

## QUALITY ISSUES IN DISTANCE LEARNING

*O.V. Tunik, M.V. Kravchenko*

*Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics, Minsk, Belarus,  
tunik7@rambler.ru*

Abstract. The objectives of the article are to reveal the problems of distant learning tools used in and out of ESP language classroom. It highlights certain issues affecting the amount of effort that goes into designing and teaching the course, which will in turn determine the quality of education received through the distance learning program.

Distance learning is claimed to be an excellent alternative to a traditional, classroom-based education. It offers students a flexible schedule and the ability to set the learning pace as well as study at institutions not otherwise available to the student. But a few crucial issues

While advances in technology have made it possible to offer distance learning in a variety of media and formats, they have also introduced some problems into the learning environment. Instructors who are teaching distance courses should be fully trained in the use of all requisite technology. They may not make full use of the technological resources available to them, or they may make poor use of the technology, which hinders presentation of the material. As a result, distance learning students may not get the full benefit of the course for which they signed up.

There is also a possible misuse of technology on the student side of things. With all of the electronic publishing and written material available on the World Wide Web today, plagiarism has become almost the top concern among teachers. As everything is done at a distance and all assignments are submitted electronically with discussions handled through screen names, students might copy information straight from the Internet or have a friend who has already gone through the program and completed the assignments.

These practices will produce graduates who have a degree but little knowledge in their field of specialization. It might seem like an individual problem, but if a learning institution gains a reputation for graduating students who don't have a solid understanding of the degree material, the value of any degree from that establishment goes down.

Distance learning often depends on technology to deliver content. Equipment problems can seriously diminish the effectiveness of a course. The simplest and often most frustrating problem is that of the Internet being down, on either the student's or the instructor's end. Anyone waiting until the last minute to turn in an assignment via email can be foiled by an untimely disconnect. Students might be gathered online for a live chat and the professor may not have an Internet connection, resulting in the inconvenience of rescheduling.

Instructors might have developed an excellent online course, full of multimedia content, interactive discussions, and a streaming video feed of lectures. All of the preparation in the world, however, cannot compete with technical failure. Dealing with technical issues in the middle of class shortens the effective learning time and disrupts the flow of the class. This in turn hinders the learning process and the successful delivery of course content.

There is also the difficulty in knowing how to operate technology effectively. Anyone not accustomed to using a computer is going to face a problem while registering for an online course. Students will have to become comfortable working with word-processing software, checking email, browsing Web sites, and using media players, among other things.

Moreover, the technology and equipment required to participate in a class might not be cheap, and its cost sometimes is not considered in the overall cost of taking a distance course. Just as classroom-based courses come with fees that can add up quickly, distance programs



have their own additional costs that might not be readily apparent. Most everyone will own a computer already, so that is not necessarily a purchase that has to be made specifically for distance learning; however, the machine will have to be relatively up to date. The computer is the most important tool, and will need to handle a variety of programs that students might not otherwise use. Processor, RAM, and graphics card updates may be necessary in order to get the most out of the course.

There is also the monthly fee for the Internet access in whatever form the student chooses. On top of that, students might be required to make use of programs that they don't already own. The cost for these programs might be avoided at traditional colleges where students can make use of on-campus computer labs that already have these programs installed.

When attending an educational institution, students have a reasonable expectation that it has been examined and accredited by the appropriate authorities. The same expectation cannot necessarily be justified for all online instructions. Anyone on the Internet can claim to be an expert and offer a distance learning program. They might even claim to be "accredited." Students need to be prepared to do their homework about any group, individual, professional organization, or learning institution before they enroll for classes. The opportunities for attending high-quality distance learning programs are vast, but just as many scams and sub-par programs exist, and students should keep that in mind.

Even when attending a distance learning program offered by a well-known, accredited university, there can still be quality concerns with the course. The traditional courses have probably been taught several times, being improved each time through student and faculty input. An online course may be new and as yet untested. Teachers who design these courses might have little or no experience teaching online courses, and might mistakenly design the course the same way they would have for a traditional format. This format might not translate well to the new online forum, and much of the content of the course might be missed, disorganized, or just hard to follow.

While it is certainly not true in all cases, some educational institutions will see their distance learning programs as somewhat less important than their traditional, established programs. Lessons might not be planned with the same care, the same quality standards might not be followed, and the professors chosen to teach the courses might feel as though they have drawn the short straw in teaching assignments.

Instructors are really the make-or-break aspect of any distance learning course. No matter how interesting or relevant the material might be, poor presentation and a lack of enthusiasm on the teacher's part can really hurt the experience and leave students feeling disconnected. If teachers are excited about what they're teaching and interested in conveying the information to the students, that will make for a more effective learning environment. Apathy about the course subject or about the idea of teaching a distance learning course can affect the class negatively. It can be hard to keep students involved in a distance learning class because they are so isolated and attendance for a given number of days per week is not mandatory. If instructors don't make a special effort to engage students in the class, students can lose interest quickly.

Close scrutiny of the intrinsic problems in distance education will help overcome problems encountered by students and faculty. Understanding and mitigating technology problems are important, especially with the rapid expansion of technology. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom.