

Course Summary and Reflection

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I can admit that before taking this course, I was skeptical since I am not a big proponent of distance and or online education. In fact, I think one of the biggest issues for me was that all of the online and distance education courses I had taken previously were hard, frustrating and not for me. Although this course opened my eyes to issues I was not aware of, I can admit that I am still weary about the subject and would choose face-to-face teaching and learning over online classes any day. If anything, this class taught me that successful online and distance education courses start with the learner who has to take responsibility for their classes, set goals, be proactive and participate in online discussions, and use the skills learned in classes to apply what they learned (Study Guide: Five steps to success in online learning, 2000).

To recap, throughout the summer course of EDIT 5370, I was exposed to various meanings and theories of teaching and learning at a distance. I learned that there are many ways to define what it means to teach and learn at a distance, which is why I used the term “various.” For instance, in regards to definition, I learned that *distance education* is not equivalent to *online education*; both terms have so many components to consider that I eventually just started to think in terms of *synchronous* and *asynchronous* teaching and learning. The same can be said about the theory of distance education; there is no one theory in which to base practice and research for teaching and learning at a distance, which is a concern for many practitioners in the field of distance education (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012).

I also learned that there are many points-of-views to consider like the institution, the student, and the instructor, just to name a few. The assigned readings throughout the course helped me understand that designing an online or distance education course requires lots of factors that can involve the type of technology that is used, how a course is designed, the

responsibilities of communicating and designing courses that touch every learner, and whether the information being conveyed is being learned (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Overall, my experience in this class has opened my eyes to distance and online education but it did not convince me that learning at a distance is better than learning face-to-face in a traditional classroom. Reflecting back on the past four weeks, I experienced so much, both positive and negative, that I cover those experiences in the next section of this paper.

Reflection on learning experience

On a positive note, a majority of my learning experiences were positive. I did learn however, that there were three important factors that adult learners should consider before taking any kind of distance learning courses: their computer skills, whether they can follow written directions, and how well they can communicate online. I mention adult learners because for many of us, computers were not household gadgets and the Internet came at a later time so there was definitely a learning curve.

I begin with the most basic requirement, computer skills. I learned from this course that it is prudent that students know how to use the most basic tools that come with their computer. When I was completing the annotated bibliography assignment for module three, I came across a study that reported that there existed a correlation between computer skills and student success of adult learners in online courses (Rakap, 2010). When I finished reading the study I found myself agreeing that without the knowledge I had of computers, I would not have completed the first assignment for our class which involved using interactive tools. I can attest that I was terrified when the first module required building a website but because I had some computer skills, I was able to complete the task. In addition to the challenge of building a website, I also learned to use VoiceThread to introduce myself to my classmates, record a vlog on budgeting using my iPhone,

and created a storybook on my iPad using Educreation for the module four assignment. Again, using these tools required computer skills as a foundation for progression in the course. I thought back to our assigned book and agreed that many of the technology used today (i.e., cell phones, digital cameras, computers, iPads, etc) are pre-equipped with tools that make creating, editing, and uploading information on the web easy, (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012) but I also kept in mind that this may not be the case for someone who has little or no exposure to technology. From a student perspective, using these tools provided wonderful experiences that helped to facilitate my learning and understanding of my computer skills and using interactive tools to communicate.

Next, there is the matter that involves following written directions. Normally, when I take traditional face-to-face classes, the syllabus is read the first day and students are told what their expectations are for the course. However, as stated in *Tips for taking online courses*, in the physical classrooms, students see the instructor and pick up on physical cues; online classes on the other hand, are conveyed in the form of words and require a degree of reading and participation. To be clear, in EDIT 5370, I was expected to read every module carefully, gain an understanding of my expectations, follow the directions for each assignment, and apply my learning to the task assigned. I found myself reading and rereading assignments to make sure I understood what was being asked of me. I also made sure I was participating in the discussion threads and realized that we all interpret directions differently. In the end, I learned that following written directions is a matter of subjectivity for online learners because words are interpreted differently and when all your information comes in the form of words, there is only room for interpretation.

Last is communication, which is important for a distance education course (Nasseh, 1997). I learned that in distance education, the emphasis is not only on the content of the dialog itself but on the communication systems that are being used to deliver the communication. In fact chapter two of our readings covered the history of distance education and module two required an understanding of historical perspectives of distance education, which is where I learned the various forms of communication tools that were used to deliver teaching content (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). Distance education, from what I read, involved a variety of communication tools; mail, telephone, television, radio, and computers, just to name a few, were used for distance education at one time or another. In my opinion, it is the communication systems that play a big role in teaching and learning at a distance, and it is the continued advances of these communication systems that make it difficult for finding a set definition and for settling on a theory. At the same time, it seems that deciding which communication systems to use is a matter of preferences based on the learner and instructor, but is so important that it ultimately affects the overall learning experience.

Overall, the positive experiences were certainly worth noting however, as with any good course, I also experienced a few negative junctures that are also worth mentioning. To be fair, I think the negative experiences are more from the instructional point of view and not from the students point of view, but they are still valid points that need explanation.

One of my biggest concerns involved instructional design and student and teacher perspectives. To be clear, for module five and six I had to design a course for distance learning that required some planning. Module five focused on the broader concepts of instructional design which did not seem difficult but when I was asked to create a syllabus that incorporated technology as a means to promote learning online or at a distance, I found it quite difficult. The

assignment was challenging but only because of the field I am interested in teaching in, law. I kept referring back to David Merrill's *Wise Remarks* when he stated, "[i]f you don't provide adequate practice, if you don't have an adequate knowledge structure, if you don't provide adequate guidance, people don't learn" (Information is not instruction-The wise remarks of David Merrill). With those words in mind, I struggled with the content since a majority of the course that I proposed involved legal skills that require a strong foundation of law. I know personally that I have the knowledge structure and could provide adequate practice but I wondered if I could realistically provide adequate guidance.

Module five and six made me reflect back on my law school days and how much I depended on my professors to provide some insight into my studies. Since legal research involves seeing, doing, hearing, practice, and print materials that are not always available online, I knew it would be difficult to provide guidance online to a law student learning about legal research. It seemed to me that module five made designing courses look easy since I had to look at the big picture, but when it came to putting all the pieces together, I found the assignment to be quite difficult. In essence, my negative experience was a result of viewing the exercise through the lens of the instructor. I kept thinking of the amount of work put into designing an online course and worrying about whether my students would learn something while at the same time, have a good learning experience. In the end, I questioned whether it was all worth it and concluded that designing an online course for law school was not anything I wanted to rush into.

The last assignment, module seven, focused on the administration and institution. I learned that management of distance education involves more than developing policies but also includes managing programs, ensuring accessibility for all who are involved, working with accrediting agencies, and complying with regulations, and so much more. When I was in the

process of completing the assignment I kept referring to the benchmarks presented by The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000). I knew from reading the study that Internet-based distance education was growing but the concern was whether this type of teaching and learning process actually embodied quality education. The benchmarks, as I understood from the study, were developed as a means of measuring the quality of distance education. Keeping these benchmarks in mind, I tried to create a policy that was all encompassing and covered major concerns in distance education but I learned it was quite difficult to do so. I kept writing and rewriting my policies hoping it would be better than the first but I realized that three policies was not enough to cover the gamut of distance education.

In the end, I gave it my best shot and wondered if there was a policy that would encompass every issue under the sun; my answer to that question was no. With everything I learned in this class I believe that policies for distance learning will evolve and change just as quickly as technology. Many schools will try to develop policies just as lawmakers will develop laws but because of the fast pace of technology, policies may have to be written and rewritten every year.

Conclusion

I end this reflection by answering the question of whether and how I could use the information presented in this course in the future. To the former, I have to admit that I am not totally sold on the idea of delivering law school courses all online. I do believe it is possible to deliver hybrid legal courses that combine online and face-to-face teaching and learning but because law schools are not considering the idea now, the question of whether, is not an option. However, if delivering law courses online were an option, I do believe that what I learned in this course would come in hand. For instance, I would love for my students to strengthen their

communication styles by using the communication tools mentioned above (i.e., vlogs, educreations, VoiceThread). I would also love for my students to take responsibility for their learning and read the syllabus without depending on me to interpret it for them. In the end, I think it may be possible to teach a hybrid law course and certainly incorporate all that I learned in this class but it will not be anything I want to do immediately. I think I like the option of knowing that an online legal class is possible but for me, knowing is enough.

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