Off-Campus Library Support for Distance Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenal growth in the number of adults enrolled in graduate level classes that are delivered through distance education methods, such as video teleconference technology, has implications for library support services. The authors discuss adult learners and higher education provided in a distance delivery format, case studies centered on these adult learners, the library service and support needs specific to this segment of the learner population, the distance adult learners' expectations of library service support, some potential online resources, and the implications for library services to enhance this nontraditional learning environment.

INTRODUCTION

As higher education moves into the twenty-first century and is forced to reach outside the physical boundaries of the university or college campus, technological change is impacting the delivery of education to distance adult learners. Today's communications technology, specifically video-teleconferencing distance education (VTDE), is enabling institutions of higher education to reach populations in a variety of settings such as business, colleges, hospitals, and prisons. In particular, rural communities are now able to receive educational offerings similar to those available in urban areas. Courses that would not normally be offered in one location due to lack of potential enrollment are now simultaneously embracing learners at several distant sites (Ehrhard & Schroeder, 1997).

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Currently there are over 1,000 educational institutions in the United States offering some type of distance learning programs (Lozada, 1997). Experts estimate that, by the year 2007, approximately 50 percent of learners enrolled in higher education courses will take courses through distance education (Kascus, 1994). Like traditional younger learners, distance adult learners require ancillary services, especially library services, to help them conduct research and fulfill their assignments. In today's world, learners can rapidly access library databases through their personal computers. The librarian's role is to assist such learners by demonstrating how to use data services and how to narrow searches in the most efficient manner. The purpose of this discussion is to help librarians become more familiar with the characteristics and needs of adult learners and to assist librarians in dealing with this category of learners.

The Adult Learner

Who are these adult learners who are moving steadily into distance education? Almost by definition, the adult learner is one who returns to study, on a full-time or part-time basis, after a period of time spent in other pursuits. As a result, he or she brings to new learning a rich background of life and work experience. This background includes the wide range of roles that adults fill: employee, spouse, parent, citizen, and community or church worker. In general, then, and in contrast with younger learners, adults possess sophisticated insights culled from their knowledge of the world of work, from the skills they have acquired there, and from the relationships they have developed with other people at work and in their personal lives. These insights make it easier for them, as learners, to recognize how ideas can be transformed into action and how theory can be transformed into practice outside the classroom.

Another way in which adult learners differ from younger learners is that their goals are often more clear-cut. That is, adult learners are likely to identify, with some certainty, the things that are important in their lives—i.e., the careers to which they want to devote their energies, the skills they wish to acquire, the persons they aspire to become, or the kinds of relationships they hope to build with others. Also, adult learners are more likely to prioritize the forces competing for their attention. Of course, there are some adult learners whose goals and priorities are poorly defined.

A third way in which adult learners are likely to differ from younger ones relates to motivation, which is closely linked to goals. That is, adult learners often feel impelled to take an active part in their own learning, and they are more willing than younger learners to make sacrifices in setting goals for themselves and in striving to reach them. There are many reasons for this superior motivation. Often adult learners are able to devote only part of their time to study because of the demands of full-
time or part-time jobs and the obligations of spouse or parent. Time is very precious to them and, when they decide to devote some of it to further study, they take that study seriously. Moreover, adult learners are often motivated by a desire to advance in a job or to make a career shift. On the other hand, younger learners tend to take their studies less seriously.

Adult learners do have certain advantages, but there are problems, too. Often, they fear change and the demands placed on them by instructors who do not always comprehend the anxieties that they feel in the new situation. These anxieties are compounded in adults who have experienced failure in school and who associate learning with unpleasant memories of unsympathetic teachers, tests, low grades, and punishments. Sometimes they have a low self-concept that causes them to shrink from exposing their ignorance to others and to dread further failure.

The physiological changes wrought by the aging process may also create difficulties for the pursuit of learning. These changes include deterioration of sight and hearing, loss of energy and strength, decline of memory, and a lengthening of reaction time. Clearly, not all adults age at the same rate or display the same characteristics as they age. Nevertheless, the changes (or the fear of changes) might create anxieties that interfere with learning. However, there is a counterpoint to this rather dismal picture. It is the enormous adaptability of human beings who face new challenges. In the case of adult learners, their high motivation often causes them to forget their handicaps when they get caught up in the excitement of new learning.

**Distance Education Case Studies**

At Northern Illinois University (NIU) in DeKalb, Illinois, among the first courses to employ VTDE was a graduate-level course in human resource development (HRD). This VTDE course has been taught each semester since Spring 1995 by the same professor on the NIU campus and at several different community colleges. This course, indeed the HRD field itself, draws learners at Master’s and doctorate levels from adult education, counseling, instructional technology, and management. The pollination of ideas that occurs among learners in these fields is enhanced by the addition of students from business, public administration, and other departments. The classes were anything but homogenous. They consisted of American and foreign nationals and part-time and full-time learners. Their experience ranged from little to none to already having an impressive record as HRD professionals.

The classroom from which the course is telecast houses a VTDE system that is encased in two 35-inch television sets, including a main camera. From the broadcasting site where the instructor is located, a signal is sent via T-1 telephone line to the community college site. The following week the process is reversed, and this alternating process continues.
throughout the course. In this way, the instructor maintains the face-to-face contact with learners that is essential to the building of good relationships. The VTDE system includes a touch screen menu pad that permits the instructor to use the camera to zoom in on learners while they are speaking, to run videotape or slides, or to run a computer application program. Another integral piece of hardware is an advanced overhead projector known as a document camera, which is used to display excerpts from the textbook and supplementary materials. Also, the document camera permits the instructor to project handwritten messages to the remote site.

This VTDE course has a two-fold purpose: (1) to provide an overview of theory, research, and practice relating to individual development, career development, and organizational change; and (2) to acquaint students with the potential and complexities of the VTDE classroom, so that they can employ it confidently and intelligently as a delivery system in their own work setting. In this classroom-laboratory, learners receive a book of readings to supplement the textbook, paper copies of transparencies, study questions that serve as advance organizers for the next class, and case studies and simulations designed to relate theory and research to practice. Guest HRD experts either attend a class at one site or interact with learners by telephone (audio-conferencing) from their homes or offices. Assignments included the keeping of journals in which learners reflect upon their classroom experiences, their readings, and the operation of the VTDE system. These journals are useful to the instructor in monitoring the progress of learners, discerning their problems, and assessing the strengths and weaknesses of systems.

Summative evaluations of the HRD course revealed that, in the years 1995 and 1996, about 90 percent of the learners reported that they were satisfied with the teaching of the HRD course via distance education. These findings are thoroughly documented in Niemi, Owens, and Ehrhard (1996, 1997).

What distance learners expect of libraries is the ability to: search periodical indexes, abstracts, CD-ROMs, and bibliographic services such as ERIC; do electronic book check outs and renewals over the telephone (toll free); deliver photocopies, the results of literature searches, government documents, and microfiche duplication; access answers to research questions; access tables of contents from professional journals; internally track and deliver all interlibrary loan services; and establish an electronic feedback system. An electronic information bulletin board would permit librarians not only to solicit feedback from their learners but also to coordinate and manage document delivery services to provide access to online service from remote sites and to manage e-mail communications.

Also, these distance learners want to know how to login to the main campus computer library from their PCs at home, work, or extension site,
to make database selections, to conduct expanded database searches, and
to obtain guidance as to which resources work best under which situa-
tions. They do not want to read manuals, but they do want access to
encyclopedias, dictionaries, periodical full-text articles, catalogs, reviews,
biographies, statistics, and information on how to evaluate authors, books,
and journals—especially Internet sources.

DISTANCE LEARNERS’ EXPECTATIONS OF LIBRARY SERVICES

The library expectations of learners, as revealed in the literature,
demonstrate a great need. The ACRL “Guidelines for Extended Campus
Library Services” (Association of College and Research Libraries, 1990)
emerged from the belief that most libraries were not offering support for
their distance education programs (Kascus, 1994). Kascus surveyed mem-
bers of the American Library Association (ALA) to examine the extent of
support for off-campus and distance education programs in the curricula
of schools of library and information sciences. Although the ALA first
recognized the inadequacy of library support services for off-campus learn-
ers as early as 1931, only 33 percent of Kascus’s sample recognized the
need to expand their curricula to address the support of off-campus and
distance education learners. Of the library schools sampled, 36 percent
did include topics on library support in their 1991 curricula, but few real-
ized the growth and impact of distance education on support services for
off-campus distance education learners (Kascus, 1994). Kascus’s study
also examined the attitudes of library deans and their directors regarding
the issues surrounding off-campus services. Findings indicated that sup-
port for off-campus distance education programs has been minimally rep-
resented and has had a low priority for most library school deans and
directors. Based on these findings, Kascus concluded that libraries should
be more user-centered rather than library-oriented.

Burge (1991) analyzed two studies that explored the relationships
among libraries, distance educators, and distance learners and found that
librarians were totally isolated from the distance education environment.
In her 1991 keynote address at an off-campus library services conference
in Albuquerque, Burge stressed the urgency of librarians playing a more
participatory role in distance education and re-establishing themselves as
educators. Burge argued that one key principle underlying the relation-
ships and responsibilities that operate to maintain effective graduate level
distance learning is that the relationship between the learner and librar-
ian must be collaborative in nature.

Throughout the literature, it is clear that off-campus students have
had to fend for themselves when attempting to access relevant library col-
lections and services (Burge, 1991; Kascus, 1994; McHenry & Bozik, 1995;
Stephens & Unwin, 1997). Comments like “We’re not getting the litera-
ture” and “Not having the material is a problem” have been common
statements at off-campus sites (McHenry & Bozik, 1995). In situations where there has been no convenient library access, books and articles have been mailed directly to learners. In this new technological age of digital computing, faxing, e-mail, and scanning, distance learners need connecting to remote data services, including how to differentiate among the myriad databases and how to use information databases.

Although many academic libraries compile packets of course-related readings, deliver reserve collections to remote sites, and provide interlibrary loan services, few have offered the complete array of library services that are available at the campus library. Off-campus services that should be enhanced are Web access, full-text retrieval, speedy document delivery from the publisher to the computer, online reference, and electronic communication. Also, e-mailing and chat rooms could improve socialization among students and compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact between learners and instructors.

POTENTIAL RESOURCES FOR DISTANCE ADULT LEARNERS

Many libraries, corporations, and professionals use resources available on the Internet daily. Some of these sources include: WorldCat, a database of 37 million bibliographic records; LibrarySpot, a 24-hour virtual library resource center which brings reference sites together with periodicals, online texts, and library information; ABI/Inform, containing full ASCII text of many articles; ECO (Electronic Collections Online) meeting archival needs nationally; EDGAR (American Securities and Exchange Commission filings of America’s largest corporations) database; DIALOG; America OnLine; CompuServe; Internet data servers and news groups (free government statistics and industry performance measures); and electronic subscriptions to Newsweek (quarterly CD-ROM video magazine), Wall Street Journal <http://info.wsj.com>, Wall Street Journal Classroom Edition <http://info.wsj.com/classroom>, and Dow Jones Services <http://www.dowjones.com>.

In the VTDE classroom, learners could benefit if they had access to Internet listserv discussion groups and World Wide Web bookmarks that are related to the study of human resource development and distance education. Lebowitz (1997) stated: “While the student population is becoming more computer literate, it does not necessarily follow that they are information literate.” Thus, dedicated and knowledgeable personnel are needed to direct learners to use the Internet and its subsystems effectively. A few of the listservs and bookmarks that could be of value to learners are:

- EDSTYLE, the Learning Styles Theory and Research list;
- NEWEDU-L, the Newer Patterns in Education List which discusses education broadly, including delivery systems, media, collaborative learning, learning styles, and distance education;
DEOS-R, the Distance Education On-line Symposium for Research, co-sponsored by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education and Central Michigan University, whose purpose is to provide a forum for scholars in the field of distance education who are specifically interested in exchange relating to research in distance education;

DEOS-L, the free international discussion forum about distance education established to facilitate discussion of issues presented in DEOSNEWS, a bi-weekly international electronic journal about distance education as well as other issues of interest to distance education;

NBEA, the national business education association, which is a forum for NBEA members to share ideas on curriculum, teaching techniques, and other areas of business education;

http://www.yahoo.com/education/distance_learning provides links to a wide variety of distance education resources and information;

http://www.uwex.edu:80/disted/index.html links to distance education resources from the Distance Education Clearinghouse at the University of Wisconsin Extension;

http://www.cde.psu.edu:80/PSUToday/PSU2U.html has related links about courses and upcoming conferences;

http://www.cde.psu.edu/ACSDE, from the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Penn State, contains links to a variety of publications, conferences, and other resources;

http://www.edie.cprost.sfu.ca/~rhlogan/bm_dl.html has over seventy-five distance education links and descriptions.

CONCLUSION

The combination of widely available technological resources with the features of electronic media and the common characteristics of adult learners forms an exceptionally good mix for educational success. Most of the technology and resources are available 24 hours daily for learners who are willing to take responsibility for their own education. Libraries and library professionals could be at the nexus of this wonderful set of opportunities and circumstances by making a few simple shifts in emphasis to facilitate the needs of the growing segment of distance adult learners. The two critical emphasis shifts that could alter librarians' activities with, and importance to, the distance adult learner are responses to student needs and empowerment of the adult learner and the library professional.

Effective use of electronically distributed information resources and search or query protocols for those resources could empower librarians to provide enhanced services and better information access than this group of learners has ever previously experienced. Clearly the information resources, search engines, data retrieval methods, and full-text materials are, and have been, available; however, some learners who desire the information contained in these sources are unaware of their existence. Other
distance adult learners have had even greater frustration or more disappointed expectations because they were at least vaguely aware of these resources but were ignorant as to how to use them. The distance adult learners' education could be particularly disrupted by these frustrations because of the influence of their individual nature and experience.

The distance adult learners' educational process could be made more successful through libraries and librarians assuming a more assertive stance toward raising the adult learner's awareness of the potential rewards to be gained with a little patience and a personal computer, thus frustration and ignorance would be overcome. Another way in which librarians could further the distance adult learner's education would be to compose and distribute some standard research protocols for electronic information access. These two modest changes, which are well aligned with distance adult learners' tendencies and preferences, could significantly alter librarians' roles in serving them.

**SELECTED ONLINE LEARNER RESOURCES**

**EDSTYLE**, the Learning Styles Theory and Research list. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to listserv@maelstrom.stjohns.edu. In the body of the text write "subscribe EDSTYLE first name last name" (omit quotes).

**NEWEDU-L**, the Newer Patterns in Education List, which discusses education broadly, including delivery systems, media, collaborative learning, learning styles, and distance education. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to listserv@uhccvm.its.hawaii.edu. In the body of the text write "subscribe NEWEDU-L first name last name" (omit quotes).

**DEOS-R**, the Distance Education On-line Symposium for Research whose purpose is to provide a forum for scholars in the field of distance education who are specifically interested in the exchange in research in distance education. This listserv is co-sponsored by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education and Central Michigan University. Listserv members meet and share information with their peers undistracted by the general commentary and questions appearing on DEOS-L, the International Distance Education On-line Symposium. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to listserv@cmuvm.csv.chich.edu. In the body of the text write "subscribe DEOS-R first name last name" (omit quotes).

**DEOS-L**, the free international forum about distance education established to facilitate the discussion of issues presented in DEOSNEWS (a bi-weekly international electronic journal about distance education as well as other issues of interest to distance educators). DEOS-L is provided by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE) and the Pennsylvania State University. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to listserv@lists.psu.edu. In the body of the text write "subscribe DEOS-L first name last name" (omit quotes).
AEDNET, the Adult Education Network, is dedicated to adult education discussion. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to listproc@pulsar.acast.nova.edu. In the body of the text write “subscribe AEDNET first name last name” (omit quotes).

NBEA, the national business education association, is a forum for NBEA members to share ideas on curriculum, teaching techniques, and other areas of business education. To subscribe, send an e-mail message to majordomo@list.thompson.com. In the body of the text write “subscribe NBEA first name last name” (omit quotes).

http://www.yahoo.com/education/distance_learning. This Web site provides links to a wide variety of distance education resources and information.

http://www.uwex.edu:80/disted/index.html. This Web site links to distance education resources from the Distance Education Clearinghouse at the University of Wisconsin Extension.

http://www.cde.psu.edu:80/PSUToday/PSU2U.html. This distance education Web site has related links about courses and upcoming conferences.

http://www.cde.psu.edu/ACSDE. This Web site is from the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Penn State. It contains links to a variety of publications, conferences, and other resources.

http://www.edie.cprost.sfu.ca/-rhlogan/bm_dl.html. This Web site has over seventy-five distance education links and descriptions.

REFERENCES