

## DARWIN WAS RIGHT! THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE LEARNING AT DARTON COLLEGE

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Although the term distance learning is a relatively new one, the idea that it is possible to take educational opportunities to students who are unable to attend traditional classes certainly is not. Correspondence courses, for example, are a familiar and still quite popular method of instructional delivery. In fact, it seems, one can rarely open TV Guide (to see what's on PBS or the Discovery Channel, of course), without being assailed by advertisements encouraging *you* to get your diploma or degree by mail.

We're more sophisticated than that these days, even on a relatively small community college campus. We've experimented with, and largely abandoned, telephone conferencing, tried, and mostly stopped, sending students videotapes of classes conducted on campus. Though arguably an improvement over print-based courses, these methods of delivery were too limited to create an effective educational program, since they were essentially passive learning approaches. As technology in general has developed and matured (and become more affordable), so too have instructional delivery systems. Our emphasis is now on television, video conferencing, and the Internet, and the blending of these technologies to maximize the effectiveness of instruction and achieve true interactive learning. When multiple technologies are used in conjunction with one another, distance learning (or distance education, if you prefer) transcends physical distance, creating a personal bond between an instructor who is in one place and a student who just happens to be in another. E-mail, listserves, forums, chat rooms, and Internet video conferencing can all be used to foster student-teacher and student-student interaction, allowing both the spontaneous, free-flowing discussions of the traditional classroom and a new, asynchronous method of discussion that lends itself to more contemplative thought.

At Darton College, all instructors teaching distance learning classes are required to maintain "electronic" office hours, during which they are available to students by phone, facsimile, and Internet Relay Chat. Students are also able to schedule Internet video conferences with their instructors. The result would seem to be a paradox. Students enrolled in distance learning classes report greater one-to-one interaction with their instructors than do their peers enrolled in on-campus classes.

The use of multiple technologies also enhances the effectiveness of instructional delivery. As is the case with most institutions, Darton's initial distance learning offerings utilized a single technology as their primary delivery system. Georgia's investment in a statewide video conferencing network and Darton's agreement with our local cable television provider to operate the region's educational access channel offered the institution a natural starting point for distance learning course development. De-

velopment of on-line courses began a year later, and it was then that we had an epiphany.

In the grant application that ultimately resulted in the development of our first on-line course, we proposed the development of "an English Composition I course which utilizes multiple technologies and which can be delivered via multiple distance learning delivery systems." Our intent was to develop a video series for delivery via television, a series of supplemental videos and multimedia presentations for use in the traditional classroom and in classes taught via video conference, and a stand-alone on-line class. We entered the project fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each of the three distance learning delivery systems with which we would be working. (Darton College is the University System of Georgia's largest producer/provider of college-credit telecourses, one of its most active video conferencing sites, and was among the first University System of Georgia institutions to offer on-line classes.) We were, in fact, already using a variety of technologies to enhance communication in distance learning courses. But we had not considered using multiple distance learning systems to deliver primary course content.

We soon realized that by combining the traditional video telecourse (which is well suited for the delivery of large quantities of information and for demonstration, but is not at all interactive) with on-line instruction and the communications technologies we already employed in distance learning courses, we could create a highly effective distance learning pedagogy. For each video episode, we created a corollary on-line lesson with both duplicate and supplemental content, as well as interactive components not possible in a course delivered exclusively on video. Each on-line lesson also includes a narrated multimedia presentation. The built-in redundancy of the duplicate content and the multimodal approach to content delivery ensure students enrolled in the course will have ample opportunity to master each lesson and provide for students with varying learning styles. Although the video and on-line versions of the course are complete in and of themselves, with the full course content and all assignments available from both formats, it is the combination of these technologies that represents what we believe is an evolutionary step in the delivery of instruction via electronic media.

While the evolution of distance learning is not complete (and isn't ever likely to be so), we believe one can now argue that distance learning represents the third great shift in educational delivery. As nomadic scholars followed by eager students gave way to brick-and-mortar institutions of learning, so too must those institutions now give way to the delivery of instruction to students through electronic media. In the past we have expected our students to come to us. Now, we must take our services to them. Distance learning technology will make this possible. \*