

Real Concerns on Distance Education When Distance is a Reality

Leo Wells
Technology Research Consultant
San Angelo, TX USA
camelpower@yahoo.com

Abstract: The study from which this report was derived explored concerns of school change facilitators (superintendents, principals, and technology coordinators) as they implemented new curricular requirements for instructional technology. This present report focused on one strand of concerns: distance education. Six informants expressed hesitation over the impending interactive video labs which were to be installed in their school districts, primarily over bad experiences from previous efforts in distance learning. Each informant expressed hope that the new systems would be useful. There appears to be the need for balance as the positive aspects of distance systems (service, teaching) are implemented against the negative aspects of distance systems (teaching changes, impersonalness).

Introduction

Distance education is a reality, continuing to be a growing factor in education, and has become the de facto focus of instructional design programs at the university level. From courses in audio visuals, to BASIC and Logo programming, to applications work, and now to teaching by means of the World Wide Web, the change in what topics need to be considered in instructional technology have morphed over my professional life, and those changes are recognized in the literature. (Becker, 1998; Cuban, 1986) In their ubiquity, distance systems are simply assumed to be the norm.

This writer has visited with many collegiate education departments, each of which believe that they are the true pioneers in distance technology, when, in fact, they are using one of a handful of commercial products which promise ease of course delivery. Noble (1997) suggests ulterior motives in promulgating distance delivery within universities and schools in their collaborations with private industry, resulting in outside control over academics in exchange for providing capital improvements.

At any rate, a cursory look at professional journals from 1998 forward reveal a preponderance of discussions over every "hot" distance topic. Notwithstanding Noble, energetic research is being conducted over instructional design for websites (Coppola & Thomas, 2000; Firdyiwiek, 1999; Huang, 2000; Ingram, 2000; Maddux, 1999; Price, 1999; Smaldino, 1999), evaluation of web courses (Kubala, 1998; Kubala, 2000; Rankin, 2000), and practical and administrative concerns (Cornell, 1999; Eastmond & Lawrence, 1998; Harmon & Jones, 1999; Hawkes & Cambre, 2000; Schifter, 2000; Swartz & Biggs, 1999; Wade, 1999; Wynia, 2000; Zhang, 1999).

This writer's earlier study explored concerns of school change facilitators during the implementation of a comprehensive statewide curriculum which included specifics on technology applications. (Wells, 1999) Concerns articulated by the study's informants included several themes, such as student learning, finances, and power, but concerns over distance education, past and future, appeared to be dominant and strong. This present report centers and expands on the concerns over distance education that these informants expressed.

Context for the Study

This study was conducted with those designated as "change facilitators" in a seven-district technology consortium in rural Texas. Two of the districts declined to participate in this research. These districts were rural, but possessed school leaders who were committed to bring their communities up to date with technology.

In general, each of the five school districts were in Texas counties which have declined in population since 1990. The combined population of these districts is 7,306 (Texas Almanac, 1998). Each district's economy was

based on agriculture and varying amounts of mineral wealth, resulting in substantial difference in property values.

Telephone interviews were conducted by this writer with three each of school superintendents, building principals, and district technology coordinators scattered among five of the consortium districts. Pseudonyms are given for each of these participants in this present report. Interview data was analyzed and organized to reflect patterns or "themes" which emerged from the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Bogdan and Biklen further suggest that this method of sorting piles of coded data allows the researcher to make better sense of the data and communicate the results to others.

The Salt Fork Educational Technology Consortium (the Consortium) is comprised of seven independent school districts, all of which have worked together as a special education cooperative. Six of these districts are members of Educational Service Center (ESC) Region J, while one is actually in the territory of ESC Region K. As also with special education cooperatives, a technology consortium is an "interlocal agreement" by Texas law, and has a management board comprised of district superintendents, one district designated as fiscal agent, and a chair, authorized to speak and act for the group.

The Salt Fork Telephone Company (SFTC), headquartered in Dellwood, Texas, provides telephone service for several counties in Texas. All of the school districts in these counties depend on this provider for telephone service and the possibility of Internet connectivity. In 1995, the SFTC invited school leaders from their service area to a demonstration in Dellwood to demonstrate a variety of new technologies that they were excited to announce, particularly their new capability for two-way interactive video. Because these districts had worked together before, had a common telephone carrier, and had common interests, these school leaders concluded it practical to combine together for technology improvement in their schools.

Prior to the Consortium's establishment, member districts were limited to the computers they had in the classroom. Almost all of their computers were stand-alone units. Each district also had a satellite dish for the state network materials, but were using them poorly and inefficiently.

The Consortium keeps operating funds in a bank account separate from general operating funds, administered by the business manager of the fiscal agent. To date, funding has come from grants, and from moneys generated from the two member districts designated as "property-wealthy" under Chapter 41 of the Texas Education Code. These districts recapture a certain percentage of excess property wealth normally surrendered to the State and assign those funds to the Consortium. These districts have voluntarily chosen to redistribute their funds in this manner.

Because these districts have formed this Consortium, they not only have more technology, but also more capabilities. As a whole, there is improved student performance and better trained teachers, with a rise in school accountability scores. Most importantly, these school leaders function as a group. They actively seek ways to collaborate.

A recent example of this improved outlook on technology concerns teachers' use of the Accelerated Reader (AR) program. Heretofore, it had been difficult to get teachers to travel all the way to Center City for training for AR, but with a high-quality technology center in Dellwood, closer to the other Consortium member schools, there was high and enthusiastic turnout for the training sessions.

Informant Concerns

Because the Consortium is implementing a highly sophisticated distance learning center in each of its member schools, each informant eagerly volunteered concerns over its implementation, use, and outcomes. The very concept of "distance," however, is not simply limited to "distance learning," but also to the significant distances Consortium educators have between their schools and sources of school improvement.

These informants perceived improvement for their school districts by being able to bring a greater variety of activities and services to their districts. Charlie Clark, a superintendent, jumps at the chance to use distance learning in his district. He sees benefits in distance learning to both professional and student progress, as well as it being a cost-cutting measure:

I think it's going to be extremely beneficial, especially to schools out here, like we are, that, you know, we're an hour and a half away from the Service Center, or from Center City, or Tech, or anywhere like that, and it'll be extremely beneficial to our students. You know we can pick up some college classes. We can get them some dual-credit classes. I've got some people here that want to take some classes and want to work on some graduate work, and so forth, that maybe we can pick up. School board training and in-service training through the Service Center will save us lots of dollars and lots of time, because if we don't have to travel all the way to Center City to get our in-service, and even if it's a half-a-day deal, you spend a whole day by the time you drive over there and drive back.

Tim Booth, another superintendent, agrees with Charlie's concern over literal distance from school to service center. When staff have to do as much travel as do these school leaders, distance becomes a significant factor in what they can accomplish:

We're so isolated. We're a hundred miles from Center City, which is where our Service Center is. . . Instead of travel time, you know, because any teacher who leaves here loses a full day, even if it's an hour workshop.

Denise Stevens, a teacher/technology coordinator, echoes Tim's concerns. She experiences the pressure of the distance crunch as she budgets her time and resources:

We live a hundred miles from any kind of technical support, and we pay \$100.00 an hour for somebody to come out and fix it, so you think twice before you even ask to have (a computer) looked at. Can I work around this?

Nevertheless, there is a sense of concern registered by each informant over distance learning implementation. There is also a fear of technology supplanting the teacher's role. Craig Henry sees distance learning in his professional future, but also makes this prediction:

My first instinct is to say that probably distance education is going to have effect particularly on rural America. I'm not real sure I'm ready to buy that yet. It may, but I'm not totally yet sold on distance learning as a tool for replacing the teacher in the classroom. There may come a day that that might be the only way that we can deliver some instruction to our students. If and when that day comes, I think that's going to be a shame, and I think that's going to be a step back in education.

Previous efforts with distance learning were frustrating at some informants' schools. Craig registers his experiences:

And (distance learning) wasn't that well received, either from the students or the parents. And I know that distance learning will be better than that because you'll have two-way interactive audio and video at all times. But I still have reservations, and I'll have to see it work well to change my mind on it. I probably can't stop it from coming.

Arnold Brady, having been a distance learning facilitator, also remembers problems with this teaching format for students and facilitator alike:

But it was all these schools, even as far away as Kansas that were viewing this at the same time. And it's hard to get through on the telephone line because you had all these people trying to get through to ask a question.

When asked about the net effects of all this, Arnold explained:

We had a lot of, I guess you'd say, disillusioned parents and kids because they were expecting to get, you know, they thought, "What a wonderful way to be in touch with computers," and what have you. And, you know, if we did work, we had to bundle that work up, send it to San Antonio. Well, by the time the guy got it graded, and got it back, you know, it might be a week or two. . . . And at the same time, we were under "no pass no play" rules. And you had athletes that, you know, at three-week's reporting period, didn't know if they were passing or not. And then some of them would wind up failing at the end, and they didn't even really know why they were failing. And so, you know, we had a bunch of kids that were, like, ineligible.

Frustrations registered by the adult facilitators were received clearly, but students' responses to the distance experience were even worse. Arnold elaborated in detail about the "legwork" done on-site to facilitate distance learning. As is axiomatic in instructional design, inadequate feedback does not promote learning:

The kids never really knew for sure if what they were doing was what he wanted or what was acceptable, or till he had a chance to mark it, and write notes on it and what have you. And a lot of times, by the time they did get feedback on it, well, it was too late.

Denise also experienced first-hand the details of distance learning. Concerning the possibilities of interactive video, Denise questions:

I guess the biggest concern has been teachers who are afraid that they will get dumped on. How many students are you going to expect me to teach for this class that I have the same prep time that I had when I had seven kids? . . . And then all of a sudden, I'm teaching an interactive video classroom where I have kids from Woodlake, and from Dellwood, and from Beaverdam, and from Sawtooth, and all of a sudden, I have fifty kids instead of fifteen. I'm given the same amount of prep time, or maybe I'm given a second hour of prep. I still have the logistics of having to be ready for however many my school district decides to contract for. And, I have to be eminently more prepared than I ever thought about having to be prepared in a normal classroom. Because I can't go on the air and expect to freestyle it, you know?

Denise, a technology coordinator, as well as a classroom teacher, brings distance learning down to earth with her practical concerns. Contrasting with the concerns of teachers over the years, distance learning is bringing in new, heretofore unanticipated concerns and challenges. Denise relates:

You know when we just had textbooks, the worst problem you had to deal with was with the student who showed up in class without their books, or, you ran out of chalk, and you sent somebody down to the office to get chalk. But when you start using these levels of technology where the bugs are not quite as worked out, then you not only run into, you run into problems using the technology that really can crush your class time and crush your prep time.

Charlie Clark concurs adding:

It's another one of those things that, a new toy, that's going to be helpful, it's going to be beneficial, but it's going to be another one of those things that we've got to learn to USE too. We don't want just the the stuff put in, we want to be able to use it when we get it. We've got to stay on top of it. . . . But if we don't stay on top of it, it won't take long to get behind.

As a superintendent, Charlie knows that he has to get the maximum "bang for the buck" as he works with his school board in defending the cost from distance education.

George Richards is adamant in his dislike for distance learning. Suggesting that distance learning might not be a good way to learn, George augments this with more mundane administrative concerns. Since George perceives

the teacher role in a traditional manner, he has concern over classroom discipline in a distance learning format:

Well, I don't think you're going to have any kind of classroom without discipline in the class. And the only person that can do that is the one that is supposedly in charge, the one that's taking care of grades, etc. So that teacher has almost got to see her classroom.

This writer wonders whether George perceives distance education appropriately when he asserts concerning his evaluation of a distance education class:

You know you have a facilitator. Your class can be strengthened by an excellent facilitator, but there's not any "school" going on. I guess to use the word "waste" of a certified teacher there. Sometimes, it's going to be an aide, somebody that will take care of the business, take care of mailing it off, getting everything in, and kind of keeping the students halfway quite. But it's not like anything like a good teacher would do, and because of this and because of the distance, it's a very slow pace.

Summary and Conclusions

The notion that technology could bring about needed opportunities and services to remote sites by distance learning has been discussed for some time and is now standard for evaluating a school's technology program (Becker, 1998; Texas Association of School Administrators, 1998). Nevertheless, there appears to be a need for a semblance of balance as the positive elements of distance learning (services, teaching, physical distance needs, etc.) are weighed against the pitfalls (teaching method changes, impersonal relationships) of these new technologies (Berg, Benz, Lasley, & Raisch, 1997; Dillon & Walsh, 1997). The apprehensions of Consortium change facilitators toward the impending interactive video system were quite real. They saw potential for some yet unknown distracting factor causing havoc with the learning process as a result of distance learning. At least one informant voiced active disagreement with distance as a viable means of teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, the Salt Fork administrators know that this is necessary for their students. Charlie Clark sums up the attitude of Salt Fork school leaders when he says:

Our main goal is to make sure that when our kids leave here, they've got just as good an education as someone coming out of Central City or Riverton or Houston or wherever, and that they can just fall right in there, and get with the program, and they don't feel like they're behind in anything. . . . Let's live out in the country, but let's get out of it at the same time and make sure we're on top of the world, here, and we know what's going on.

References

- Becker, H. J. (1998). Running to catch a moving train: Schools and information technologies. *Theory Into Practice*, 37(1), 20-30.
- Berg, S., Benz, C. R., Lasley, T. J., & Raisch, C. D. (1998). Exemplary technology use in elementary classrooms. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 31(2), 111-122.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1992). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (2nd. ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Coppola, J. F., & Thomas, B. A. (2000). Beyond "chalk and talk": A model for e-classroom design. *T. H. E. Journal*, 27(6), 30-36.
- Cornell, R. (1999). The onrush of technology in education: The professor's new dilemma. *Educational Technology*, 39(3), 60-64.
- Cuban, L. (1986). *Teachers and machines: The classroom use of technology since 1920*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eastmond, D. V., & Lawrence, B. H. (1998). Instructing faculty to develop and deliver distances courses with computer network technology. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 26(4), 315-324.
- Firdyiwiek, Y. (1999). Web-based courseware tools: Where is the pedagogy? *Educational Technology*, 39(1), 29-34.
- Harmon, S. W., & Jones, M. G. (1999). The five levels of web use in education: Factors to consider in planning

- online courses. *Educational Technology*, 39(6), 28-32.
- Hawkes, M., & Cambre, M. (2000). The cost factor: When is interactive distance technology justifiable. *T. H. E. Journal*, 28(1), 26-32.
- Huang, H. (2000). Instructional technologies facilitating online courses. *Educational Technology*, 40(4), 41-46.
- Ingram, A. L. (2000). The four levels of website development expertise. *Educational Technology*, 40(3), 20-28.
- Kubala, T. (1998). Addressing student needs: Teaching on the Internet. *T. H. E. Journal*, 25(8), 71-74.
- Kubala, T. (2000). Teaching community college faculty members on the Internet. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(5), 331-339.
- Maddux, C. D. (1999). A university class in web design for teachers: Content and rationale. Paper presented at the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education Conference, San Antonio, TX.
- Noble, D. F. (1997). Digital diploma mills, part I: The automation of higher education. [online]
URL: <http://www.communication.uscd.edu/dl/>
- Price, R. V. (1999). Designing a college web-based course using a modified personalized system of instruction (PSI) model. *TechTrends*, 43(5), 23- 28.
- Rankin, W. (2000). A survey of course websites and online syllabi. *Educational Technology*, 40(2), 38-42.
- Schifter, C. C. (2000). Faculty motivators and inhibitors for participation in distance education. *Educational Technology*, 40(2), 43-46.
- Smaldino, S. (1999). Instructional design for distance education. *TechTrends*, 43(5), 9-13.
- Swartz, J. D., & Biggs, B. (1999). Technology, time, and space or what does it mean to be present? A study of the culture of a distance education class. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 20(1), 71-85.
- Texas Association of School Administrators, (1998). *Texas public school technology survey*. [online]
URL: <http://www.coe.tamu.edu/~texas/techsurvey>.
- Wade, W. (1999). What do students know and how do we know that they know it? *T. H. E. Journal*, 27(3), 94-100.
- Wells, G. G. (1999). *Leadership concerns about the implementation of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for Technology Applications*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX.
- Wynia, L. (2000). How do students really feel about interactive television? *TechTrends*, 44(4), 39-41.
- Zhang, P. (1999). A case study on technology use in distance learning. *Journal of Research on Computing in Education*, 30(4), 398-419.