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# The Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Learner

***Online learning is not going away, so our challenge is to reduce attrition by making online learning "less distant" for learners.***

Distance education (radio, TV, print, internet) has been a staple of teacher pre-service and in-service instruction for decades from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. Its benefits? in particular, online learning, which this article discusses? are well documented. Online learning provides teachers with access to content, new instructional practices, colleagues and experts, and curriculum and assessment supports.

In particular, it provides these opportunities for teachers who have often been excluded from professional development?women, religious and cultural minorities, residents of post-conflict areas, or inhabitants of remote geographic regions. And it can potentially do so at scale and in a more cost-effective way than face-to-face learning.

Unfortunately, the high attrition rates associated with online learning erode many of its perceived benefits. Globally, it is estimated that 40%?almost half?of all adult online learners drop out or fail to complete an online program. In some open universities?which often prepare much of the teaching force in developing countries?the rate has been documented at 90% (Latchem & Jung, 2010). The great MOOC (massive open online courses) bubble popped in part because of completion rates in the single digits.

Many multinational programs, teacher training schemes, and transnational consortia rely on online learning as a scalable, cost-effective, less resource-intensive vehicle for teacher preparation and development. But low completion rates undermine the perceived quality, utility, cost-effectiveness and, yes, legitimacy of online learning. Furthermore, to boost completion rates, many online programs often lower standards, thus contributing to the perception of online learning as being of low quality. This article examines the issue of attrition and suggests some remedies.

## Why Do So Many Online Learners Leave...?

Unsuccessful online learners drop out for several reasons. The "open and distant nature" of online learning means that learning is not time or place-bound. Learning is mediated by technology, which, when it works well, brings learners together, but when it doesn't, as is inevitable in so many developing countries with tenuous infrastructure, learning and connections with others cease.

A lack of active facilitation by course instructors also contributes to learner dissatisfaction with online learning. The fact that so many online courses are self-paced promotes the traditional paradigm of the online learner as a "solo learner". Together, all of these factors can combine to make online learning "a lonely experience" ? the learner is separated from the course if the technology doesn't work, from the instructor, assuming there is one, and from each other (Burns, In press).

## ...While Others Persist?

There are generally 3 sets of variables that drive success in an online program.

- **Personal Characteristics Of the Online Learner**
  Such as autonomy, responsibility, self-efficacy, and self-regulation.
- **Skills Related To Learning Online**
  Such as expectations about the rigor of online study and its actual level of difficulty; the ability to successfully use technology; prior education level; time management skills; reading and writing ability and information management skills.
- **Course/Program-Related Variables**
  Such as access to technology, support and materials; learner engagement and interaction with other learners; and their sense of connection or isolation (Burns, 2013).

All of these variables are interconnected and impact a learner's "readiness" to successfully persist in an online course of studies. Learners with low readiness (who may never have partaken of an online course, who don't have good time management skills, who don't read or write well) are more likely to drop out. In contrast, learners with a high degree of readiness?autonomous learners, with strong technical skills and strong information management skills?are more likely to persist (Burns, In press).

Many of the teachers in countries where we work have low readiness skills. They may have never taken an online course, they come from education systems that promote passivity versus agency, they may not know how to use a computer (versus phone) or live in areas with poor Internet access.

Online learning is not going away, so our challenge is to reduce attrition by making online learning "less distant" for these learners.

We can do so in the following ways:

## 1. Understand Our Learners

Who are they? What do they need to learn? How can they best learn what they need to learn? How "ready" are they to learn online? Answers to these questions determine whether we use a fully online, a blended (face-to-face and online) or a web-facilitated (mainly face-to-face with some online) model of online instruction. (More on blended learning in next month's article.)

## 2. Differentiate Online Offerings

Online learning is not just a formal course in a Learning Management System. There are numerous types of online learning that are more "face-based" and that connect learners to each other, to content and to the instructor?two-way video with just-in-time coaching, web conferencing, or social networking sites that allow teachers to teach each other as they see each other.

## 3. Carefully Recruit, Prepare And Support Online Instructors

Just as in face-to-face teaching, online instructors are critical to learner success in an online course. We need to help instructors motivate and manage the work of online learners to keep learners on task and help them achieve high expectations.

## 4. Prepare Online Learners To Be

We can't do much about a learner's personal characteristics, but we can design courses, and prepare online learners so they develop the skills related to success in online learning. For example, managing their time by developing schedules and work plans or helping learners with reading and writing.

## 5. Support Online Learners

We need to move away from the model of online learning as "do-it-yourself" learning to much greater support for online learners. And we need to do so on two levels. First, we can support online learners through course design, cohort-based classes versus self-study modules; synchronous design elements; using mentors or coaches. In Indonesia in an online program that taught educators how to be school-based coaches EDC learned that yes, some support is better than no support in helping learners complete an online program, but it's not the quantity, it's the quality of the support that matters, and sometimes a particular variation of online learning may impact quality outcomes (Burns, 2013).

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