Overview

The most essential aspect of any teaching-learning situation must be the learner. However, in distance education this concern for the learner is often moved to a secondary level, and the primary focus of attention is captured by the challenge of the media — the actual delivery of the instruction via some form of distance-bridging technology. The concern for the learner is overshadowed by a focus that has been shifted to computer programs, TV monitor resolution, type of telephone cable, broadcast quality, or some other technology-based issue. The shifting of attention away from the learner and toward the media is often done by default without any real examination of the central role that the learner must have in any teaching-learning relationship.

Gibson (2003) writes, “It goes without saying that learners and learning are at the heart of the distance education enterprise. Thus, it comes as a bit of a surprise that Koble and Bunker (1997) determined that only 17% of the 117 articles published in the American Journal of Distance Education in its first 8 years of publication had a focus on learners, learning, and learner support” (p. 147).

In this chapter, the focus on the learner, the most complex aspect of any teaching situation, will be established and strengthened through an examination of the variety of learner relationships that are foundational to a strong distance education setting.

Key Questions for this Chapter

Why is it important to begin considering distance education with a concern for the learner and then move on to other concerns?

What is it about the media of distance education that makes it so attractive that the media, and not the learner, become the key basis for planning for so many educators?

What are the different learner relationships that must exist in a distance education setting?

Why do we as educators often assume that the creation of a distance education learning environment is basically the same as establishing a face-to-face teaching-learning relationship? How are they different?

Building the Learning Relationships

The very thought of framing this chapter in terms of a relationship runs counter to many popular
views of what teaching is all about. A relationship is an intimate concept that assumes there is a meaningful linkage between the learner and the things that make up the instructional environment – other learners, the media, the content, and the educator. And, it is through the development of such a relationship that the learner develops the trust that is needed to allow new learning to occur.

The contrary view of the teaching-learning relationship is built around the effective and efficient delivery of information. The challenge in a delivery of information view is to create replicable procedures by which information can be organized, packaged, and delivered. Then, once created, the delivery part of the process can be replicated as many times as is needed for successive groups of students. The key to such a view is to gain a sufficient enough understanding of the student's knowledge or skill needs to allow the educator to do the selection of appropriate content and then to package it in such a manner that it will be deliverable to a group of learners with minimal loss of information. Instructional objectives are defined, curriculum is organized, procedures are identified, lessons are developed, and when ready the information is delivered to the learners. This view then goes on to assume that, once packaged, the information can be marketed through a variety of sources for continued delivery in the future. The delivery of information view appears to be very similar to a supermarket approach to instruction – stock the shelves with well advertised products that are guaranteed to fulfill a need and then wait for the customers to come to purchase the products.

So why is a relationship view of teaching and learning often avoided? A relationship view of teaching and learning holds that learning is a very personal phenomena and care must be taken to reduce the impersonal aspects that often accompany the teaching and learning situation. Such a view can present a very complex picture and leave the educator with much less control over the learner – the control moves to the learner. Adhering to an exclusive concern for information delivery, can be comforting to the teacher because of the opportunity for strong teacher control. A relationship view holds that it is not possible nor desirable to create packaged approaches to teaching without first taking into serious consideration the uniqueness of each individual learner. In fact, the relationship view begins with the assumption that each learner is so unique and different that it is impossible to treat any learner in the exact same manner as another. If prepared instructional materials are used in the relationship approach, it is imperative that the distance education system be developed to accommodate the uniqueness of each learner.

The idea of building teaching and learning opportunities around relationships is seen by some as a serious roadblock that stands in the way of distance education – a mediated form of education that is usually delivered to large groups of students without a concern for personalization. The challenge for the distance educator is to look for ways to develop relationships and personalization, even when the tendency is to do, however, otherwise.

The remainder of this chapter will examine the four sets of relationships that must be accommodated within the distance education environment to create the basis for meaningful learning – learner-instructor relationships, learner-learner relationships, learner-instructional content relationships, and learner-technology relationships.

**Building the Learner-Instructor Relationship in Distance Education**

Interestingly, distance education has a greater potential for viable learner-instructor relationships than a typical face-to-face teaching environment. In a face-to-face situation the learner and the instructor are just a matter of a few feet from each other. We assume that, due to the lack of any distance barriers, the learner-instructor relationship will have no problems and operate in wonderful ways. Yet
that is seldom the case. Let me share something that happened to me.

I remember a rather large class I was teaching one evening a number of years ago. It was the very first class of the semester and I had my usual jitters that accompany the beginning of a new course. I made sure to begin the class with an activity and before I knew it things seemed to be moving along quite well. Students were organized into small groups and discussing the topic I had written on the chalkboard. We then moved to a large group discussion and I was able to summarize key ideas. Appropriate questions were being asked. People were taking notes. I was starting to learn the names of the students. I was beginning to relax as the class momentum was picking up!

Finally it was time for a break and I suddenly remembered that in my nervousness to get started I had forgotten to do introductions. So, following the break I began the class by writing the course name and number on the chalkboard along with my name, office address and phone number. Immediately three students got up out of their chairs, grabbed their paper and pencils, and darted out the door. They had been in the wrong class! Wow, what if I had not mentioned the course name until the third week!

In face-to-face instruction it is easy to assume that there is a sense of relationship between the instructor and the students. It is easy to assume that since we are together in the same room, there is a high level of personal relationship. Wrong. If the learner-instructor relationship in a face-to-face setting is not made a point of concern, it will not exist. Regardless of how physically close instructors may be to the learners, unless they work to facilitate relationships they won’t happen by themselves.

In a distance education situation, however, the prerequisites for establishing learner-instructor relationships are built in. The course is advertised by name and number, the instructor’s name is posted, and contact information is prominently displayed. The basis for a relationship with each student is already in place as an instructor begins the course. Then it is up to the instructor to build on that beginning with each student. Let me try to clarify this further with something from my own experience.

As an amateur radio operator I have always been familiar with what is referred to as a "net." This is the situation where a number of different amateur radio operators, each operating their radio station from a distant location, join together for a roundtable discussion. If the number of operators is small enough there is no need for a moderator – each person remembers the order in which they joined the net and the discussion continues around the group with each person talking for a few minutes and then turning the conversation over to the next person. The net continues around and around until the topic is exhausted or everyone leaves. It usually works well because everyone is familiar with the protocol of how a net works.

When there are a large number of amateur radio stations on the net it requires a moderator, a net control station, to keep things organized and flowing well. The net control station keeps track of all participants, the order in which they will each share their comments, and also maintains order. As each radio operator finishes speaking he turns the control back to the net control station who, in turn, moves it to the next contributor. The net control station accepts the responsibility for keeping things organized so that everyone can make their contribution. The best nets have net control stations that are able to artfully balance between too much and too little control.

It is essential for the distance education instructor to accept responsibility not only for the content of
the instruction, but also for the process that is used. A viable distance education program has as its foundation a strong sense of relationship between the learner and the instructor. Acting as a moderator, the instructor must be aware of all learners who are participating, the interests and motivations of each, and work to provide appropriate opportunities for everyone to make his or her contribution. Acting much like a gracious host, the distance education instructor at times will work to either encourage or challenge each learner. Moving from one learner to the next and not forgetting any of the learners, the distance education instructor helps each learner understand that his or her desire to learn can be achieved and the instructor is willing to assist. The instructor must be able to use his or her own relationship with each learner as a key to involving the learners in the course and establishing the culture for the course. The instructor must be able to move his or her own ego to the side to allow such relationships to forge the basis for learning. Without the instructor serving to welcome each learner to the interaction, there is a high probability that the course will turn into a one-way exercise in information delivery, something that is probably better accomplished by reading a textbook.

Building the Learner-Learner Relationship in Distance Education

When we are one of the key players, the work of developing relationships that will enhance learning is certainly easier. This is clearly seen in the learner-instructor relationship. In the learner-learner relationship, however, instructors might seem to be key players; the key players are then the learners. However, in much the same way that the instructor can be a significant helper to developing the learner-instructor relationship, the instructor can also significantly help learner-learner relationships.

The "hit meter " on my website was indicating that traffic was starting to pick up. Though it had taken nearly 4 months for this to occur it was now apparent that more and more people each week were stopping at the website for information. Occasionally I would receive an email from a visitor inquiring about one thing or another. Now it was time to see if I could stimulate a bit of interaction among those who were visiting the site. Certainly it was fun to see the numbers begin to rise and to receive an occasional email, but I was really interested in finding out what sorts of things the visitors were interested in.

I found a free Bulletin Board on the worldwide web and I linked to it from my website. I created a link to the Bulletin Board, invited visitors to enter their comments, and then I sat back and waited to see the sorts of messages the visitors would start leaving. The first day went by, as did the second, third, fourth and fifth. No messages were being left on the Bulletin Board! Why not? The Bulletin Board was there and ready for people to use. Certainly they had things they would like to share with each other. After waiting for nearly three weeks with no messages on the Bulletin Board I finally began to understand that there might be an important role for me play. I needed to leave some sort of message that would stimulate others to share their ideas. I first considered leaving a "guilt" message but quickly dismissed it as inappropriate and probably ineffective (You know the type – “This is your Bulletin Board and you have to contribute to make it work – or else!”). I realized that such a message might stimulate reaction to me but I really wanted interaction rather then reaction. And, I wanted the interaction to occur between the visitors to the website – not between a visitor and me.

I needed to better understand the visitors and to find ways to encourage them to share their thinking. If I could get a few to begin to do some sharing, others were certain to follow. I got on the phone and called one of my friends who had previously checked into the Bulletin
Board. I challenged her to leave a message on the Bulletin Board that would allow others to get insight into what she was thinking. She did it and things immediately began to pick up!

As an instructor it is important to understand the difference between true interaction and merely reacting to his or her comments. To establish a basis for interaction demands that the instructor adopt a set of assumptions that places value on the learners and their experiences, knowledge, and ability to help each other to learn. Then, to actually energize the interaction, the instructor must search out ways to unobtrusively encourage the learners to share their experience, knowledge, and willingness to help each other. When the instructor is able to accomplish this form of learner encouragement, learner-learner relationships will develop and form a powerful foundation for the instruction.

**Building the Learner-Instructional Content Relationship in Distance Education**

The learner-instructional content relationship is often beyond the direct control of the instructor. Such a relationship is usually built around a teachable moment for the learner whereby certain content becomes interesting or essential to the learner. When this connection occurs, the learner recognizes the importance of the content and works to become involved with it. The instructor can assume much more of a "consultant to the learner" role in such a situation and work to bring important content to the learner. Yet, the learner's role is significant in helping to define the instructional content.

Of course, instructors often face the very opposite situation — one that can be quite disastrous — when the learner sees no need for the content. In such a situation the instructor fights an unending battle to try to get the learner involved. But since this situation often appears to be a waste of everyone's time, the typical outcome is extremely frustrating.

It was my first semester for teaching this course and I spent a number of weeks reading articles, books and anything else that seemed to be related to my topic. When I felt I had enough “stuff” to make a meaningful course I sat down to the task of organizing the content. What started out as a seemingly easy task soon turned difficult. Each time I went about organizing the content I could only go so far before I decided that there was a better way to do it, an alternative strategy for the organization. I would then start all over again trying to organize the content in this new alternative way. After a number of these false starts I began to realize that, though I knew the content, I really wasn't very sure of the best way to organize it for presentation for this particular group of learners.

What to do?

I selected what seemed to be the most logical organizational plan and used it as the basis for my syllabus. I decided, though, that this would only be a decoy, a way to get the learners to relax at the beginning of the first class. With a bit of luck I would be able to enlist their help in building a syllabus that truly represented their interest in the content. They would enter the class assuming I would have a syllabus for them and they would be right — I would have one. The thing they would not know is that I didn't plan to really use this organization plan. And the reason was because I didn't know the learners and their need for the content.

Once the class began and things settled down a bit I was able to start drawing from the learners bits and pieces of their own concern for the content. Carefully writing down their ideas on the chalkboard, I tried to document what they were saying. At a key point I suggested
to the class that it might make sense if we reorganized the course around specific content
concerns and questions they had. (Aha, there it was, I was trying to link the learners directly
to the instructional content.) We broke into small groups and within an hour we had a number
of recommendations for how to best organize the semester’s content. The learner-instructional
content relationship was off to a good start!

The instructor desiring to help build the learner-instructional content relationship is confronted with
helping to empower the learners. The challenge is to create a situation where the learners are given the
freedom to express their interests and to define content that is meaningful to them. Rather than having
the instructor play the lead role in this process and risk creating a sense of learner dependence, the
instructor helps the learners assume the lead role. The instructor's role is to facilitate the learners’
direct interaction with the content. If it works well the learners will be able to move forward and
explore content that is defined by prior experience, knowledge and interest.

Building this link between the learner and the instructional content is not nearly as easy to accomplish
in a distance education setting as it is in a face-to-face situation. Searching out creative and functional
ways to help learners identify their content needs and then linking them directly to the course content
to gain needed information is a considerable challenge. A few ideas:

- Have learners post short resumes on a website that describe their background and experience
  in relation to the content of the distance education program. Have them identify particular
  questions, issues, and content that they would like to search out.

- Ask learners to individually identify ways in which they will be able to make a contribution to
  the instruction. What specific questions is each learner prepared to help his or her classmates
  answer?

- Develop a listing of content resources that are suggested by members of the class. Post the
  listing and the name of the class member who contributed each item to a website for all to
  access.

- Have learners individually prepare an outline of specific areas within the course content that
  they plan to explore in depth. Enter into a contract with each learner that is based upon his or
  her outline and identifies specific output during the course.

- Hold part of one class session at the library and invite one of the reference librarians to help
  the class members understand how to best search out relevant information at the library. For a
  distance education course, invite the librarian to join the group online or on the air to share
  ideas on how the learners can be more successful at getting in touch with relevant content.

- As you have success in helping one student get closer to the content that he or she is looking
  for, share a description of how it happened with others in the class. Encourage others to follow
  a similar path.

Building the Learner-Technology Relationship in Distance Education

If instructors can remember the first time they tried to use a friend's cellular phone, or the time the
copy machine jammed and the mess they made as they tried to fix it quickly before anyone saw that
they had broken it, then they may have some idea of the potential apprehension that the learners may
face in a technology-based learning environment. Adding technology to the learning environment, though potentially offering all kinds of wonderful advantages to the educator, may be very threatening to the learner. Helping to establish a meaningful learner-technology relationship in a distance education program is an essential activity for the educator. When the learner gains a sense of control over the technology, when the learner-technology relationship has been well established, instructors can then expect viable learning to take place. The fit between the technology used for distance education and the learner can greatly determine the eventual success of the distance education program. The fit must be a good one.

My friend’s voice sounded a bit tired and very weary. He had just returned from Detroit where he had witnessed one of his staff member's attempt to link four groups of local citizens at locations around the state via two-way interactive television. Even forgetting the 20 minutes at the beginning of the event that were lost when problems of compatibility of equipment had to be solved, he felt that the entire ordeal had been an expensive lesson in failing to communicate. A half hour panel discussion had droned on for almost 50 minutes; a couple of prepared questions had been asked; there had been little interaction, and the guest expert turned out to be a lot less expert than they had planned. It appeared that the only smart thing he had done was not to distribute the evaluation or feedback form that had been prepared. He already knew what the reactions would be.

His call to me was in desperation. They had another similar four-way hookup scheduled in another month, and he feared that it would again lead to less than wonderful results. And, of course, the real fear was that they might lose the learners. Those people who had showed up for today’s session may not want to try it again! Their time was valuable, and it seemed there was not a lot to be gained from sitting in a room watching a television screen for two and a half hours. I asked him to describe the learners’ reactions to what went on, and, as can be expected, he described a scene where people sat in neat rows, rather uninterested in what was going on, and non-communicative.

My suggestions -

1) Don't try the two-way interactive television the next time. The technology seemed to be extremely more powerful than was needed. The learners were probably intimidated by such a powerful medium to the point where they were afraid to enter into dialogue.

2) Use a facilitator at each of the four sites who would be able to start interacting with the group before going "on the air." Use this first segment of time to help people become involved with each other and to identify questions that they would like to ask of both the other groups and of the guest expert.

3) Use a simple speaker phone at each site and hook them all together via a telephone conferencing system. Everyone involved is familiar with the telephone and how it works. The technology was not formidable.

4) Have each facilitator help identify a group spokesperson who would relay comments from his or her group to the others on the conference call. Make sure this person felt comfortable with the technology.

5) Periodically stop the conference call and go "off line" to allow each group to react
to what was being said and to compose their next round of questions and concerns.

6) Instruct the facilitators in how to use the "mute " button on the speaker phone, so each group could periodically break away from the conference call to poll its members, decide on a group response, or share a thought or two without disturbing the others who were on line.

7) Finally, after a couple of sessions and the groups had mastered the speaker phone technology so it is working well, then consider once again trying two-way interactive television. The learner-technology relationship would then probably be strong enough for it to work well.

My friend was excited. He had felt he had to use the latest and best technology, even though it was apparent that it wouldn’t be easy to establish a relationship between such technology and the learners. By altering the technology, however, the learner-technology relationship was improved to the point where the technology would not interfere with the learning.

Selection of technology to support distance education can be made for a variety of reasons. But all of the reasons that are used for selecting distance education technology are made with the learner clearly in mind. For instance, some of the more typical reasons for choosing particular distance-bridging technology include:

  - **Cost** - The new technology is affordable to purchase and inexpensive to use.
  - **Newness** - The new technology is the latest thing available.
  - **Flexibility** - The new technology can be used to respond to a variety of different needs.
  - **Transportability** - The new technology can be easily moved about and used at different locations.
  - **Transparency** - The new technology is not obtrusive and will not get in the way of teaching and learning.
  - **Compatibility** - The new technology can be used in conjunction with existing technology.

Although these criteria can all be very meaningful in their own way, when considering specific technology to be used in support of distance education, one additional criteria is essential:

  - **Embracability** - The new technology will be welcomed and embraced by the learners.

If the distance education technology is embraced by the learners, it will most certainly provide for learner comfort, trust, and most importantly, relationship.

References

