

Distance Learning/Education

"In their academic online courses, Boston University found that 44 percent of distance learning students remained in contact with one another long after the course ended. In a constantly changing economy and evolving field, there is a growing need to be able to increase competencies in our field and at times retool to a different career path. Distance learning is not the only solution, but can make a difference."

— Joan Rapp, MEd, CAGS, Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation Training Division

The Explosion of Distance Education Options

For anyone educated in the era when "cut and paste" meant paper, scissors, and tape, the growth in online educational opportunities is truly mind-boggling. However, "distance education" has been around a lot longer than e-learning, and simply refers to a separation between the instructor and the learner, often in both space and time. The goal of distance education is simply to reach learners unable to be in the classroom (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Old-time correspondence courses provided text materials for self-study, and assessed progress and achievement through written assignments and examinations. Recording and broadcast technology introduced the use of audio and video instruction. In 1983, Boston University's innovative off-campus graduate program in psychiatric rehabilitation (Farkas, O'Brien & Nemec, 1988) used "snail mail" to send audiotaped lectures and to receive audiotaped recordings from students. Supervision occurred via the telephone—an upgrade from correspondence courses that exchanged only paper, but a far cry from the web-based instruction used by most academic institutions today.

Distance education can occur in real time (synchronous), through archived materials that learners can access as their schedules permit (asynchronous), and through a combination of approaches ("blended" design) including live lectures and discussion, asynchronous discussion (chat), and archived materials. Asynchronous courses are the most common in distance education (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Self-paced asynchronous courses for in-service and continuing education for service providers avoid the challenges of scheduling training sessions and can provide cost savings for provider agencies. Distance education provides an effective budget-sparing solution for training, which is an essential component of effective service delivery. "The current economic environment has had a negative effect on training enrollment," says Ev Bussema,

director of training for the U.S. Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (USPRA). "It seems like training is often the first thing cut when there is a budget crisis. That's unfortunate, because, in reality, lack of training costs more down the road."

Is Distance Education Effective?

Doubts about the effectiveness of distance courses should be laid to rest—numbers of studies demonstrate either no significant difference or an advantage for the distance courses. Proof of the effectiveness and advantages of distance education has resulted in widespread adoption in two-thirds of post-secondary education programs (Parsad & Lewis, 2008), with public institutions leading the way (McCarthy & Samors, 2009). However, faculty report that providing online instruction requires more effort for preparation and for teaching than courses offered in the classroom, and that they lack the requisite technical support (McCarthy & Samors, 2009). Many distance learners report positive experiences, although some also cite negatives such as occasional technical difficulties—and some studies suggest distance education drop-out rates as high as 50 percent (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

The strong advantages of distance learning include the practical value of self-paced instruction that the learner can access when it is convenient. Self-directed learning, one of the most effective methods of teaching adults (Guglielmo, 2008) means more than setting one's own schedule and timing for learning; it involves reflective interaction with training content in a way that promotes discovery, application of new knowledge, and a transformed perspective (Reushle & Mitchell, 2009). Frequent self-assessments are easily built into online courses, and "click-on" interactive assessments are more intriguing than a textbook's end-of-chapter discussion questions, which are easy to skip. Web-based instruction with links to definitions of terms and related information provides an opportunity for learners to investigate beyond the information presented by the instructor—something that is difficult to accomplish in lecture-based training. Being online while "in class" makes it easy to access the vast collection of resources available on the Internet, and provides guidance from an instructor who has identified reliable sites and sources for exploration.

The biggest disadvantage of distance education is the potential for isolation of the learner, which may contribute to drop-out rates. The benefit of self-direction also can be a disadvantage. "Distance learning is not for those who procrastinate. The very flexibility that makes distance learning attractive also makes it easy to fall irreparably behind," was one conclusion of a report on distance education for vocational rehabilitation (Institute on Rehabilitation Issues, 2002, p. 69).

New Technologies

One reason for the explosion of distance education is the availability of new technologies for creating, accessing, and exchanging information. Document sharing, podcasts, YouTube videos, the free Adobe Reader software, and other potential teaching tools present new opportunities and challenges to instructors and learners alike, as well as the need for technical experts to make the best use of available technologies.

A 2009 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture highlights the dramatic increase in computer access in the U.S., but points out a “digital divide” in that many people in rural areas lack access to the high-speed Internet services needed to make the best use of the new technologies being used in distance education. People living in poverty often lack at-home computer access, and people with disabilities may find some of the newer technologies inaccessible. Although it seems that most young people are digitally literate almost from birth, many people remain intimidated by computers and interactive technology. Any efforts to expand distance education, then, need to overcome difficulties with access to computers and to the information presented via the Internet as well as personal barriers created by a lack of knowledge and confidence in computer use.

Best Practices: The Importance of Good Instructional Design

The Sloan Consortium (www.sloan-c.org) has developed a list of “five pillars of quality” for the evaluation of online education (2002) related to program quality, cost, supports for learner success, and faculty and student satisfaction. New technologies provide a wide variety of tools for instructors and supports for learner success, but do not guarantee quality. The most basic educational principle still applies: the teaching method used must be selected based on its effectiveness and efficiency for achieving learning objectives.

A meaningful interaction must stimulate the learners’ intellectual curiosity, engage them in productive instructional activities, and directly influence their learning. The essence of a meaningful interaction holds true for both campus-based encounters and online interactions. A Web-based environment does not provide necessarily better conditions for a meaningful dialogue (Guri-Rosenblit, 2009, pp. 111–112).

General resources on effective instruction are available (see reference list), and the literature on the “science of learning” (e.g., Halpern & Hakel, 2000; Mayer, 2008) provides evidence-based principles and practices for maximizing learning. For example, research recommends context-specific learning in a setting as similar as possible to the future practice environment, varied practice opportunities including knowledge application to real-life situations, opportunities for self-study, and interactive lessons. A well-accepted list of seven principles (Chickering & Gamson, 1987) focuses on the importance of learner–instructor interaction. The list was originally proposed for undergraduate education, but has broader relevance to education and training, including distance education:

1. Encourage contact between learners and instructors.
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among learners.
3. Use active learning techniques.
4. Give prompt feedback to improve self-assessment.
5. Emphasize time on task and support improved time management.
6. Communicate high expectations.
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of -learning.

The value of active learning through discussion, exploration, and discovery is well supported, yet online education programs require careful design to avoid potential “death by PowerPoint” (Flocker, 2006; Nemec & Sullivan-Soydan, 2008). Clear learning objectives are essential, and the selection of teaching tools and methods should be based on the approach best suited to engage the learner in achieving each stated objective.

Distance Learning Options from the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation

In response to the distance learning needs of the field, the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation began its Professional Development Program (PDP) in 1998 with a traditional self-paced study reading and testing option with the Center’s textbooks and, in the Fall of 2003, added the issues of the Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal to this option. Internet courses and online seminars were developed over the last 10 years, and Sue McNamara, director of the Professional Development Program, attests that the response from the field has been positive. Distance learning participants, now numbering nearly 2,400 PDP customers, like being able to access the online training when it is convenient for them. Although the course content is web-based, the PDP course formats are relatively low tech. “You might be surprised,” McNamara points

out, “but most of the people who take our PDP courses say they really appreciate being able to print out the material and read it that way.”

Another option offers training for learners who are unable to attend the Center’s training events in person. For example, the Center’s Innovations Institute is a series of affordable courses highlighting efforts and practices directed at making recovery a real possibility for people with psychiatric disabilities. The 15 multimedia courses capture presentations from the Center’s 2008 conference on innovative and effective recovery-oriented services, and feature an outstanding collection of national and international leaders in the field of mental health. These courses are offered through Essential Learning, an organization providing online training for behavioral health service providers, with many courses that offer continuing education hours. Over 800 people have taken courses through the Innovations Institute.

The Certificate Program in Psychiatric Vocational Rehabilitation (see the September 2000 and June 2005 *Recovery and Rehabilitation* newsletters) is an example of a blended course. Learners meet face-to-face at Boston University for an intensive on-campus training experience, but complete work-based learning assignments at their work sites. They receive detailed individualized feedback from an instructor and participate in conference calls that provide opportunities for discussion and review of course content. The face-to-face component of the Certificate Program can be delivered at an alternate location, as it was for the 2009 class in Belgium.

A new distance learning initiative at the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation will develop a curriculum on “Getting and Keeping Meaningful Employment,” with a focus on providing instruction that is broadly usable by people in the field. This new 20-hour curriculum will transcend any specific model of employment services and will address employment issues related to culture and to service delivery in a rural environment. Curriculum development will draw on the expertise of a diverse content advisory panel. A separate advisory panel will focus on utilization, emphasizing how best to reach the end user—the direct provider of employment services, including both incumbent workers and agencies developing new employment services. Relevance to practice will be ensured by piloting the curriculum with three groups of service providers. Training will be delivered live to the staff of The Life Link in Santa Fe, New Mexico (www.thelifelink.org), an agency that provides a broad array of services, including supported employment. Two groups will receive online training—a mental health service agency (Options for Southern Oregon:www.optionsonline.org) and the state/federal vocational rehabilitation agency in Alaska (www.labor.state.ak.us/dvr/home.htm). Once it has been developed, evaluated, and revised, the final “Getting and Keeping Meaningful

Employment” curriculum will be made available online through the Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation for PDP credit.

Summary

Many opportunities for distance learning are available, and affordable training through distance education will become increasingly important in psychiatric rehabilitation. Information on new research and emerging best practices needs to get out into the field quickly. Resources need to address the “digital divide” that prevents some people from effectively accessing and using web-based instruction. Recent advancements in computer technology and distance education are truly mind-boggling, but they bring with them equally amazing and exciting possibilities for training that will help service providers deliver effective services for psychiatric rehabilitation and recovery.

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