Running head: DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance Learning

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Although there are different definitions for distance education, the definition usually includes the fact that it is an institution-based, formal education where the group of learners is separated (Simonson et al., 2009). Typically, distance education uses interactive telecommunications to allow learners and educators to connect with each other and outside sources (Simonson, 2003). There are many different kinds of distance learning and the one I am most familiar with is distance learning that primarily uses the Internet and Websites as a means of communication and delivering instruction.

My preconception about distance learning was that it is not as rigorous as traditional classroom learning. After taking several distance learning classes, I have to conclude that this is not the case. In fact, I believe it can actually be more rigorous than a traditional classroom because the classes generally are accelerated. In a traditional classroom it would take an entire semester to complete one class. With acceleration in distance learning, two classes can be completed within a semester. There is also a lot more writing because you are writing your discussion answers. In addition, based on the traditional classes I have taken, the distance education classes have required a lot more papers, generally one per week, whereas in the traditional classroom, there might be two or three papers per semester.

There are advantages and disadvantages to distance learning. Advantages include the fact that more can be done in the same amount of time as a traditional classroom. Another major advantage of using distance learning is the convenience and flexibility it offers students. Students are able to participate in discussions when it is convenient for them and do not have to spend time traveling to attend classes. Another advantage of distance learning is that students may be able to get a wider perspective on topics because students from around the world may participate.

Many people live in places that are not heavily populated. Distance learning gives students in these environments an opportunity to take classes that might not be offered where they live. For example, there might be one or two students in a small school who want to take an advanced chemistry class. There might not be a teacher at that school who can teach it or there might not be enough students in the school to form a class. Through distance education, they are able to connect with others who have the same interest and complete coursework in the subject.

A disadvantage of distance learning can be the technology itself that is used to facilitate it. Not everyone has the required skills in technology to use it effectively. There can be a large learning curve when using technology before instruction can even begin. There also may be technology that is used for supplemental materials or to complete projects that students would have to learn before using effectively.

Another disadvantage of distance learning is that the learners and instructor are separated from each other. Because students need to be pretty independent and self-sufficient in order to do well in distance learning (Wedemeyer, 1981), this disadvantage may be more significant with younger students than older students. By not being in close proximity with the instructor and other students, it may be harder to develop relationships with peers and some students might not have enough internal motivation to complete coursework. Social development can be a big part of education and the lack of physical face time might be a disadvantage for some students.

Distance learning may not be for everyone but overall, it provides opportunities that some students might not otherwise have. It also offers convenience and flexibility that working parents might need to complete a degree. Before starting on a distance learning course, I would try to become familiar with the technology that is used.

References

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