Opposite Ends of the Spectrum: Distance Learning from Both the Student and Instructor Perspectives

by Lisa Felix

Distance learning allows people to complete training or college degrees that they would normally not be able to complete. In many states, including Indiana, a library science student might need to regularly commute a long distance or even relocate in order to attend in-seat classes. Distance education is no doubt more convenient than face-to-face classes because most online classes are not attended at a set time. Class work can be planned around one's work schedule and home responsibilities. In some classes, however, simultaneous chat is required, especially for group projects. I earned my Master of Library and Information Science degree through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's online program. During my entire MLIS experience I never saw my classmates and never even heard their voices. The only time I saw or heard my professors was during an occasional streaming video lecture. Classmates resided in many states and even in many countries. Chances of being able to meet a classmate face to face were pretty slim. However the variety of students' geographic locations and work experience can make the distance education experience like no other. During my MLIS coursework, I completed a group project with three other students who lived in Salt Lake City, Utah; Seattle, Washington; and Hong Kong! I lived in Mishawaka, Indiana. I was amazed at how well we worked together and with the quality of the paper we wrote.

Online library science classes are best suited for those who have library work experience. There is a better understanding of theories, practices and procedures when related to actual library situations. Students who live in different locations and work in different types of libraries such as public, academic and special can lend varying points of view and solutions to problems. Some online MLS programs require a comprehensive essay exam. If this is the case, any real-world library experience can supplement library theory for a more complete answer to the test questions.

It is a common misconception that online classes are easier than in-seat classes. From my experience as an instructor in both the face-to-face classroom (Davenport University) and the online classroom (INCOLSA)

and as a student, I have found that online classes, although more convenient, are more challenging in many ways. In many distance education courses, class work can be done 24 hours a day, seven days a week at a student's own pace. You can "virtually" attend class at 3:00 a.m. wearing your pajamas whether you are the student or the instructor. However, since students have different home and work schedules, and live in different time zones, there is constant posting to blogs, emailing and even chatting. Keeping up with class is very time-consuming for both student and instructor. There are so many messages to sort through and so much goes on in the class while you are working or sleeping! It would be much easier to meet your classmates from a traditional class at the local coffee shop to discuss that group project or latest lecture. A discussion in an online class could take days while the same discussion would take only about an hour in a face-to-face learning environment.

At first one would think an online class saves paper. Not necessarily so. I have found the opposite to be true. In order to save time, I printed many pages of discussion blogs and emails and, as an instructor, my students' assignments to read on my lunch hour or in the waiting room of my dentist's office. Then, after digesting what I read, I would post feedback later online. I found myself swimming in a sea of endless paper that I tried to keep organized.

Technology is the backbone of any distance education experience. However, both the good and bad of technology play a part. Of course, technology is what makes the online experience possible, but the glitches in technology from problems with the class software to Internet difficulties to hardware failures can make an online experience less than desirable. There is also a learning curve for the first-time online student. Even if you are techno savvy, it takes a while to get the feel of how each online class is organized, how assignments are submitted, and what role your instructor will play in the whole experience.

Your instructor may be very involved or seem totally absent. In one of my MLIS classes, I got absolutely no

feedback from my professor, had no idea how I was doing in class, and did not even know if she was reading my assignments until I received my final grade at the end of class. With distance education, there is often no immediate feedback. A student doesn't always know if the instructor received and read an assignment. As a student, I remember thinking that once I submitted my assignments, they were relegated to some black hole. On the other end of the technology chain, the instructor is inundated with assignment submissions and e-mails from students. It is easy for a student to forget that there are many other students in the class who are demanding the instructor's time as well, even though the blog posts of other students can be seen. "Out of sight, out of mind" as the saying goes, although the addition of web cams to some classes has helped reduce anonymity. The instructor may have a full-time job as well and may be teaching an online class in addition to these responsibilities. Likewise, it is easy for the instructor to forget about their students who feel like they are out of touch and left in limbo. It is very important that the instructor give regular feedback to students.

Distance education has opened up a world of opportunity for those wishing to obtain training or earn a degree in library science. Over time the distance education environment has improved and will continue to do so. Every year the opportunities for distance education are expanded, the technology is made more user-friendly, the instructors are more experienced, and the students are more technologically savvy. Together, these contribute to an overall positive educational experience for both the learner and teacher.

About the Author

Lisa Felix

Lisa Felix is manager of the Bittersweet Branch of the Mishawaka-Penn-Harris Public Library. Since her first job as a library page 25 years ago, she has worked in public, academic and school libraries and was a Network Coordinator for INCOLSA. She has experience teaching in both face-to-face and online environments and regularly writes for *Library Journal*. She earned her BS in Commerce from Calumet College of St. Joseph and her MLIS from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

E-mail: l.felix@mphpl.org