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Technology, Distance Education, and Honors

JON A. SCHLENKER

THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT AUGUSTA

INTRODUCTION

Few people would deny the advancements that have occurred in educational technology in recent decades. Scarcely a generation has passed since educators have gone from 16-mm projectors, slide projectors, overhead projectors, and opaque projectors to video players, DVD players, computers, and power-point presentations in the classroom. Indeed, for many teachers these “modern” technologies have become “traditional” and indispensable classroom features.

This “educational technology revolution” has likewise been extended to the offering of honors courses in honors programs and honors colleges across the country. The preliminary results of a survey of member institutions of the National Collegiate Honors Council, conducted by the NCHC’s Technology and Distance Education Committee during the spring semester 2002, indicated that of the 139 colleges and universities responding, 102 (73.4%) reported utilizing technology in the delivery of their honors courses.

Again, a preliminary review of the survey data showed that there is a wide range of technology employed in the delivery of honors courses: from the standard to the complex. Since the survey questions were open-ended, the responses were not specific enough to allow for solid conclusions. Nevertheless, the 102 honors programs/honors colleges reporting the use of technology in the delivery of honors courses did identify several educational technologies as the most popular.

Forty-five of the 102 (44.1%) honors programs/colleges utilized personal computers, specifically PowerPoint, in presenting course content. The next popular technology involved web sites/web pages designed to include course syllabi and course materials (31 respondents or 30.4%). E-mail to communicate with course participants was listed by 30 schools (29.4%). Various other technologies were used to facilitate discussions about course topics: “Blackboard” (27 respondents or 26.5%); listserv (8 respondents or 7.8%); chat rooms (5 respondents or 4.9%).

Honors programs/colleges also employed the internet with on-line (internet-based) courses (12 respondents or 11.8%); courses via Web CT (10 respondents or 9.8%); and accessing the internet for course resources (15 respondents or 14.7%).

Other technologies included VCR, CD, and DVD players (29 respondents or 28.4%); interactive television (5 respondents or 4.9%); and document cameras (2 respondents or 2.0%) to deliver course materials. And four respondents (3.9%)

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identified their subscriptions to the NCHC/Phi Theta Kappa Satellite Seminar Series as a use of technology.

Finally, fifteen honors programs/colleges reported that multimedia or “smart” classrooms were available for their faculty to present courses. In these situations, a combination of educational technologies is available in the classroom. Typically, a “smart” classroom would include computers that are internet connected, personal computers, VCRs, DVD players, CD players, document camera, overhead projector, slide projector – or any combination of these.

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Besides the application of educational technologies to deliver honors courses on campus, the possibility or necessity exists for some honors programs/colleges to offer their courses to students at a distance. The occurrence of distance education in higher education in the United States has increased markedly in the past fifteen years. About one-fourth of the accredited colleges and universities in the U.S. are presently providing some form of distance education to students, ranging from individual courses (credit or non-credit) to entire degrees (Connick, 1999). The *Peterson's Guide to Distance Learning Programs* listed nearly 900 accredited schools offering courses and programs in the U.S. and Canada.

The concept of “distance education” has historically had several meanings. Some people preferred the term “distance learning,” which tended to focus on the end product (“learning”) of distance education (Willis, 1993). Others used the term “distributed education,” especially when referring to computer-based courses where collaboration and “virtual interaction” among students was intended (McMahan, 1998). Most commonly, however, the term “distance education” implied a physical separation between the teacher and the student, involving distance teaching as well as distance learning.

Compared to campus-based delivery of courses, educating students at a distance involves several options that are not location-bound, limited by space, limited by time, and limited by curriculum. As a result, there are different levels of delivery – each one characterized by increasing use of technology and innovation (Connick, 1999).

For many years, correspondence courses have been available to students away from a campus (Saba, 1999). The older correspondence methods consisted of packaged print materials that would usually contain a textbook, study guides, course materials, and assignments. Later, pre-produced telecourses were developed to add a more visual component to distance education, and these courses were broadcast over public television (Moore, 1990). More recently, audiotapes, videotapes, and CD-ROM (computer-based instruction) have been added to off-campus education offerings.

Technological developments have created other educational possibilities. Audio-conferencing uses a telephone bridge to connect a number of lines at the same time (“real time” or synchronous) on a single telephone line.

As more people have become familiar with electronic mail (E-mail), this mode of communication has become an important component of distance education (McMahan, 1998). With E-mail, a listserv (mailing list) can be set up in which

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participants subscribe to the service. This mechanism has the advantage of connecting people at a greater distance with minimum difficulty.

Another method of distance education is computer conferencing, which permits either synchronous (at the same time) or asynchronous (at different times) communication capability (Connick, 1999). A web-based bulletin board system on the World-Wide Web can be established and once established, provide relatively easy access via browsers such as Explorer or Netscape. Software is now available to produce graphics, photos, print material, and "form-based" surveys which allow participants to fill in text, respond to polls, or click in answers. Also, software enables students to interact with the teacher and other students.

Video-conferencing is another possibility (Van Dusen, 1997), in which a television monitor with a camera mounted on it enables participants to see and hear one another. Additionally, desk-top video-conferencing allows participants to see one another and to work on the same file.

The most technologically complex level of distance education at present is interactive television (Vincent and Vincent, 1996). This technology is a closed-system (using microwave and/or fiber optic cable) or a satellite system (relying on an up-link and down-link connection). Depending on the system, the connection can be one-way video with two-way audio or two-way video with two-way audio.

When developing a specific distance education system, it is possible for a college or university to use any of these methods independently or in combination. Of course, the particular system is dependent on the needs, and available resources, of the institution and its participants.

According to the NCHC survey, twenty-three (16.5%) of the 139 responding honors programs/colleges indicated that they participate in distance education. Of the twenty-three, nine offer courses via the internet and seven use interactive television; compressed video, video-conferencing, satellite courses, and E-mail are also used to deliver honors courses to students at a distance. Only two institutions reported offering all of their honors requirements to students at a distance: Eastern Oregon University and The University of Maine at Augusta.

THE UNIVERSITY OF MAINE AT AUGUSTA'S EXPERIENCE WITH OFFERING ITS HONORS PROGRAM TO STUDENTS AT A DISTANCE

Since 1987, when The University of Maine at Augusta (U.M.A.) began its statewide instructional telecommunications system, the Honors Program at U.M.A. has been delivering its honors courses to students throughout the state of Maine. The telecommunications delivery system is now known as University College of the University of Maine System, and the seven campuses of the university system provide courses, programs, and teachers. The University of Maine at Augusta permits students the opportunity to study for U.M.A. undergraduate certificates, associate degrees, and bachelor's degrees, while the other six campuses support their own bachelor's and master's degrees.

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University courses are delivered to over 100 locations throughout Maine. These locations include the seven campuses, ten university centers, seven technical colleges, and scores of off-campus sites. Also, U.M.A. has two programs (A.S. and B.S.) in library information technology that are available entirely on the internet, with students worldwide. Consequently, any student matriculated in one of U.M.A.'s associate or bachelor's degree programs, and who is accepted into the Honors Program, is able to complete honors requirements regardless of location.

Access to courses at a distance is accomplished by way of a variety of delivery mechanisms. Most U.M.A. distant courses are broadcast over the statewide interactive television (ITV) system. Technologically, courses on the ITV system are broadcast from the campus to the receive locations via point-to-point microwave and fiber optic cable. The system involves one-way video and two-way audio transmission. Students communicate with the instructor during the class time by telephone, and the broadcast classroom can entertain four calls simultaneously. Also, the telephone system includes phone bridge capability, which allows up to twenty-six students from distant locations to be placed in discussion groups.

Another technological delivery system for courses is the compressed video (CV). CV permits two-way video and two-way audio between locations, but only between university campuses and the University College in Bangor.

The university also offers online courses. These computer-based courses are available over the Internet to anyone who has access to a computer that is connected to the Internet. As such, these web-based courses are asynchronous.

Further, many distance education courses use the Internet for communication, research, and information resources. Computer conferencing ("Blackboard," "First Class," Web CT), E-mail, and the World-Wide Web are available for faculty and students. Some courses use prerecorded videotapes for part or all of the course material. And still other courses employ multimedia, where streaming video and/or audio technology enable the students to view and/or listen to the class on a multimedia PC connected to the Web.

Therefore, although offering the entire U.M.A. Honors Program to students statewide represents a challenge, honors faculty have been able to adapt their courses effectively to match the capability of the various types of technology.

The University of Maine at Augusta has three campuses (Augusta, Bangor, Lewiston) where students may take honors courses on-site. All faculty and students associated with honors courses on-campus have access to computer conferencing, E-mail, PCs with Powerpoint, Internet connection, VCRs, DVD and CD players, overhead projectors, slide projectors, and telephone conferencing: in other words, the "smart classroom" described earlier.

U.M.A. students who do not take classes on the three campuses have the option of driving to a university center, where there is a combination of on-site instruction and distance education courses, or to an extended site where there are only distance education courses. Sometimes honors courses are scheduled on-site at centers, but most often the honors courses are received off-campus via ITV or the Internet.

The U.M.A. Honors Program requires a minimum of fifteen semester hours for associate degree students and a minimum of twenty-one semester hours for bachelor's

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degree students. HON 300: Critical Thinking and Writing is the foundation course in both degree sequences. This course is offered every spring semester over the ITV system, with a class size limit of 35 students.

The second course in the honors sequence is HON 301: Honors Colloquium. When offered as an honors course at a distance, HON 301 is cross-listed with a regularly scheduled course, such as Psychology of Human Development, which is listed as PSY 308/HON 301 in the course guide. Students in the honors program register for the honors option, and the course requirements for the honors students are altered to reflect honors-level effort. HON 301 distance education courses may be ITV, compressed video, or web-based courses.

For associate degree honors students, at least six semester hours of elective honors courses and, for bachelor's degree honors students, at least twelve semester hours of elective honors courses are required. For these elective requirements, whether on-campus or off-campus, honors program students may satisfy the requirements through a variety of means. More HON 301 courses may be taken, honors independent studies may be pursued, honors readings courses may be developed (especially in conjunction with the NCHC Satellite Seminar topics), honors international/intercultural experiences and service learning experiences may be granted credit, or students may waive three honors elective credits by completing 45 hours of documented voluntary community service. For many of these options, technology facilitates the educational process: ITV, CV, the Internet, computer conferencing, telephone conferencing, E-mail, satellite up-link and down-link.

For each honors student a capstone experience is required: a project for associate degree students (HON 210) and a senior thesis (HON 410) or leadership seminar (HON 401) for bachelor's degree students. A mentor is matched with the student for the project and senior thesis, depending upon the nature of the topic. All honors program students are encouraged to take the leadership seminar, but it may be used to satisfy one of the capstone experience requirements as well. Besides being scheduled on campus, the leadership seminar is also offered to distant students using compressed video between campuses (two-way video, two-way audio). There are also faculty at the various CV locations to facilitate discussions, exercises, and projects.

CONCLUSION

For administrators and faculty in higher education today the question no longer is whether the relationship between technology and distance education will continue, but rather what form that relationship will take in the future. And when the relationship is extended to honors programs, those colleges and universities that desire or need to present their honors courses and programs to students at a distance are only limited by their resources (human and financial), creativity, and imagination. As The University of Maine at Augusta has demonstrated, the honors experience can be made available to off-campus students through the use of technology in an effective and efficient manner.

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