

# **Reaction: Distance Learning in Literacy Instruction: What's Happening Now? What is Projected for the Next Millennium?**

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Throughout the United States, teacher preparation programs have updated and enhanced their curricula to include informational technology so that graduates will be prepared to meet the educational needs of a diverse population of students in the twenty-first century. Economic and political indicators suggest that access to information and the ability to use that information effectively enable individuals to seize life's opportunities. Students who can access information the fastest, evaluate it the most appropriately, and use it the most efficiently to solve problems will be the ones most successful in the future (Leu, 2000). The powerful role of information technology has become pervasive in the field of education and it is essential that teacher educators find ways to prepare future educators to effectively use new information technology in their twenty-first century classrooms.

In a Problems Court discussion at the American Reading Forum, Nickie Askov, Jane Hager and Regina Chatel addressed the issue of incorporating new information technologies in their education courses and programs during a presentation entitled, "Distance Learning in Literacy Instruction: What's Happening Now? What is Projected for the Next Millennium?" The three presenters raised powerful issues regarding the

incorporation of distance learning technologies in teacher preparation programs and focused their discussion on three specific areas including:

1. Commitment from the university to initiate and support distance learning projects.
2. Student and teacher incentives to participate in distance learning courses.
3. Opportunities for teacher educators to conduct research based on distance learning courses.

The intrigue of distance learning is that it is seen as an alternative to traditional methods of instructional delivery on college campuses. To create effective distance learning education programs, universities must be committed to providing considerable financial support throughout the duration of the program. According to Regina Chatel, on-line education courses are expensive to initiate and maintain. She suggested that a great deal of the financial burden could be offset through grants, but cautioned that grant writing involves a great deal of planning and resources must be allocated by the university to permit individuals to write the grants.

The presenters also suggested that universities consider the importance of maintaining effective technical assistance for on-line courses. Communication between technical assistants and course instructors must be maintained and encouraged, so that pedagogical information is effectively conveyed through on-line communication. Instructional technology must be modified to accommodate students' learning styles and instructors' teaching styles so that all students have the opportunity to gain understanding of the course content. If instructional design issues are not accounted for, instructors run the risk

of jeopardizing the content of their courses and vital information may be sacrificed at the expense of technology.

Once university commitment has been established, distance learning programs must create participant incentives which lure potential students into the program and encourage faculty members to teach in distance education programs. The presenters suggested that prospective distance learning programs assess the demographics of their potential student population to determine whether on-line courses would be beneficial to students' learning.

The presenters' analysis of their student population suggested that the vast majority of the on-line students were unable to attend a university and participate in traditional classroom settings. Most of these students were women, many of whom either worked or chose to stay home and assume family responsibilities. Other students chose to participate in on-line courses because they had very long and involved sports schedules which prevented them from attending regularly scheduled university courses.

The presenters found that distance learning as an alternative to traditional method of instructional delivery on college campus encouraged many students to engage in educational dialogue from the comfort and convenience of their own homes. According to Jane Hager, "technology has helped us step out of the box." In Hager's program at Old Dominion University in Virginia, technology has come to the aid of individuals who are living in rural and isolated communities in Virginia. Through a state sponsored grant in distance learning technology, the university was able to offer teachers and other professionals certification in special education.

Nickie Askov reported on the great success of using distance learning in the master's degree program at the Pennsylvania State University. Individuals from around the world are able to come together and take on-line graduate courses where they have the unique opportunity to dialogue on issues related specifically to education, yet influenced by the participants' unique international perspectives and experiences. Askov found that the opportunity to communicate with people from around the world has been an empowering educational experience for all participants in the on-line program.

The presenters also stressed the need to attract motivated and enthusiastic instructors to teach their courses on line. Instructors must feel comfortable using technology and be willing to adjust the design of their courses to permit and encourage student learning. Instructors must consider the accessibility and diversity of their course content, the nature of student participation and interaction in and outside of class and the evaluation of students' learning.

Although all of these factors appear daunting, the presenters agreed that on-line teaching provides instructors with numerous opportunities to observe, assess and evaluate distance learning programs to determine their value and appropriateness in terms of educating individuals for the twenty-first century. The argument was raised that benchmarks of technology assessment must be designed to determine whether technology has positively or negatively affected student learning. Presenters also suggested that teacher educators conduct case study analysis on distance learning by studying how the absence of physical presence and the lack of face-to-face communication among students affect their learning. Presenters were curious to see whether it was possible for on-line students to establish relationships with other participants and thus create the sensation of

an on-line community of learners who communicate from remote sites throughout the world.

It is clear from this presentation that technology will play a significant role in how students learn and instructors teach in the twenty-first century. As teacher educators we need to see informational technology as a resource which benefits all students. No longer will students be denied education simply because they are unable to conform their complex lives into the traditional format of university courses. Students who are fortunate to have access to appropriate technology will have the opportunity to receive an education which can be easily tailored to their schedules and life experiences. These individuals will have the opportunity to engage in meaningful educational exchanges with motivated individuals from around the world. According to the presenters, the challenges of the twenty-first century appear to promise students a refreshing approach to learning and an empowering educational experience.

### **Reference**

Leu, D. J. (2000). The convergence of literacy instruction with networked technologies for information and communication. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 35:1, 108-127.