready access to the instructor, or familiarity with the technology being used for delivery of the distance-education course. They may be unsure of themselves and their learning. Morgan (1991) suggests that distant students who are not confident about their learning tend to concentrate on memorizing facts and details in order to complete assignments and write exams. As a result, they end up with a poor understanding of course material. He views memorization of facts and details as a "surface approach" to learn-

ing and summarizes it as follows:

Surface approach:

- ❑ Focus on the "signs" (e.g., the text or instruction itself).
- ❑ Focus on discrete elements.
- ❑ Memorize information and procedures for tests.
- ❑ Unreflectively associate concepts and facts.
- ❑ Fail to distinguish principles from evidence, new information from old.
- ❑ Treat assignments as something imposed by the instructor.
- ❑ External emphasis focusing on the demands of assignments and exams leading to a knowledge that is cut-off from everyday reality.

Distant students need to become more selective and focused in their learning in order to master new information. The focus of their learning needs to shift them from a "surface approach" to a "deep approach". Morgan (1991) summarizes this approach as follows:

Deep Approach:

- ❑ Focus on what is "signified" (e.g., the instructor's arguments).
- ❑ Relate and distinguish new ideas and previous knowledge.
- ❑ Relate concepts to everyday experience.
- ❑ Relate and distinguish evidence and argument.
- ❑ Organize and structure content.
- ❑ Internal emphasis focusing on how instructional material relates to everyday reality.

Improving Distant Learning

The shift from "surface" to "deep" learning is not automatic. Brundage, Keane, and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult students and their instructors must face and overcome a number of challenges before learning takes place including: becoming and staying responsible for themselves; "owning" their strengths, desires, skills, and needs; maintaining and increasing self-esteem; relating to others; clarifying what is learned; redefining what legitimate knowledge is; and dealing with content. These challenges are considered in relation to distance education:

- ❑ **"Becoming and staying responsible for themselves."** High motivation is required to complete distant courses because the day-to-day contact with teachers and other students is typically lacking. Instructors can help motivate distant students by providing consistent and timely feedback, encouraging discussion among students, being well prepared for class, and by encouraging and reinforcing effective student study habits.

□ **"Owning one's strengths, desires, skills, needs."** Students need to recognize their strengths and limitations. They also need to understand their learning goals and objectives. The instructor can help distant students to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Providing opportunities for students to share their personal learning goals and objectives for a course helps to make learning more meaningful and increases motivation.

□ **"Maintaining and increasing self-esteem."** Distant students may be afraid of their ability to do well in a course. They are balancing many responsibilities including employment and raising children. Often their involvement in distance education is unknown to those they work with and ignored by family members. Student performance is enhanced if learners set aside time for their instructional activities and if they receive family support in their academic endeavors. The instructor can maintain student self-esteem by providing timely feedback. It is critical for teachers to respond to students' questions, assignments, and concerns in a personalized and pleasant manner, using appropriate technology such as fax, phone, or computer. Informative comments that elaborate on the individual student's performance and suggest areas for improvement are especially helpful.

□ **"Relating to others."** Students often learn most effectively when they have the opportunity to interact with other students. Interaction among students typically leads to group problem solving. When students are unable to meet together, appropriate interactive technology such as E-mail should be provided to encourage small group and individual communication. Assignments in which students work together and then report back or present to the class as a whole, encourage student-to-student interaction. Ensure clear directions and realistic goals for group assignments (Burge, 1993).

□ **"Clarifying what is learned."** Distant students need to reflect on what they are learning. They need to examine the existing knowledge frameworks in their heads and how these are being added to or changed by incoming information. Examinations, papers, and class presentations provide opportunities for student and teacher to evaluate learning. However, less formal methods of evaluation will also help the students and teacher to understand learning. For example, periodically during the course the instructor can ask students to write a brief reflection on what they have learned and then provide an opportunity for them to share their insights with other class members.

□ **"Redefining what legitimate knowledge is."** Brundage, Keane, and Mackneson (1993) suggest that adult learners may find it difficult to accept that

their own experience and reflections are legitimate knowledge. If the instructor takes a facilitative rather than authoritative role, students will see—their own experience as valuable and important to their further learning. Burge (1993) suggests having learners use first-person language to help them claim ownership of personal values, experiences, and insights.

□ **"Dealing with content."** Student learning is enhanced when content is related to examples. Instructors tend to teach using examples that were used when they received their training. For distance learning to be effective, however, instructors must discover examples that are relevant to their distant students. Encourage students to find or develop examples that are relevant to them or their community.

In Conclusion

Teaching and learning at a distance is demanding. However, learning will be more meaningful and "deeper" for distant students, if the students and their instructor *share* responsibility for developing learning goals and objectives; actively interacting with class members; promoting reflection on experience; relating new information to examples that make sense to learners; maintaining self-esteem; and evaluating what is being learned. This is the challenge and the opportunity provided by distance education.

References

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