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Facilitating Distance Learning

In your view what are the most important measures to be taken to facilitate learners' learning? Please include course development, communication, and administration in your considerations.

The Tutor's Role in Facilitating Distance Education

Successful facilitation in a distance education requires that tutors must adopt new methods and strategies that actively involve their remote learners.

Considerations for the facilitator of any distance learning program include:

Develop the distance learning course structure using Instructional Systems Design (ISD): One concrete methodology for developing learning programs is called Instructional Systems Design (ISD). This approach provides a step-by-step system for the evaluation of learners' needs, the design and development of training materials, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the course (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 102).

The facilitator role also involves setting the agenda for the course: the objectives of the discussion, the timetable, procedural rules and decision-making standards.

Use appropriate questioning skills: Following Bloom's Cognitive Taxonomy, questions to learners should be pre-planned and range from low order (recall or knowledge) to higher order (synthesis, analysis, problem solving).

Create an environment of interaction with learners: The tutor should ask questions to ensure interaction with learners and to determine learner understanding. This will also keep them actively engaged during the instructional process. After posing a question, the tutor should allow sufficient time for learners to process information before answering (Holmberg, 2003, p. 60).

Also, the tutor should also develop good group cohesion from the beginning by assigning simple group projects or tasks.

Facilitate involvement and communication from learners and from tutor: Efforts should be made to involve all learners in class activities. Calling learners by name to participate in class discussions will personalize lessons as well as notify learners that they are each responsible to participate as active participants.

Conversely, the tutor should be mindful of his role in providing immediate feedback for assignments and comments, as a lack of this will lead to learner frustration (Holmberg, 2003, pp. 57-60). Managing the interactions with strong leadership and direction is considered essential to a successful learning experience.

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Clear tutor articulation: The tutor must articulate clearly and distinctly. Verbal instructions from the tutor must be precise and explicit in order to avoid learner confusion. Also, a voice that portrays empathy, enthusiasm, variety in tone, and diversity in pace will do much to maintain learner interest (Peters, 2001, p.14).

Use variety to engage learners: Learner involvement activities may include small-group work, dyad discussions, cooperative learning tasks, learner presentations, and polling of learners to seek their opinions or ideas.

Using a variety of interactive tools to address differing learner needs is important. Diverse learning exercises may be enhanced by using an assortment of delivery methods. Additionally, if learners understand there are multiple means of contacting and interacting with the instructor they will experience reduced anxiety which can enhance learning.

With that being said it is also the responsibility of the tutor to understand the used technology's strengths and weaknesses, be prepared to offer technical assistance and plan for technical failures.

Conclusion

Consider Peter's thoughts on the impact of technology and communication in Distance Education:

"It must be open, learner-centered, outcome-based, interactive, participatory, flexible with regard to curriculum, learning strategies, and delivery…" (2003, p.21)

The same can be said of the tutor. The tutor must have a clear understanding of the role he plays as the facilitator of distance learning information in order to create an environment where learning is possible.

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