

From here to eternity – studying distance

Abstract

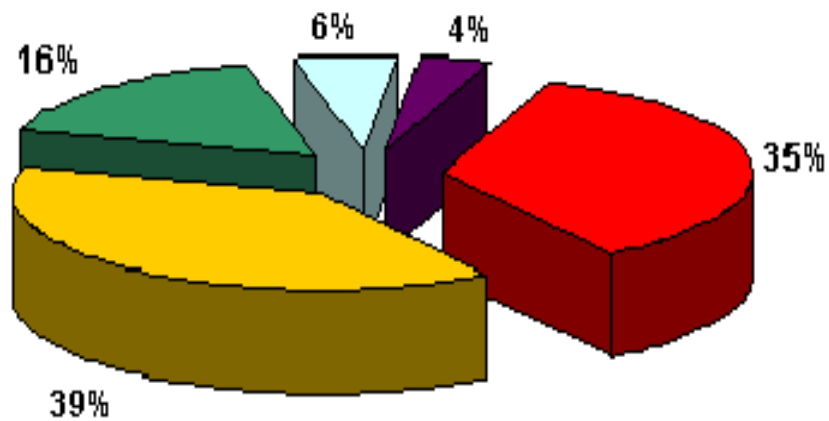
Ever thought of studying by distance education? Do you know where to start looking for the information? What credit might you be granted? How long does it take and how will it affect my life both at work and home. These are some of the questions posed when the presenter considered upgrading her qualifications. While undertaking a library and information course by distance education the presenter discovered that, the different courses offered increased her knowledge within the workplace and outside of work. These include balancing assignments, with work and other commitments. While there have been many challenges during her years of study she can now see the end of the tunnel. In this paper Janette will describe some of the challenges and experiences the course has provided and also how it has enabled her to expand and further her career and undertaking future studying.

Introduction

There are a number of different terminologies used for studying by distance. These include distance learning, distance education, online learning, ODL (online distance learning), open learning, off campus study and external studying. Australian University and College (2008) states that “distance education is a method of teaching at a university in which the students are not required to be present in a classroom or any specific location. Usually course material arrives in the mail in the form of written materials, videos, audio tapes and CDs. However with the Internet email and the web are often used. Distance education is also a new term for correspondence courses which was originally intended for people who lived too far from towns or cities that provided higher education”.

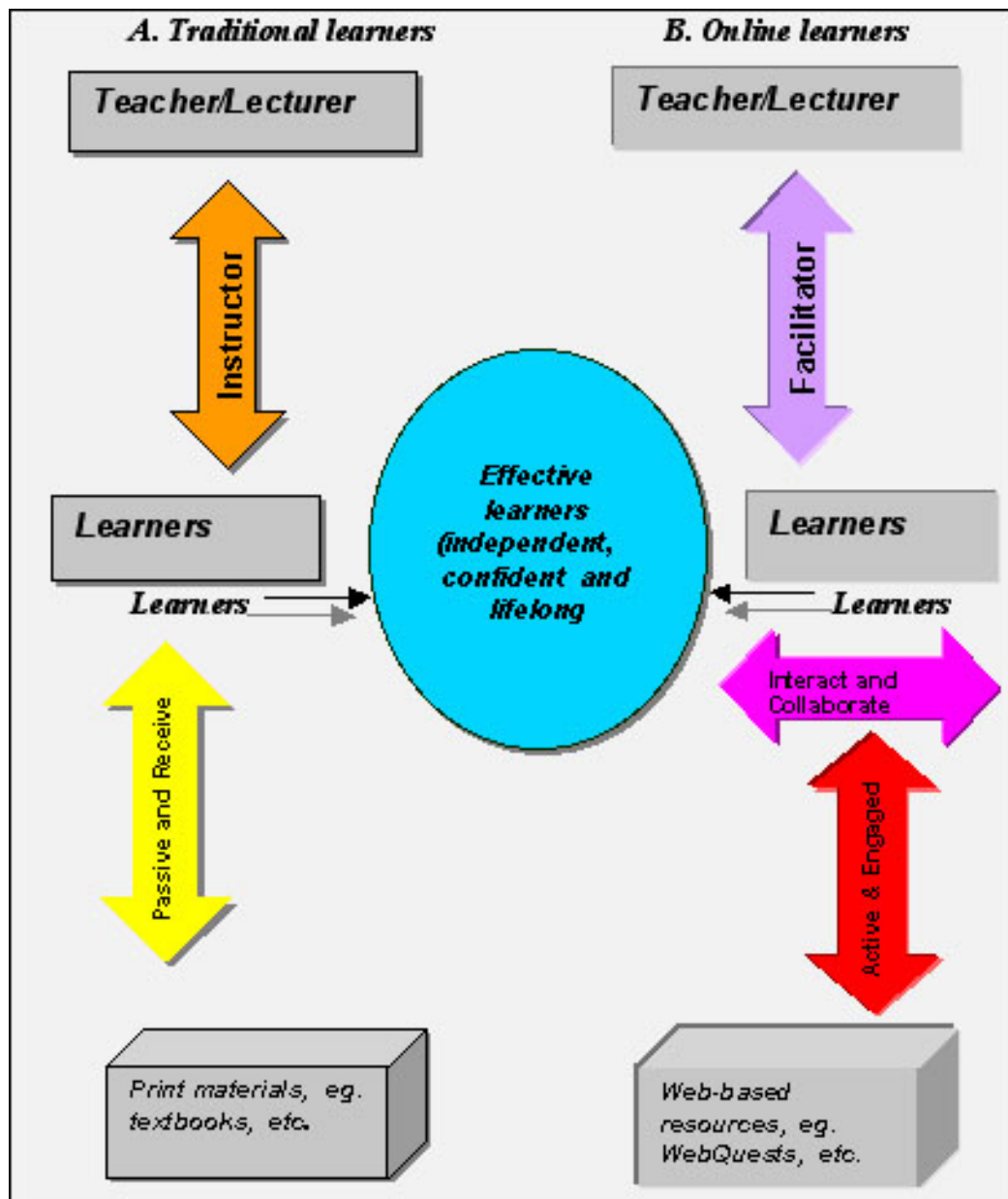
Kalman (2002) conducted a survey on how what people’s notion distance learning was and stated that “the interpretation of this notion was quite diverse”. One of the outcomes from the survey was that no one used the exact term distance learning or distance education. There were three main terminologies that resulted from the survey and they were 39% correspondence learning, 35% new form of learning, 16 % night school, 6% nothing and 4% other. Another outcome of the survey was that over 70% of the people saw advantages in distanced learning in its flexible delivery. The graph below illustrates the results of the terminology used.

What does the notion 'distance learning' mean to you?



- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ■ totally new teaching method | ■ correspondent learning |
| ■ night school | ■ it does not mean anything |
| ■ other | |

The diagram below illustrates the differences between the traditional methods of delivering a course/unit to the more technology based way of most courses are delivered now. Lawson (2007) backs up this statement in that “technology has made it possible for this generation of students to access information on any subject without having to go the library or looking at books”.



Damoense (2003)

What does it take to succeed?

There are many aspects to consider when thinking of enrolling in a distance education course. Simpson (2002 p. 11) states that “to succeed as a student in ODL a person needs:

Intelligence	Ability to deal with job pressures
Numeracy	Ability to handle demands of family
Literacy	Ability to manage the paperwork
Motivation	Ability to create a good study environment

Ability to ask for help

Ability to prioritize among study demands

Self-confidence

Ability to accept constructive criticism

Sense of humour

Ability to handle stress of being assessed”.

The course that I studied was Bachelor of Science (Library Technology) at Edith Cowan University, Perth. I chose this course of study for a number of reasons. These included knowing one of the lecturers, Judy Clayden, personally, the course looked attractive in that it upgraded my qualifications, gave me extra qualifications in my elective was in archives and also that the course was part of the librarianship course there. Due to the librarianship course not available via distance education I decided, at the time of enrolment, on the Library Technology course. I also decided to finish one degree before commencing another. Over the years the courses regarding both Library Technician and Librarian have changed over the years and this year they have changed yet again.

Why study and how is information delivered?

There are a number of reasons to study by distance. Some of the reasons include a desire to extend your knowledge, upgrade your qualifications to increase employment options, intellectual stimulation. At some stage in your career you may seek new challenges. For me this has occurred twice. The first occasion I joined Australian Volunteers Abroad and was sent to Tonga for two years. The second occasion was 6 years ago when I began my course at Edith Cowan University. Each time I gained greater experience both intellectually and emotionally.

In Tonga I commenced an ESL course (via distance education) and found it very hard as there were, at that stage, no internet connection or electronic books. All the papers were printed and delivered by post, very difficult there, and my assignments had to be posted back to Fiji (very expensive). Unfortunately due to circumstances beyond my control I was not able to finish the course.

When I enrolled at Edith Cowan in 2004 internet was still new on the scene but as the technology developed so did the way the courses were communicated to the students. Now with the advancement in technology the subjects can be delivered in a variety of ways such as CD, podcasting, email, blogs, online management systems (e.g.: Blackboard) and NING.

Another reason for studying is upgrading your qualifications. Again this happened to me. It was over 20 years ago that I completed my Library Technician Certificate at Sydney TAFE. As the course had changed dramatically I decided it was time to upgrade my qualifications. Now I am still a Library Technician but also a qualified Archivist.

Lastly your position maybe upgraded in the near future it would be good to start looking for courses to assist you in applying for the job. This could include restructure in your organization, restructure in the library or staff leaving. The courses studied may not be

completely library related but could assist you later. These include computer courses, archives or other technical courses related to libraries and computing.





What courses are available?

The listings of all library courses in Australia are available on the ALIA homepage. These are located under the heading of Education & PD, Courses in Library Science. You must then select which area either Library Technician or Librarian for study. The courses are updated regularly but if in doubt please check the homepage of the institution you are looking into.

Library technician

There are a number of courses available for distance learning. According to the ALIA webpage in 2009 these courses were available:

TAFE:

-  Box Hill Institute – Diploma of Library/Information Services
-  Victoria University (TAFE Division) – Diploma of Library/Information Services
-  TAFE NSW (Illawarra Institute) – Diploma of Library/Information Services (course no. 19027)
-  Sunshine Coast Institute of TAFE – Diploma of Library/Information Services

Capra Ryan Online Learning Pty Ltd – Diploma Library & Information Services





Universities:

-  Edith Cowan University – Associate Degree of Science (Library Technology)

Librarian

There are a number of courses available for distance learning. According to the ALIA webpage in 2009 these courses were available:

Universities:

-  Charles Sturt – Bachelor of Applied Science (Library and Information Management)
-  Monash University – Bachelor of Information Technology and systems (IM Major)
-  Curtin University of Technology – Bachelor of Arts (Librarianship and Corporate Information Management)
-  Edith Cowan University – Bachelor of Information Technology/Bachelor of Arts (Library Technology)





Cost

The total cost of a degree or diploma can be very expensive. It is important to plan in advance for this. For me it depended on which band the subject belonged in. If it was a computer subject it belonged in band 2 or a humanities subject like display and publicity it belonged in band 1. My course, when attempting two subjects per semester, cost me approx 1,000 per semester at the beginning and \$2,000 at the end due to the computing subjects. This made the total cost approx. \$10,000 not including books, internet connection, computer upgrade and new printer. Below is an approximate cost per subject from each tertiary sector as at 2009:

TAFE – refer to website

Capra Ryan – refer to website

University – per subject as at August 2009

 Band 1- Humanities	\$648.00
 Band 2 – Computing	\$924.00
 Band 3 - Law, Accounting	\$1084.00
 Band 4 – Education, Science	\$520.00

Other things to consider include leave from work, work experience or placement required as part of the course and residential schools. In some organizations you are able to have study leave to sit your exams and for extra studying. If your organization does not have this available then this must be taken either as annual leave or leave without pay. If your course requires additional work experience or placements then this also requires time away from work.

Textbooks are an additional cost that can be very expensive. If you are able to borrow the books from your local library or obtain them through ILL it will save you money. The other aspect to consider is writing to the blackboard if anyone has second hand books for sale. In addition to textbooks the printing and photocopying for the subjects can also be very expensive. Remember if possible to have a good printer (colour if possible) at home.

Lastly residential schools for some courses are required and these can last up to a week. According to the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (2009) homepage residential schools are “Residential schools are blocks of time when you are required to attend classes with other students doing your course. They may be a requirement of your distance education program”. This requires not only time away from work but also the added expense of travelling there and accommodation. With my course at Edith Cowan University there were no residential schools required and also my work allows for study leave if your course is relevant to your position you are currently in.

In my organization study leave and financial assistance are available to courses that are relevant to your present position. In my case this was true and I was granted study leave to

sit my exams and financial assistance to any course that I passed in. Study leave varies from organization to organization and also if it is face to face or distance. You would need to consult your personal relations section of your organization to see if you are eligible.

Equipment

There are three essential pieces of technology and equipment needed to perform distance education. These are a computer, internet connection and printer/paper. Some particular software may be required for particular subjects and these must also be purchased but they would be recommended by the lecturer. The internet connection can be either broadband or dialup, although broadband is quicker and more efficient. I had a dial up connection and although it was slow to make the initial connection, it was fine once connected. It may be required as part of your unit to have a chat with other members of your group at a particular time. This is where having your own computer at home comes in handy.

Advance standing or credit

It depends on the institution depends the number of credits or advance standing that you receive. The institution takes into account what subjects you have previously studied (formal learning), work experience (non formal learning), and when you finished your last qualification. For me as my last qualification was over 20 years ago hence I relied on my work experience to obtain advance standing. According to the Edith Cowan (2009) homepage “Advanced standing is the term we use for credit (aka exemptions) for previous studies, or recognition of prior learning, for professional experience. Advanced standing can enable you to reduce the number of units you need to study to be awarded your ECU qualification. It can be awarded as credit or in the form of preclusion”. You must remember to apply when enrolling for the course so that all your advance standing or credit can be recommended at the beginning of the course.

Advantages

There are a number of advantages studying via distance including:

- ❖ No travelling, convenience, anywhere, anytime and self paced learning – you are able to juggle the subjects at your convenience. This is very handy when undertaking several assignments at the one time.
- ❖ Another advantage is that in the majority of cases the entire course is given to you at the beginning of semester. This assists you in planning your work load over the semester.
- ❖ Extra knowledge gained – increased knowledge of writing essays, computer skills, learning new terminology and software and juggling priorities.
- ❖ Accessibility – able to access information anywhere in Australia at any time.
- ❖ Networking with students not only in Australia – in my course students came not only from Australia but Hong Kong, Kenya and New Zealand

Disadvantages

There are also a number of disadvantages studying via distance including:

- ❖ Technology – this can be very expensive for a number of reasons. These include having to upgrade your computer, travelling elsewhere because there is no accessibility, good printer and toner or computer breaking down and having to purchase a new one.
- ❖ Advance planning required – this is where your juggling skills come into play. You must be able to balance work, family and studying at the one time.
- ❖ Hidden problems – Caruth states that “some students read well and others write well, however the ability to do well at both becomes critical in the virtual environment”.
- ❖ No immediate feedback – time lag due to university being in different time zone or lecturer constantly being unavailable.
- ❖ Not all courses available online – double check that your course is fully online. Some subjects are available online while others must be face to face in the one course.
- ❖ Course may not be recognized – make sure that the course you are attempting is recognized by ALIA or work. There are many courses out there that have not been approved yet
- ❖ Social isolation – This refers to not having face to face lectures or seeing students you still must join in the group.
- ❖ Difficulties contacting lecturer – with time differences and office hours it was difficult to contact lecturers sometimes. The best solution I found was to email and hopefully they responded before the assignment was due.
- ❖ Working in groups – this can be a major challenge if the group does not communicate with you. This happened often to me as there were group assignments. You can contribute your comments but do not know if they are accepted until the end. This occurred when I had a group assignment and there were only 2 students outside Perth. The group in Perth had meetings and gave us the decision.

Conclusion

Although there have been many problems and difficulties in studying by distance education I have found it to be very beneficial in many ways. This includes having learnt more about using technology, gained confidence in my ability to write and communicate with others and also being able to widen my horizons for job prospects if the need arises. I completed my course in 2009. My particular course although it was a Library Technician course the majority of units are also in the Librarians course at the same institution. If I decide to go on to become a Librarian I only have a few subjects to complete.

I would highly recommend upgrading your qualifications either with an advance diploma course or university course. The main reason is that as technology and the positions in libraries change so should you upgrade qualifications either in library specialties (cataloguing or information services) or qualifications outside the library (computer technology or archives).

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