

## **Introduction**

Distance learning, correspondence education, e-learning and a host of other terms have been used to define the method of education where teachers and students do not share a physical classroom and use technology to interact (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). This paper seeks to present my personal definition and understanding of distance education (DE) based on study group interaction and supported personal experiences.

## **Study Group Definition**

From the shared perspective of my study group members (Naegle, Rodgers, Procaccini, Radhakrishnan, & Russell, 2008), DE is both opportunistic and the framework for future education. Our discussions highlighted the advantages of DE and identified technology, committed independent study and teacher preparedness as key areas for continued discussion. In addition, while DE provides continuing education opportunities for individuals unable to attend typical classroom courses, it is understood that these individuals must have access to the technology that defines DE, thus affordability may be an issue for some. Ultimately, the study group agreed that DE is a form of education for use by mature focused students who do not have access to classroom based courses nor the availability to attend courses that occur at set times while balancing work, family and recreation.

The group experience definitely influenced my understanding of DE. Each of us had our own perspective that was either reinforced by the readings or redirected. Although our understanding was focused on the benefits of DE, we were also aware of the limitations and the perceived negatives involved with DE courses and their availability. Personally, the above documented understanding is a definition that supports my understanding of and current experience with DE as well.

## **Personal Experience**

In the healthcare industry, DE is fast becoming the preferred method for learning. Some organizations, such as Emory Healthcare, use DE for all required annual training and much of their clinical software training (Emory Healthcare, n.d.). Healthcare organizations invest in the necessary technology and are committed to using proven educational pedagogy because any money or time not spent on patient care must be justified and shown to have a solid return on investment for the organization, the healthcare professionals impacted, patients and/or patient care (Raths, 2008; GE, n.d.; Bangert & Hatfield, n.d.; & Carlson-Sabelli, 2007). DE from my personal experience is, therefore, a method that provides “just in time learning just in time” (Phillips, 2003, p.1). As Kahn, Jr., Ehlers, and Wood (2006) assert, “To be effective, learning must be incorporated into a schema that supports its application to a range of “real world” situations” (p. 202). Thus, DE is instruction that occurs using technology appropriate to the students’ environment and is immediately applicable to a task, requirement or responsibility.

## **Individual Definition**

My individual definition of DE is influenced by the positive experiences that I've had in DE courses as both a student and an instructor. My definition has changed over time and expanded to include text as technology. My recognition of the use of technology in DE was previously limited to electronic media. Moore and Kearsley (2005) enhanced my understanding of DE by identifying technology as "text, images (still and moving), sounds, artifacts" thus opening my definition of DE to both text and electronic media (p.6). This awareness led me to rework my perspective. Accordingly, DE is education that occurs when tutor and learner are separated and where technology connects tutor, learner and content. My definition presupposes a foundation in "key educational concepts" (Bates and Poole, 2003, p. 25).

## **Conclusion**

The study group project and subsequent discussions, reading Moore and Kearsley (2005) in particular, researching and rethinking my personal healthcare associated DE experiences, and scrutinizing my assumptions and beliefs has informed my definition of DE. Thus, my current definition of DE is that it is a form of education where technology connects tutors, students and content, where course content is presented in a way that maximizes understanding and where both teaching and learning occur in separate physical locations.

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