

Transforming Caregiver Training

Distance learning: the process of extending learning, or delivering instructional resource-sharing opportunities to locations away from a classroom, building or site, to another site by using video, audio, computer, multimedia communications or some combination of these; occurs when the learner and teacher are separated by geography and time.

Telecommunications and distance technologies are transforming how we deliver education and training because they allow for expanding capacity to respond to the requirements for keeping health care workers up to date. With a long history of serving geographically isolated learners, distance learning has now emerged as an effective, mainstream method of education and training that provides flexible learning opportunities in response to learners' needs.

Numerous studies, including the one by Thomas Russell at North Carolina State University (Russell, 1998), conclude that the learning outcomes of students in a traditional instructor lead classroom are similar to the learning outcomes of students in distance technology classes or an online learning environment.

The Center for Adult Learning purports that developments in technology and communications have brought about dramatic changes in both the learning needs and the way learning opportunities are delivered in business, labor, government and academia. We are becoming a society in which continuous learning is central to effective participation as citizens and wage earners. Telecommunications technologies are not only transforming our needs for education and training, but they are expanding our capacity to respond to these needs. Distance learning is now a key component of our new learning society, in which learners must take increased responsibility for control and direction of the learning process (American Council on Education, 2008).

Chickering and Ehrman (1996) used the American Association for Higher Education's 9AAHE "Principles for Good Practice" to develop best practices to teach students in online environments in paper called "Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever." They suggest:

1. Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty: asynchronous communication (time delayed) is enhanced by using online environments. Students and faculty exchange work more effectively and safely in online environments than in the traditional classroom. Communication becomes more intimate, protected, and connected online than in face-to-face interaction.
2. Good practice develops reciprocity and cooperation among students: technology provides opportunities for interaction in online learning environments. Students can share their knowledge and experience in small groups, study groups, during group problem solving, and in activities related to learning content. For example, the learning content may be infection control and the chain of infection. Online students can be given the assignment "explain how to break the chain of infection when providing care and how to keep it from occurring."

3. Good practice uses active learning techniques: the technology included in online learning systems provides opportunity for active learning. For example, students in an online class are given exercises related to the content.
4. Good practice gives prompt feedback: technology provides many opportunities for feedback, both synchronous, asynchronous and email.
5. Good practice emphasizes time on task: time is critical and using time wisely is a goal online. Online courses save the student commuting and parking time. Students can learn anywhere— wherever there is a computer.
6. Good practice communicates high expectations. Expectations should be clear with students. If students are not performing at the expected levels, the instructor can email the student and describe observed behavior and delineate expected behavior.
7. Good practice respects diverse talents and ways of learning: the advantage of online courses is the many resources available to accommodate a variety of learning styles. For example, for the visual learners, use PowerPoint. For audio learners, use audio-visual material, and for readers, add notes. Slide shows can be easily constructed for disseminating content online, links can be added.

What do healthcare and medical professionals think is important in continuing education courses? Quality of content was the characteristic most important to participants, and too little interactions with the largest source of dissatisfactions (Casebeer, Kristofco, Strasser, 2004).

Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (2004) offers these as advantages of distance education:

- Online learning offers a tremendous opportunity to learn without the limitations of time or location. Students have the flexibility to learn any time, anywhere.
- Contrary to popular opinion, distance learning can be more personal and interactive than traditional classroom courses. Students who are uncomfortable asking questions in class can communicate more comfortably with faculty.
- Students often have the opportunity to learn according to their preferred learning styles.
- Students become more self-directed and responsible for their own learning.

The National Education Association (NEA) lists the following Core Beliefs on Effective Education Online:

- Are instructor-led, student-centered, collaborative, and flexible?
- Foster information, communication, and technology
- Have clear and concise expectations and instructions
- Account for learning style
- Use best practices

Advantages of distance learning:

- 24/7 access from any location, not dependent on work venue and shift on duty
- Access to broad array of course offerings beyond basic task training or compliance items
- Ease of addition of new or custom courses, updating of existing course content

- Use of multimedia and interactive methodologies to increase focus and knowledge retention, adapted to different learning styles
- Archived tracking of student completion
- Integrated reinforcement and remediation
- Integrated testing and completion verification
- One-on-one supervision by and interaction with live teachers, coaches
- Saves time and money

Goals of distance learning:

- Dramatically improve and extend the breadth and effectiveness of traditional in-service training
- Build confidence and skills of learners
- Free staff to focus on primary needs of residents and facility operations
- Increase staff engagement with the mission of the facility
- Improve quality of care and service
- Connect to career ladder strategies

Validation of the Issues

A November 2002 report from the Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General cites that (1) nurse aide training and education has not kept pace with the demands of the changing care needs of nursing home residents, (2) nursing homes have difficulty meeting the Federal requirement that in-service training address areas of weakness for individual nurse aides, and (3) nurse aide training needs to include communication and interpersonal skills. Additionally, the report finds that 61% of State Nurse Aide Training and Competency Evaluation Program (NATCEP) directors believe there are still training needs that are not being met in their states. Nearly half (48%) of the nursing home supervisors interviewed explained that nurse aide training does not adequately address the interpersonal skills, training on communicating with residents, awareness of the aging process and treating residents as people, not just bodies. One out of every four nurse aides interviewed for the report cited interpersonal skills lacking in the training and education including time and stress management, teamwork, developing relationships with the residents and coping with death and dying.

Creating a culture that values education and training, both clinical and interpersonal, delivers a message to the caregivers that they and their work are important and worthy, and that the entire community or organization is committed to enhancing job performance, work environment and quality care. Lower staff turnover and higher staff satisfaction and engagement are the result, which also drives higher resident and family satisfaction.