



LII Backgrounder on Distance Learning

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"Workplace-bound employees of the future may never have to leave their desks, much less enter a classroom to receive training."

-- The Virtual University & Educational Opportunity, p. 12

"Much of the commercial hype and hope about distance learning is based on a very unidirectional conception of instruction, where teaching is merely presentation, and learning is merely absorption. The Open University's experience with two million students over 25 years suggests that such an impoverished notion of distance education will fail -- or at least have massive drop-out problems."

-- Sir John Daniel, Vice Chancellor, The Open University

I. Introduction - Why (and why not) to be interested in "distance learning"... for adults

Half of all U.S. households have at least one computer; the number of e-mail users in this country exceeds 80 million. Nearly a half of the courses offered at the college level now use e-mail as at least one mode of communication between teacher and student. Nearly a half of today's undergraduates use the Internet at least once a day. And each of these measures of penetration is changing rapidly.

Distance learning is an old idea, but its potential has been transformed by the explosive take up of digital technology. As the College Board report (see side panel) notes:

[It is now possible] to transcend barriers of time and space in ways unimagined only a few years ago. Almost anything - text, data, images, video, audio - can be delivered electronically, almost anywhere in the world, almost any time and in real time, over the Internet. Imaging and Web-based technologies are also constantly enhancing the potential for two-way communications between and among teachers and students in remote locations.

Some viewing these developments imagine or worry about substitution - using the new technologies to substitute less costly alternatives for "conventional classroom instruction." But judging from the past, the new technology is more likely to supplement than substitute in conventional education settings and therefore to add costs rather than reduce them. So far that has been true with campus-based education.

With forms of content delivery and communication that are so heedless of time and distance, the challenge for many educational institutions is less "How can we do what we have done more cost-effectively?" but rather "What else is now possible?" Freed of the need to do so much of our teaching by gathering teacher and student in the same place at the same time:

- Can we reach new students?
- Can we draw upon teachers previously unavailable?

[ways to access material](#) 

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References and Suggested Readings

- [Outline for May 21 Discussion](#)
- [Recent Reports on Distance Learning](#)
 - [Distance Learning in Higher Education: Update February, 1999 \(Institute for Higher Education Policy 1999\)](#)
 - [Full Report](#) (8 pages)
 - [The Virtual University & Educational Opportunity \(The College Board 1999\)](#)
 - [Press release](#)
 - [Full Report](#) (35 pages, contains numerous references)
 - [What's the Difference? \(Institute for Higher Education Policy 1999, prepared for the AFT & NEA\)](#)
 - [Full Report](#) (42 pages)
- [Some Examples Big and Small](#)
 - A few large-scale institutional leaders:
 - [Western Governors University](#)
 - [The California Virtual University](#)

- Can we do a better job of meeting the learning needs of diverse students?
- Can we offer educational program that is more closely matched in time and place to the situation that prompts the learner's desire to learn?

And so on.

II. Publishing as a form of distance education (distance learning on demand)

Technology shapes the categories we use to discuss and think about human activity. The set of activities we think of as "education" and those we refer to as "research or information gathering" may well blur together as they converge on the same set of new technologies.

The successful providers of continuing professional education in law have increasingly become publishers of print materials, audio and video tapes to the point that most provide more "education" in this form than through live programs. These materials share the characteristic that they allow the learner to choose the time, place, and topic.

III. Approaching distance education incrementally

Many of the players now rushing into distance learning are being drawn by the technology. They can be understood as asking "What problem can this solve?" or "How can this be used to generate new revenue?"

Others appear to be paralyzed by the technology, viewing the costs and the expertise required to be a serious player in distance learning to be out of their reach.

For most educators an approach that might be termed "attentive incrementalism" may be the wisest approach. "Attentive" suggests the necessity to become and stay aware of what others are doing with digital technology. Those one must attend to include both competitors and one's students. "Attentive" also calls for identifying future infrastructure or support needs. "Incrementalism" suggests adding accessible distance elements to current programs. If Web-based conferencing is not currently available within a unit, that doesn't mean that e-mail or a list can't be used to develop an understanding of how current offerings might be improved through these very similar means and to build a familiarity among faculty with the pedagogical value of asynchronous electronic exchange. Course Web pages don't have to be "designer" pages to do the job. One advantage of going incremental and lower tech is that it is likely to provide better access to greater numbers. Because LII's distance learning course (see below) used low-end video conferencing technology students at law schools that lacked a dedicated facility were able to participate.

IV. The LII's experience with distance learning

A. Distance learning on demand

As an electronic publisher of legal materials - Supreme Court decisions, the U.S. Code, introductory commentary on law topics from admiralty to workers compensation- the Legal Information Institute has since its establishment in 1992 moved Cornell Law School into an educational relationship with a vast and diverse new clientele. Each time the U.S. Supreme Court hands down a decision, the LII's e-mail bulletin summarizing it carries the word to over 18,000 individuals and institutions. Currently, the LII's web servers are relied on by some 40,000 users a day. Every day the LII provides at least a small measure of legal information (education?) to nearly three times the number of people who have graduated from the school since its founding.

B. Copyright and Digital Works

In 1996-97 LII undertook to explore how digital technology might be used by law schools to reach students (and involve faculty) remote from their campuses. Using the Internet, it offered a law course, for credit, to students of four participating law schools -- Cornell plus Chicago-Kent, Colorado, and Kansas. That course has just finished its

- [Virtual U Minnesota](#)
- [The Open University](#) (UK)
- [Contact North](#) (Canada)

- Some smaller institutions:
 - [Lansing Community College](#)
 - [Brevard Community College](#)
- A sample course or two:
 - [Copyright and Digital Works](#) (the LII's own modest venture)
 - [Online class tours](#) (California Virtual University)
- Some of the many eager partners:
 - [PBS](#)
 - [McGraw-Hill OnLine Learning](#)
 - [eCollege.com](#)
 - [BlackBoard, Inc.](#)

- **An assortment of basic tools (with examples)**

- Web pages as a mode of distributing text (this page)
- Audio and video ([NPR's 1000 Years of Music](#) and [Cornell Medical School's Grand Rounds](#))
- "Discussion" tools:
 - e-mail (including use of address groups and lists)
 - web-based conferencing ([WebBoard](#))
 - desk-top audio/video conferencing (CU-Seeme: [commercial site, one of many user sites](#))
 - high-end conferencing ([Pictel](#))
- Testing or evaluation tools

third year. Some key elements of this initial LII distance learning venture include:

- digital course materials (distributed via the Internet)
- e-mail and Web-based written exchange as a continuous (asynchronous) means of teacher-student, student-student, and student-teacher exchange [using WebBoard, see side panel], and
- once a week Internet-based video conference for "face to face" class discussion (scheduled across four school class schedules and academic calendars and three time zones) [using CU-Seeme, see side panel]

Educational institutions are embarking upon "distance learning" for many different reasons and consequently the phenomenon takes many forms. The underlying aim of this particular project (shared by all the participating schools) has been to discover ways that network communication, with its ability to nullify barriers imposed by distance and advantages provided by proximity, can be used to give resident students wider educational options, and permit faculty members to teach in areas of special interest and expertise that draw insufficient student enrollments in their home institutions.

Questionnaire

In order to make best use of next Friday's short session I would like to find out more about the experience and concerns you bring to an exploration of "distance learning." To that end I've prepared a short questionnaire. Would you kindly [click here](#) and fill it out.

Suggestions or Comments?

This collection of material on distance learning is a work in progress. If you have suggestions of additional material or sources, comments, or feedback of any kind, please [email the author!](#)

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