

Distance Education:

An Insider's View

by Katherine Hall

Introduction

As a recent graduate of an Internet-based MLS program, I wish to dive into the current dialog on distance education. By sharing my experiences and thoughts, I hope to dispel some of the misconceptions surrounding distance education, particularly as they relate to education in library and information science.

Reasons for Choosing Distance Education

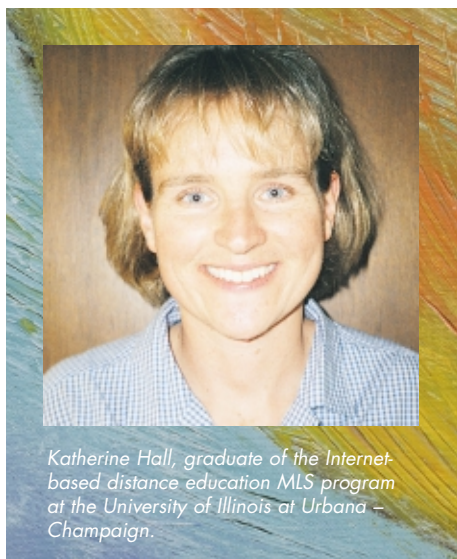
Before beginning the masters program at the University of Illinois, I took classes at a local graduate library school. I quickly became disenchanted with the program, specifically with the quality of instruction and resources. However, relocating to attend a different library school was impractical. I found an attractive solution in the distance education program at UIUC, which allowed me to enter a strong, innovative library program without the attendant necessity of relocating.

When I entered the Internet-based program at UIUC, it was only in its third year and still in an experimental phase. Since the program resided within a large research institution, there were of course researchers interested in studying its progress. Consequently, as a participant in the program, I felt that I was the subject of observation and study as I interacted with my fellow students and instructors. The experimental nature of the program also resulted in a trial-and-error approach to the program development. Although this could be frustrating at times, overall it proved exciting to observe the development of an innovative educational program.

Experiences with Distance Education

I began the program by attending an introductory two-week on-campus session. The on-campus session included a technology workshop, which introduced the tools used in the program: basic html, e-mail, electronic bulletin boards and

electronic threaded text messages. During the session, I also completed a brief course, "Libraries, Information and Society." The course focused on group discussion and projects as the primary means of instruction. As a consequence, students formed enduring friendships and associations. Obviously, the administration deliberately structured the on-campus session to foster this bonding among students since future interactions would take place primarily via the Internet.



The regular semester classes began after the two-week on-campus session. Each class met twice a week. Classes began at a specific time with everyone meeting in the virtual classroom. In practice, the virtual class sessions proceeded much like in-person class sessions. The names of participants would appear on the right side of the screen so you would know who was present. Usually there would be a running text chat dialog before the official commencement of class. People discussed general topics or "whispered" to their friends (which allowed you to direct your comments to only certain people in the chat room). The instructor would usually begin the lecture and/or class discussion by broadcasting his or her voice to the class. So while the instructor communicated orally with the class, students asked

questions and participated in class discussion via text chat.

To be honest, I found the class format initially awkward. Using text chat for class discussions yielded several drawbacks. It took longer to type a response than to speak it. Consequently, text chat discussions proceeded slowly with numerous pauses in conversation. The discussion threads became easily disjointed; while one person would be discussing one issue, another person would bring up a different point. I felt the absence of physical communication cues, like facial expressions and tone, resulted in a more simplistic and abbreviated discussion content.

However, other discussion outlets compensated for the limitations of text chat. In addition to participation in the synchronous discussion, every class required participation in non-synchronous discussion. The non-synchronous discussion consisted of weekly contributions to the electronic bulletin board discussion threads. The instructor or designated students would initiate and monitor the weekly discussion topics. The difficulty lay not in posting to the discussion thread, but rather in reading the postings of the other students in the discussion group. With every student posting one to three messages a week, it became quite a task.

Given the generally high quality of the postings, the electronic bulletin board was a valuable tool in fostering class discussion. In my opinion, contributing to the electronic bulletin boards proved more demanding than contributing to synchronous discussions. It was necessary to more thoroughly incorporate course readings, lecture material, and classmate comments into a posting. The standards were higher for postings compared to chat so the postings often required a greater investment of time and effort.

Each course also had an on-campus session mid-semester, which served several purposes. Although I disliked the inconvenience of traveling from California to Illinois each semester, the on-campus sessions gave everyone the opportunity to meet face-to-face

again or for the first time. The on-campus session also provided an opportunity for in-person presentations, group work, class discussions, and further instruction.

Despite a few inconveniences, I found the program at UIUC rewarding. I was able to choose from a broad range of courses so as to tailor the course work to my own interests. I especially enjoyed the challenging assignments. Many of them capitalized on Internet-based instruction, such as creating Web-based tutorials and research guides. All courses were taught by accomplished instructors, many of whom were authorities in their fields. Similarly, it also proved rewarding to study with a motivated and energetic group of students from diverse backgrounds.

Defining Distance Education

Unfortunately, distance education is frequently mischaracterized as independent study or correspondence course work. In their recent article, "Will Law Schools Go the Distance? An Annotated Bibliography on Distance Education in Law," Arturo Torres and W. Clinton Sterling further this misconception by defining distance education as "a method of teaching students off-campus, at a distance, and with a flexible schedule. To a large extent it requires self-study, but with the periodic guidance of an instructor whom the student may or may never meet face-to-face." (*Law Library Journal* 1999, 91.4:655)

After completing the masters program via a distance education program, I find this definition inaccurate. This definition is based on out-dated conceptions of distance education, failing to recognize the diversity of modern programs.

The reality of many modern distance education programs is antithesis to the correspondence and independent study models. Modern programs employ communication technologies that allow for interactive, synchronous (or live) interaction among physically distant faculty and students. Although face-to-face meetings might be infrequent in distance education programs, learning communities are preserved through interaction via alternate communication media and group work.

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Credit: Don Hamermon

Distance education participants work together and form friendships during the introductory on-campus session at the University of Illinois.

Distance education deserves a definition that acknowledges its evolving character. Fred Spooner et al. use a more accurate definition in their article "Student Ratings of Instruction in Distance Learning and On-Campus Classes": "an instructional arrangement in which the teacher and the learner are geographically separated to an extent requiring communication through media." (*The Journal of Educational Research*, 1999: 92.3:132) This definition avoids outdated stereotypes, while

acknowledging the varied technical approaches employed in distance education.

Pros and Cons of Distance Education

Due to outdated stereotypes, I am afraid that many people view distance education as inferior to conventional approaches to education. However, a comparison of the quality of distance education LIS courses to on-site courses is

difficult. As Daniel Barron explains in his article "Distance Education and the Closing of the American Library School," quality standards for LIS education are lacking, making comparisons difficult:

The fact is that we have neither developed nor vigorously pursued an articulate definition of quality as applied to the teacher, student, environment, process and content

interaction in LIS education. As threatening as it may be, the debates over quality in distance education versus traditional education will demand that we justify what we have assumed to be the "best" way to teach. (*Library Quarterly*, 1991, 61.3:273)

In the field of LIS education, the focus of the debate ought to be on the quality of education rather than the means of access and instruction.

I completed the program at UIUC after attending a local LIS masters program. Each option had its own strengths and weaknesses. Distance education, in any format, poses technological hurdles to communication. This demands greater attention to and planning of classes and group projects. As it stands today, Internet-based communication still lacks visual cues important to effective communication, requiring greater attention to and reliance upon written expression. Additionally, travel expenses and time inflict a further inconvenience.

However, the opportunity to attain a good education through the UIUC program significantly outweighed the physical and technological hurdles. The program proves that the dedication of everyone involved determines the success of an educational program more so than an indiscriminate dependence upon conventionality.

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