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Distance Learning Summary

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According to Wikipedia, Distance education is “a field of education that focuses on teaching methods and technology with the aim of delivering teaching, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional educational setting such as a classroom”. Basically, this is any learning that takes place when you are not physically attending the event. Distance education is beginning to transform the whole educational system. Education is now available to people who may not have had access to further knowledge. The questions become at what age is distance education the most effective?, what are the advantages and disadvantages of distance education? , and as an educator, how can we make distance learning a positive experience and empower the student to be self-motivated to learn?

Distance learning can be effective at many different age levels. The type and amount of distance learning that is used can be adjusted to age and maturity level of the student. Brain development has shown that children in the early childhood years learn by hands-on learning. An educator that teaches children in the early childhood years has the challenge of balancing technology with hands-on activities. Early childhood educators can enhance the curriculum by adding theme-based technology into their lessons. For example, a teacher can use a podcast about weather during a unit that is teaching the children about different weather changes. Elementary age children are using distance learning within the classroom environment. For example, there are many websites geared for elementary-level academics. Starfall is a sight that is used frequently in the kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The sight teaches children basic math, reading, and spatial concepts. There are schools that provide K-12 education solely by distance learning. I am not convinced that this is the most effective teaching method for elementary aged children. I feel that there is a large amount of social development that takes place within the confines of the school that is necessary for children to learn. These social skills are not necessary built into the teacher’s curriculum. The development of these social skills just happens naturally when a group of peers are together day after day. Social skills developed in this manner are helpful to prepare children for the workforce they will be immersed into when they are adults. For that reason, I don’t feel that programs that rely solely on distance learning for elementary aged, and high school aged children can be effective. At the high school age, the students can take part in a larger portion of distance learning, but I still feel it should be within the confines of the classroom environment. Not only are high school students still learning necessary social skills, they are also not mature enough to utilize higher levels of thinking necessary to make distance learning effective. To make this effective in the high school years, there must be a facilitator present to teach important concepts and ethical concerns that arise when using technology. Unfortunately, not all parents will take the time to understand these concepts. Teachers must be present when teenage children are learning appropriate rules of technology use. I feel that college level learning is a completely different category. Distance learning can be highly effective and make furthering education a possibility for many people that might not have the opportunity otherwise. Single mothers that can not sit in a class all day, people who have to work full time while attending school, and people that move around a lot are just examples of people that can benefit from distance learning. Even at this age, a person must reflect on their own personality and learning style to decide if distance learning is right for them. A person must be self-motivated and disciplined enough to be held accountable for reading and assignments. Some people learn better from being in a classroom environment. At the college level, the students must be honest with themselves to figure out if they will benefit from distance learning.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of distance education? I discussed many of the advantages and disadvantages in the paragraph above. Age and developmental level can hinder the effectiveness of using distance education solely as educational tool. Social skills can be harmed if a child is not placed into a classroom of their peers and allowed to learn simple life skills such as sharing, problem-resolution, morals, ethics, etc. Some learners are not equipped with the appropriate tools that are necessary to make distance learning effective for them as an individual. On the flip side, distance learning has opened up education to an entirely different segment of the population. The creation of distance learning has helped students more effectively balance the pressures of adult life while furthering their education. Distance learning also provides an excellent curriculum enhancement and an additional way for teachers to accommodate to different learning skills.

Finally, the question remains: How can we make distance learning a positive experience and empower the student to be a self-motivated learner? First, and foremost, the teacher must know their students. Every group of students is different. Each group will be made up of different personalities and different types of learners. A good teacher, who truly knows her students, will know how much distance learning can be incorporated into the classroom curriculum effectively. Also, facilitators of distance education classes must provide a variety of activity types to cater to the different needs of the learners. The facilitator can use podcasts, videos, documents, hands-on activities, and other activities that can be found useful to students with different learning types. By doing this, the facilitator is also keeping the student’s interest. If educators slowly begin implementing distance learning as a curriculum enhancement in the younger ages, then the likelihood that the learning will be successful in the future could increase. Setting up the education system to use a little distance education in the early childhood and elementary years, then increasing this type of instruction in the high school years with supervision from the teacher, and allowing college students the choice of distance education, classroom education, or a mix will be the most successful implementation for most learners.