

DE or not DE? That was the question

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My first “distance education” experience

In the early 70's, as a graduate student at the University of South Carolina College of Business, I became familiar with this thing called “Distance Education” although, we did not call it by that name. The university had a closed-circuit TV system with centers at about 15 locations around the state. There was a studio on the main campus in Columbia from which the classes were broadcast to the distant locations. There was a degree of interaction between the professor and the students not only in the studio, but at the distant locations as well. If I remember correctly, we each had a microphone at our desks and if we had a question or wished to make a comment, we could push a button on the mike that would light up on a board in front of the professor in the studio. Of course, the professors could not see us and did not know who the individual was that was asking the question but could identify the center the question was coming from. They would respond with “Anderson center, what’s your question or comment”, and we could respond. The response was heard at all the centers. Students at any of the centers could then respond to the question or comment.

I did not realize at the time that I was participating in something that in its day, was somewhat of a pioneering innovation that would eventually, with the development of the Internet and modern communication devices, become a standard form of delivering and receiving an education; something we now call Distance Education or more recently, online classes.

Becoming a DE instructor

As a Maryland professor, I entered the world of distance education later than many of my colleagues. It was not something I wanted to do.

At one of the annual faculty meetings in Heidelberg, Maggie Smith, Business and Management Director at that time, held a meeting with all the business faculty in attendance and said the following: “Please raise your hand if you have not taken the DE training and started teaching DE classes.” I was among a fairly large number, perhaps the majority, with raised hands. Maggie then said the following: “Read my lips! If you want to continue teaching for UMUC, complete the training and start teaching DE classes”. With some reluctance and trepidation, I registered for the five-week training class. I found myself enjoying it and I “passed” with flying colors.

From that point forward, I was assigned at least one, and sometimes two, DE classes per term. While I was not totally convinced of the efficacy of the concept, particularly for lower-level courses, I was enjoying the new experience and embraced it

enthusiastically. In fact, at a faculty meeting a year later, my DE trainer commented on how I had really jumped into the DE water with both feet. Ultimately, I even became a Mentor for new DE instructors.

An interesting note here is that the first time I did that, it was to help a friend, a fellow faculty member, who was a bit unsure with his first DE assignment. I did not know I would be paid for doing it!

DE growing pains

The convergence of two issues gave rise to some DE growing pains. Some of the old timers will remember that it took quite a while to get the DE classes to the “correct” term lengths and get them coordinated with the F2F schedules. If I recall correctly, In the beginning we had sixteen, then fifteen, then thirteen, twelve, then ten-week DE terms, alongside our regular eight-week F2F class schedule. For a while we even had a combination of several different DE course lengths at the same time. In time, a more acceptable, somewhat better coordinated schedule, was developed.

Eventually, UMUC adopted the hybrid model for some of the upper-level courses. That model seems to dominate today. While this gave students and faculty the benefit of having at least some F2F time together, something many students and faculty members wanted, it was of course, not something that would work in a DE course with a group of students from scattered locations around the globe. The hybrid format was also necessary to satisfy VA requirements that called for some face time for tuition reimbursement and the housing allowances.

How long does it take to complete a degree with UMUC?

When I joined UMUC in the mid 80’s, I was told that the average time from first enrollment to degree completion was about 13 years. That was understandable prior to DE given that military members transferred from division to division and base to base where the course offerings did not always mesh well for their programs and they might have to sit out for a few terms before they could get the courses they needed to complete their degree programs.

Thus, DE provided students with a way to speed up their degree programs. While I do not have any empirical evidence to offer, a fair number of students began to take DE classes not in place of, but in addition to, F2F classes. I believe if I were to discuss this with some of my former colleagues and some administrators, they would agree.

There were UMUC rules established that prohibited students from carrying a course load of more than nine semester hours, perhaps a bit more with a seminar or two, but I believe registering for more than nine hours required a waiver of some kind or at least, special permission from an administrator and/or the course instructor. If such a rule did exist it seemed to exist in name only. It was difficult to police because students were enrolling in courses at different locations, dealing with different people, and at least from what I was seeing, many were taking more than the number of courses allowed. For a

while It seemed to be a case of the proverbial right hand not knowing what the left hand was doing, somewhat understandable in a university setting where registration was spread far and wide.

What constitutes an acceptable course load?

For a long time, on stateside campuses, faculty and administrators recognized 12-15 semester hours or 9-12 hours quarter hours, as a normal course load for full-time, on campus, university students. That kind of a course load may have been okay for handful of high performing military dependents, but it did not work for most of our military students, most of whom had work, family, and community responsibilities. It did seem like most of the students attempting to take the heavy condensed course load were dependent spouses. However, even they began to have problems.

In the early years, before we managed to come up with reasonable class schedules for DE classes, the schedules overlapped at the beginning and the end of the terms, sometimes by as much as three weeks, resulting in some students being enrolled in as many as five and on rare occasions, even six classes, at the same time. They were completing three classes from the previous term and starting three classes in the new term, and not necessarily at the same starting and ending times. Thus, they were dealing with final exams, completing papers and projects, and getting started on assignments in new classes at the same time.

Faculty members faced similar problems. I do not know how many of my colleagues found themselves in this situation but if a faculty member was teaching a two or three course load, which many of us did at that time, *he or she was dealing with the same problem as the students: finishing up in two or three classes and starting two or three new ones at the same time!*

I guess I am from the old school that had lived by the rule of thumb that stated something like the following: To do well in a university class, one needed to put in between two and three hours of reading, work, and study, outside of class, for each hour spent in class, perhaps more for some difficult quantitative courses.

I always gave this advice to my students so they could judge how much they could realistically handle. I know several my colleagues in the business and management disciplines did the same.

Our contracts with the military also had “contact hour” requirements which were never completely clear to me. There seemed to be some inconsistencies in this regard. At some installations, F2F classes were scheduled for three hours of class time for example, 1800 – 2100, with two scheduled 10-15-minute breaks. The same course at a different installation might show meeting hours of 1800-2045 and yet another might show 1800-2030. While it was never completely clear to me, there was a requirement of somewhere between 40 and 48 fifty-minute contact hours per semester for a three-credit course. Theoretically, there was a similar requirement for DE classes although I

could never figure out how that was supposed to work. I think it is safe to assume that the “contact hour” requirement for F2F and DE classes would be approximately the same as well as the total number of hours to be successful in a class.

Something had to give

If a student was enrolled in five or six classes during the overlap periods, and each F2F class met for five plus hours a week, and, given some leeway we can say that the DE classes because of their longer length had perhaps three to four hours a week of “class time”, a student would have to find fifty to sixty or so hours per week to devote to their courses, for three weeks at the beginning of each term and three weeks at the end.

For many of our students who were in the military or working civilians this meant the following:

Forty plus hours a week for work, fifty plus hours a week for school, and giving sleep low priority, perhaps forty to fifty hours a week to sleep. That does not provide much leeway in a week that consists of only 168 hours!

Something had to give. And it did. Often, because their presence was not tied to a specific class “time”, the DE classes became “poor step-children” to which students devoted little time and effort when they could find a spare ten minutes or so. I really hate to say this, but unfortunately, according to what I heard from several students, some of our colleagues acted in a similar manner, maintaining only a minimum presence in the DE classroom and not being very responsive to student questions or comments.

Some students began to complain that they were being given “too much” work. Didn’t I understand that they were taking four or five classes in addition to mine and had full time jobs? Some of them told me I should keep in mind that I was not the only professor asking them to do work. Many times, I had to convince them to withdraw from a course or perhaps two if they were going to survive the term and do well in their other classes.

Please do not misunderstand here. Having been a Maryland instructor for many years, I fully understood that some of our students had military obligations that had to be attended to. Some were in combat zones, and I was always flexible regarding the priority being their military responsibilities. Had I not been flexible, I do not think I would have lasted as long as I did.

Yes, there were some superstar students who were able to handle this and managed to do well and really benefit from their education other than simply obtaining a degree. I guess there were also some faculty members who also managed this very well. I think I did okay, not great, but okay.

Nonetheless, there were and perhaps still are, some unanswered questions here that go to the very core of what we were about as a university or at least to what we have always said we were about. Was the quality of the education we were able to deliver

suffering? Were most students able to get what they should have been getting out of their courses. Did some faculty members succumb to the pressure from the students and water down their courses? I hope not, but we should be realistic. We were under similar pressures during those two overlapping periods each term. It was difficult for the students and equally difficult for the faculty members.

DE changed the nature of teaching overseas for UMUC faculty

Admittedly, from a somewhat selfish point of view, another impact of DE schedules was the reduction of the term breaks faculty members used to enjoy; two weeks between terms, three weeks in the summer, and four weeks at Christmas. With the advent of DE and the strange schedules, these breaks were reduced to a single week between Christmas and New Year's Day. The forty-week work year turned into a fifty-one-week work year!

For some, this meant that the opportunity for extensive travel, one of the major "perks" of the job was significantly reduced or lost completely. On top of this, while I cannot speak for all my colleagues, I know that I, and several of them I spoke with, found, that to do a "good job", in DE and Hybrid classes, to give the courses and the students the attention they deserved, required a significantly larger time commitment, in some cases, almost twice as much as a traditional F2F class, cutting even further into a faculty members off time. Notice here that I referred to doing a "good job". One could have (and some did as I mentioned above) taken an easier route, reduced the rigor of the courses, and spent less time in the DE classrooms. A few admitted to doing so, off the record of course.

One of the more troubling aspects of DE for me occurred not so much while I was teaching, but later in the progression, that is, the erosion of the professor's control of the format and content of the courses offered via DE. As the syllabi and course structure become more standardized along with the assignments and exams, the unique experience and expertise that some of our exceptionally fine faculty members brought to their classes became less important than their ability to stay within the assigned course structure and guidelines.

This resulted in a diminution of the "transformational" aspect of education. I have always believed that the role of a teacher at any level, is more than simply imparting knowledge and critical thinking skills. It is to contribute to the transformation of the quality of lives. This occurs in those face-to-face moments when a teacher and a student or an entire class, "connect" on a level that is far less likely to occur in a DE mode. One only has to think about those "great" teachers we have all had, those who "touched" us in a way that we will never forget them. Do you think they would have had that kind of impact in a DE environment?

It has improved but...

Given some of the more recent innovations in DE and the technology for its delivery, it is improving but I remain somewhat concerned about the education that is delivered via DE, at all levels, particularly since the Pandemic has forced it upon teachers and students who may not be adequately prepared for it.

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Asian Division – 1985-1987

European Division – 1987 - 2013