

Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design

Distance Education Teaching Strategies

Structure vs. Control

Teaching adults requires that you are respectful of the fact that these learners have valuable life experiences that contribute to their learning. Therefore, one element a distance educator must balance is that of **structure vs. control**. You will need to walk this fine line between structure and control as you create distance materials.

We want to provide **structure**, which typically reduces anxiety, but we must also respect the fact that our learners are typically **adults** and want to maintain aspects of **control** about their educational experiences. (Plus, no one likes to be “bossed around.”) Some suggestions to strike this balance are to:

- Provide as many choices as possible to students
- Support learner autonomy
- Keep students “on track” without a threatening approach

Although the suggestions to deal with **structure vs. control** issues are easy to understand, **balancing** these two issues is quite difficult.

Interaction

You’ve probably noticed that all of the concepts and ideas presented require that the distance educator interact with the learners in the course. This brings us to another very important topic in distance education — that of **interaction**. As you create meaningful and engaging learning environments for distance learners, make sure to consider the interaction opportunities you provide students. Getting distance learners to move beyond “just reading” to interacting with the content, instructor, peers, and media to gain materials is paramount.

Saying that there should be interaction in a distance education course seems like common sense, since you have interaction in a traditional classroom, but it is something that instructional designers, teachers, and facilitators many times forget. We must recognize that the educational media (videotapes, CD-ROM, Web, etc.) play an important role in the delivery of instruction. Students expect interaction with the instructor and, hopefully, their peers. And most importantly, without meaningful interaction with the content, the only “learning” that might occur is short-term. So, interaction is a very important element that you’ll want to consider as you create and teach in a distance environment.

Distance Education Instructional Strategies

In this next section, we’ll look at some methods or instructional strategies that distance educators can use to allow learners to master the instructional objectives in each lesson. As you create these distance learning instructional environments, you want to provide students with **different ways to learn the content**. If you only use one way to present materials, learners that have other preferred learning styles and strengths might not be successful in mastering the objectives.

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It is important to note that many of these strategies are used in conjunction with other instructional strategies. For example, when you have students work in **group projects**, they are participating in **collaborative learning, using small groups**, and **using a project instructional strategy**. It is also important for you to realize that instructional strategies **aren't** an “**all or nothing**” venture. A second important element to remember when creating instructional materials is that **you want to “humanize” the learning environment**. A third element to remember is that when you **connect learning to the interests and prior experiences of learners**, they become more motivated, interested, and involved in the context.

During a distance course, it's also important to **build communities** of learners. Why bother building a community? Without this, students aren't willing to really share their thoughts and ideas about the content with others. You must create a warm, safe, and enjoyable environment in which students can learn. You can use silly icebreaker activities – such as the ones from parties you've attended – to let students get to know each other and the instructor. You can suggest that instructors create a Web page about themselves to share professional and personal touches with the students.

Instructional Strategies

Generative strategies are learning strategies that help the student “make the content his or her own.” We start with recall strategies that help the student remember the information. You might have learned one like this. “In 1492 (fourteen-hundred-ninety-two), Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” That's an example of a **recall strategy**.

Organizational strategies help you understand how a concept is organized. Students could make a concept map of the concept being studied.

When you try to assist the student in adding the knowledge to his or her existing schema, you are providing students with an **integration strategy**. For example, when students are learning about whales, they could describe the characteristics of a whale that make it a mammal.

Finally, **elaboration strategies** allow a student to add his or her own ideas to the knowledge base. For example, having learners list examples and non-examples of a concept or trait could be beneficial.

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Formal Instructional Strategies for Distance Education

Following are specific instructional methods that can be used in a distance education environment and how they can be used.

Self-directed learning: Research shows a student who initiates learning has more of a purpose and greater motivation. He or she also tends to retain and make better use of what is learned. Some activities you could suggest for students that take on self-directed learning projects are to visit libraries, institutes, and museums, talk to professionals, access recent research, and even create publications in a variety of formats.

Lecture is a format with which you are very familiar. Lectures can be presented via audio or video over the Internet and web-embedded online lectures.

Discussion is another instructional strategy very familiar to you. This strategy is particularly effective with adults. Allowing adults to utilize their prior experiences is very important. Some ways discussions can take place in a distance environment are with chats and bulletin boards.

Small groups allow students to be highly involved with a concept or topic. This strategy allows students to present their ideas as well as get the ideas of others. The instructor's role in small groups is to act as a consultant to the groups. This is actually very ideal because the instructor can address specific questions, comments, or concerns one group has while another group(s) can continue working.

The use of **mentoring** can be a very effective instructional strategy because it allows the mentor to serve as a guide rather than a provider of knowledge. The mentor can introduce the learner to new situations, interpret unknown elements, and help point out critical areas of knowledge to enable the learner to function within the field. Telecommunications allows for the mentor and mentee to stay in contact without a great deal of difficulty.

Projects allow students to have practical experience with a concept and give a sense of accomplishment. These projects can be individual or group and shared with the class, groups, or only the instructor.

Learning contracts might be somewhat newer to you. In public school and even higher education, learning contracts are used to ensure that the student and the instructor agree in writing exactly what needs to happen for something to be deemed a "successful" learning experience. With adults, have the learners write their ideal contract and then negotiate what the final contract will be. A learning contract helps the educator and the learner **share** the responsibility of learning. Contract learning can result in deeper involvement, on the part of the learner, in the activities they are involved with. Contracts also provide increased accountability and a means for learners to receive feedback on their progress to accomplish the learning objectives.



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Collaborative learning is working with others. UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute reports that over a third of courses in higher education use collaborative activities. Again, technology makes this much easier. Although students might be separated by distance, they can use programs such as NetMeeting® to simultaneously work on documents, share files, chat, and more.

Case studies are becoming more and more popular. When evaluating case studies for use in your learning environment, you want to make sure sufficient detail is included so students can partake in powerful problem-solving.

Forums are also becoming more popular with the use of telecommunications. Synchronous and asynchronous tools, two-way audio/video, and other technologies allow forums to be used in distance education.

Roadmap to Effective Distance Education Instructional Design is a collaborative effort of the following universities: University of Florida, University of Idaho, Iowa State University, University of Missouri-St. Louis, Texas A&M University, and Texas Tech University. This project was funded through a **United States Department of Agriculture Higher Education Challenge Grant** (2002-2004).