



Integrity of Method and Objective¹

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In any educational venture, when purposes and procedures do not match, outcomes tend to be disappointing. How we teach is as important as what we teach, although it is rarely given much attention. The ways and means of teaching—instructional procedures, teacher/learner relationships, encouragement, and assessment—determine whether or not the content of the learning experience will come alive or remain dull and lifeless. Everything that is really important to the communication and retention of meaning can be fulfilled or nullified by the choices of methods.

The common perceptions of extension education, whether called by its older name or by the newer categorical nomenclature, distance learning, are too often condescending. “How can we make our extension courses as close as possible to the high standards we have on campus?” is a seemingly benign question. But it reflects an often uninformed presupposition that the campus standards must surely be superior.

In many situations, extension education can provide learning experiences that are superior to the equivalent experiences on a campus. Distance learning can provide learning opportunities that are closer and more intimately linked to the practical applications and the realistic contexts which make learning meaningful. Generally, those who plan and manage distance learning should start with the assumption that what is intended is a superior and more intense learning opportunity—certainly not some make-shift substitute.

The special problems of distance education and institutional extension often result in compromises dictated by convenience and educational habits. This article will consider three scenarios based upon case material:

1. Minimal Use of Field Experience with Distance Learning

The Problem. The assumption that learning is learning and teaching is teaching produces laziness in any educational operation. The simplicity of these assumptions seems to justify carelessness in educational imagination and planning. The key fallacy is the belief that any learning experience can simply be picked up whole and transported to some other location and situation. The lively circumstances of the new context—a student’s personal and vocational experiences, for example—are, thus, ignored. The way we teach in one place we can teach in anyplace seems to be the watchword. Distance learning becomes nothing more than transplantation of the most ordinary of campus-based instruction.

The most unfortunate consequence of this sort of thinking is the overlooking of the many ways that the learning experience could be made more integral with other aspects of the learner’s life and experience. The failure to think about the related resources and

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experiences that are inherent or available as field experiences produces a *canned* educational approach.

Identifying Probably Causes. In addition to the rudimentary laziness that usually underlies this problem, several other factors often can be identified:

- Preference for use of campus-based instructors.
- Presumption that the course-at-distance will be better if it closely copies the campus-based norms.
- Unfamiliarity of the educators and managers with local resources in the field setting.
- Failure to invest the time and effort in a systematic study of the potential values of relating the intended learning to elements in the learner's context.

Proposing Solutions. Solutions may arise from focus on various aspects of the educational plan:

- Does the intended experience really fit the needs?
- Have the right resources been employed?
- Have the learners and their contexts been carefully considered?
- What are the motives that the institution is attempting to fulfill?
- Whose interests are being served?
- What evidence of imagination and creativity is evident?

Such questions of a diagnostic and critical sort should be pursued into the realm of innovative and creative planning until they show promise of real resolution of the fundamental problems. Special attention should be given to the matter of relationships between educational objectives and institutional methods.

2. Minimal Use of Social Interaction in the Learning Process

The Problem. This problem is especially common when distance learning is intended for scattered individuals, rather than groups. Many educators tend to view the learning process in individualistic terms. Sometimes they think of classrooms as collections of individuals who will be engaged in learning largely as independent and isolated experiences. Such educators make extremely poor distance learning planners, even for the designing of individualized instruction. Learning is essentially a social process that is facilitated and deepened through interactions with others. The difficulty, of course, is to plan flexibly and creatively and to visualize the many interactive possibilities that exist in the learner's real world. Even while a learner is engaged in an independent learning, there is no excuse for being lonely and isolated.

Content-related interaction with others (not necessarily only those who happen to be similarly enrolled) is almost always possible if the designers of the instructional experience are imaginative.

Identifying Probably Causes. Surely the most common cause of this tendency to ignore the importance of human interaction is the competitive habits taught by the schooling approach. Competition, usually assumed to be a strong motivator, tends to isolate learner from learner and to encourage every person to excel individually.

The difficulty of *dreaming up* suggestions to pass along to a learner about how he or she might actually use new learning as the studies move forward is no small part of the problem. It takes imagination and a sort of intellectual freedom based upon respect for the human being.

Although electronic communication technologies offer whole new categories of possible learner interactions, the technologies are all too often employed in non-creative ways. The tendency to assume that teaching is telling causes the interactive communications to be a matter of questions-in/answers-out. Closely related is the discomfort of distance learning, especially when it requires travel, the stress of changing one's habits and life-style, and the prospect of being required to add some new ways and means of doing the educational business.

3. Developing, Optimizing, and Correlating Local Institutional Resources

The Problem. The difficulty of integrating and correlating resources that the institution brings to the teaching/learning situation with the resources that exist locally is common. Institutional people tend not to think beyond their own self-contained capabilities. They tend not to take notice of other resources which might be useful. Thus, the resultant distance learning or extension experiences are less effective than they could be. The tendency to simplify and make things as convenient for oneself as possible is hard to reform into a more outgoing and generous style of the sort that is ideal in those who plan and deliver distance learning.

Identifying Probable Causes. Among the more common underlying causes of this problem are the following:

- Limited awareness of the contexts in which the learning will take place.
- Lack of experience (and resultant lack of confidence) in dealing with people outside the institutional context.
- Fear of loss of control. This fear often is disguised as a deep concern for quality in the learning experience.
- The habit of telling others how they can help, rather than sharing with others the task of thinking through the possibilities. For example, in reference to internships, mentoring, and even field trips, the institutional educators often presume that it is their place to tell the field supervisors what is to be done and how.
- Lack of imagination regarding alternative and innovative ways that the learning situation can be structured.

Distance learning should be designed to be effective. More often than not, distance learning can be *better* learning.