

Distance Education, Not Different Education

Michael Simonson

One sign that distance education is growing in importance is the increasing number of professional associations that are exploring ways to improve service to their members by offering events and education at a distance. One large biomedical organization recently hired a consulting and marketing firm to interview distance educators to determine how they could

“get into the distance learning game,” and I was interviewed.

Interview questions ranged from the obvious to the unique. The interviewers wanted to know about effective techniques for course design, the barriers to effective practice, and names of leading distance education organizations.

They really wanted to know what was different about distance education—different needs, different approaches, different designs, different technologies, different problems, even different solutions. Some of their questions were easy to answer, at least in a general sense. Readers of *Distance Learning* magazine probably have been asked questions like these dozens of times. Other questions were more difficult, and their quest to find differences began to become a problem.

The interview questions also were specific, focusing on vendors and providers. They wanted a “top 10” list of vendors. I recommended USDLA as one of the best places to find information about suppliers of distance education products.

An interesting aspect of this interview was the series of questions that dealt with profits, making money, and up-front expenditures for program design. These questions were more difficult to answer. It would seem that the economies of scale might make profit centers out of courses delivered without concerns for time and place, but the data to support these suppositions are hard to pin down.

After discussing distance learning for about 30 minutes, the interviewers asked me for a concluding remark. I told them this: when the wrappings are removed, and the Cosmoline is cleaned, distance education is really education. It is less different than the same as any education. It is education: the combination of teaching and learning to produce measurable, observable, and desirable outcomes—what educators have always done. I think the interviewers wanted statements and support for the contention that our field is different. I could not give them what they wanted. And finally, it is distance education, not different education.



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