

INTERVIEW

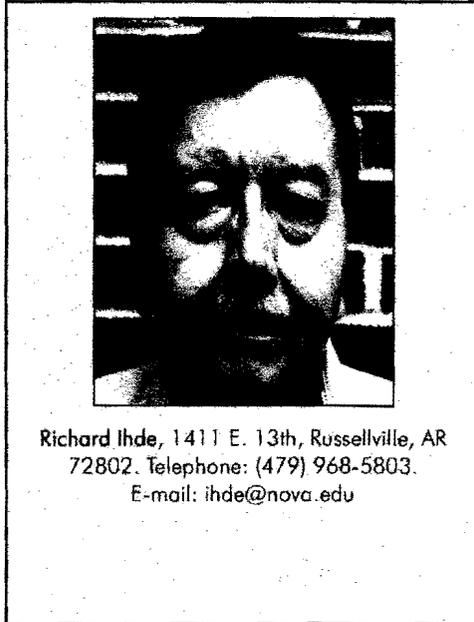
The Perils and Promise of Distance Education

An Interview with Dr. Yusra Visser

Richard Ihde

Yusra Laila Visser is a faculty member working in the Digital Education Teacher's Academy (DETA), a collaborative program between Florida Atlantic University and the School Board of Broward County. In this capacity, she is engaged in the design, development, and evaluation of targeted in-service teacher training programs focused on instructional design and technology integration. She concurrently serves as vice-president and

researcher for the Learning Development Institute. Previously, Visser worked as assistant professor in instructional technology at Florida Atlantic University and Wayne State University, as visiting faculty/program manager at Florida State University's Office for Distance and Distributed Learning, and as program associate for international programs at Education Development Center, Inc. In her consulting work she has served such clients as Verizon Corp, the Department of Homeland Security, Arthur Andersen, the United Nations, and Pearson PCS. Visser holds a PhD and master of science in instructional systems from Florida State University. Her bachelor's degree in international relations is from American University.



INTRODUCTION

The field of distance education today seems to be filled with promise while struggling to find an identity to call its own; in the world of higher education it is often seen as both darling and demon. This interview sought to present some of the challenges of distance education to a seasoned veteran in terms of being both a former distance education student and an instructor in distance education-based programs. The answers provided are insightful and important. They represent current thinking about challenges in distance edu-

cation and give indications of where the field is headed.

QUESTION: Is it fair to state that distance education on a graduate level in its current state is the true equivalent of a classroom experience with regard to content and instructional design?

Yes and No. It depends on how you define "graduate level education." Based on research and prior experience, I believe quite firmly that there is a qualitative difference between the distance learning and the face-to-face experience. Effective distance [instruction] is a different experience than effective face-to-face instruction. It challenges learners in different ways, and develops different types of skills. Therefore, as long as we do not use traditional face-to-face instruction's metaphor as the basis for comparison with other instructional approaches, I believe distance learning graduate education can be as effective as face-to-face education (quality of teaching and instructional design remains the key determinant of quality in both instructional approaches). However, if our measuring stick is traditional face-to-face education, and "equivalence" is based on how closely distance learning mirrors face-to-face instruction, then it would be hard to argue that the two are truly equivalent.

QUESTION: There seems to be a mad dash by universities to develop new online offerings. How can we be assured of a reasonable level of quality and accountability in these educational products?

Great question! People differ in their views on this issue. Some argue that market forces will ensure that the highest quality programs will be the most successful ones, and therefore that there is a built-in incentive for quality and accountability. I am skeptical about this. While I have high confidence in the potential of online dis-

tance learning, I believe that many universities are propagating online learning with more focus on increasing enrollment than on improving quality of instruction. A couple of ways to improve quality and accountability:

1. Requiring faculty to experience distance learning as learners before teaching online. Many faculty are clueless about the online experience since it did not figure in their own education.
2. Evaluating distance learning courses on the basis of relevant attributes for distance learning. Many universities use the same criteria for student course evaluation in distance learning and in fact to face instruction. This seems inappropriate to me, and leaves little relevant insight into the true quality of online instruction. Dropout rates, student perception of isolation, and so on need to figure prominently when the effectiveness of distance learning is evaluated.
3. Requiring faculty/departments to gain approval for distance learning courses in the same way that they are required to get approval for new course offerings. If a department in a university wants to offer a new course, they have to submit a proposed syllabus and so on for the class in order to get approval. I believe that it would help if departments were required to provide proposals for courses when they are switched from face-to-face to distance learning delivery. As part of this process, departments could be required to answer questions about Carnegie unit equivalence between the distance learning and face-to-face versions of the course, how (and how often) students will have access to faculty, etc. Often it seems courses are being converted to an online format in a very haphazard manner, and the quality of the course suffers immensely.

4. Limiting the enrollment in distance learning sections, ensuring equivalence in teaching loads for distance learning and face-to-face instructors, limiting the use of teaching assistants and adjuncts for distance learning courses. At present it seems that universities are really running the risk of reducing the potential effectiveness of distance learning by finding ways to reduce cost for delivery of courses in this format. They override class size conventions, exceeding the 25:1 ratio that is usually present in face-to-face instruction. They expect faculty who teach online to teach more, rather than less, sections (even though it is often a more labor-intensive teaching approach). They have more distance learning courses taught by teaching assistants and adjuncts than face-to-face courses.

QUESTION: Is higher education in the midst of a revolution as they embrace distance education or have administrators been seduced by potential enrollment numbers and more dollars?

I have a terrible record with predicting the future, but I would guess a little bit of both. I think much of distance learning is pushed by numbers and dollars. However, I think higher education is in the midst of a revolution—and distance learning is part of that. There is little continued tolerance for the prevalence of graduates exiting with few marketable or worthwhile skills. Competing models (corporate universities, community colleges, etc.) are forcing higher education to reevaluate what they do and how they do it.

QUESTION: There is a documented trend in universities, at least in the United States, which shows a great deal of resistance by faculty to teaching online. How can we overcome that resistance?

A couple of different ways:

1. Allow faculty to move through gradually—going from Web-supported to fully online instruction.
2. Providing adequate pre-, during- and postcourse support to faculty teaching online.
3. Finding ways to reassure faculty that their intellectual property in the course design is not compromised through putting their course material in published format on university servers.
4. Limiting class sizes and teaching loads in distance learning—right now distance learning has the reputation of being the ultimate way in which faculty can be overburdened.

QUESTION: Because of the shortage of qualified online instructors, universities will often hire a professor fresh from a graduate program to teach. Should these people be required to acquire practical experience in a subject matter area before being allowed to teach or is access to an SME good enough?

Your suggestion would certainly help improve the quality and relevance of university teaching, so I would very much support it. However, the reality is that the majority of faculty at universities have been career professors, with no experience in the outside world for 20-30 years. Perhaps there should be more of a requirement for all teachers to demonstrate that they are continuing to get “real-world” experience throughout their teaching experience.

QUESTION: Research shows that students select online courses mostly for convenience's sake. Should students be dissuaded from thinking of distance learning as an educational shortcut?

I think the main challenge here is misinformation. Convenience may be the initial

draw, but in reality distance learning is very challenging for many students, so those who choose distance learning for the sake of convenience are in for a major shock, and will likely not persevere. I think that in many areas, there is an advantage to having both distance learning and face-to-face instruction, simply because it helps learners develop the full gamut of skills that a university education can offer.

QUESTION: Has higher education started down a slippery slope by giving students too much freedom in moving away from a face-to-face experience at least for younger undergraduate students?

The slippery slope, in my estimation, is the focus on market-driven approaches to education. This creates a highly prevalent idea that the customer of education is the student. I could not disagree more—the customer for higher education is society. By focusing on the learner as customer, higher education is changing in ways that, in my view, may not serve either the student or the university.

QUESTION: The concept of learner as customer seems to be quite prevalent in higher education. Can you elaborate on why you think this approach may not serve the student or the university?

At the broadest level, I believe that the purpose of education is—quite simply—to make a better person. A better person, in my estimation, is a person who is not only self-reliant and able to be effective in his/her job, but also someone who has the skills and desires to positively impact the world, and to leave this little planet behind in better shape than he/she found it. So, I feel that the customer of education is society. Ultimately, education should seek to shape each of us to be better “tools” with which to improve the world.

This view contrasts significantly with what we often see in higher education

nowadays. Because of the focus on education as a market-driven phenomenon, we start applying all kinds of business terms to the different components of the higher education system. A class or a learning experience becomes a “service.” We look at the value of a degree in terms of “return on investment.” We see distance education as an approach to improve “efficiency” and to achieve “economies of scale.” Lastly, we label the individual learner as “the customer.” While there is certainly some merit to recognizing that higher education is a business, I feel that we are making a mistake by taking this concept as far as we do.

Here is how the issue of learner as customer can pan out: There is a common mantra in all business settings that “customer is king” or “the customer is always right.” If I order an item from a menu in a restaurant and I don’t like it, I can tell the waiter that I don’t like the item and would like to return it. I can exchange it for something else or I can just walk out without paying for the item. I have this “right” even if the menu item is exactly as it was described on the menu, and my only objection is that I just don’t like the way it tastes (i.e. nothing is missing from the dish, nothing is rotten, etc.). What is happening, in my experience, is that this very same thing is cropping up in our higher education classes. I can give you a couple of concrete examples:

I know of a faculty member who on the first day of class in a grad course, had a student walk in and say; “this is my last semester in the program, I have a 4.0 GPA, so I need to get an A in this class.” Then, the student just stood there and stared at the professor. The student did not express any desire in knowing what it would take to get an A, nor did she express an interest in committing herself 100% to the class in order to maintain her 4.0. The student simply was expressing that as a customer, she expected that in exchange for paying tuition she would basically be eligible for an A. And that it was the professor’s

responsibility to make sure that this happened.

I know of a faculty member who received a concerned letter from a very hard-working student in her class. The alarmed student was writing to ask whether it was really true that in graduate education as long as you showed up to class and submitted assignments, you would get an A. The reason why the student was asking this question was because, after working his tail off on a series of assignments, the student had heard from others in his class that he should not worry so much because "graduate education is basically pay-for-your-degree education. As long as you run through the motions, you have paid for the As and for the degree."

These are true stories, and they are from different institutions. The underlying theme in all of them is the notion that the learner is the customer, and therefore he/she can demand "value for my investment" on the basis that is defined by the learner, and not by what best serves society. In other words, if the learner/customer has determined that he has gotten his money's worth simply by getting an A, and not by having learned a whole bunch of valuable new stuff, then that is what higher education should give the learner.

Interestingly, even though my examples refer to cases where the student is really overstepping what would be considered (in my estimation) reasonable academic practice, the greatest problem, in my view, is that the universities are very much perpetuating this. University administrations sound a constant drumbeat of "learner as customer" which makes it very difficult for individual faculty members to feel that they can take any risks at all in their teaching. Any business wants more customers, and more repeat customers. So, universities want more students, and they want students to keep coming back for more. So universities keep focusing on recruitment, classes are getting bigger, ser-

vices in universities are becoming strained, and individual attention is hard for learners to get. Faculty members may feel pressure not to turn away students, even if the student may not be qualified to succeed in the class. They likewise may feel pressure not to challenge students excessively, because research consistently shows that students most negatively evaluate teachers who teach the most complex subjects. The net effect is that the quality of education is lowered, grade inflation is rampant, and the value of a university degree is brought into question.

QUESTION: Graduate programs seem to be populated more and more by working professionals who are asking for degree programs with shorter time frames and concentrated areas of study. Should universities accommodate these goals or should standard program configurations be maintained to facilitate an adequate learning experience?

I believe universities should by and large offer standard program configurations be maintained to facilitate an adequate learning experience. However, the push for compressed curricula comes about largely because universities have historically bogged learners down with all kinds of required courses that either seems to have little relevance, or for which learners already have prior relevant experience. So, universities need to address that issue if they wish to avoid going the fast-track route. My opposition to a large-scale adoption of the fast-track approach is because I believe that it comes at the expense of sustained, profound learning opportunities that require extended reflection and immersion into the academic culture.

QUESTION: The developing trend toward more international students taking online courses from American universities is becoming a reality even for smaller schools. What measures would you suggest to successfully accom-

moderate international students in an online environment?

Great question! I think part of the responsibility is with the international student to adjust to the culture of education in the United States (I was an international student myself throughout my university education). The other part of it likely involves the following:

1. Clearly expressed expectations for the class
2. Clear guidelines for online discussion/exchanges
3. Lots of information for all learners on intercultural communication
4. Assignments that have learners connect the content for the course to issues, experiences, etc. in the learner's local context.
5. Careful integration of pre-admission requirements for English language competence.
6. Providing teaching faculty with experiences for intercultural communication and teaching.

QUESTION: What will the world of distance education look like in 10 years?

I think that distance education will have eclipsed today's world of higher education in the next 10 years. Meeting in class will be the exception rather than the rule. But, then again, I am lousy with predictions. I also think some schools will give up on distance learning and strongly move to a 100% nondistance education approach because they may come to associate distance education with poor instruction. (I don't agree with this view but believe that so many universities are adopting a haphazard approach to distance education that they are unlikely to realize the full potential of distance education).

QUESTION: You state in your online biography you like to challenge stated fact and look for

alternative explanations. What current stated fact, or facts, would you like to challenge in the world of distance education?

Wow, nice catch!

1. Distance learning should strive to be equivalent to face-to-face instruction.
2. Distance learning limits the ability of the learner to develop the skills to apply and transfer what he/she learns.
3. An effective distance learning learner must have effective self-regulatory skills and high levels of intrinsic motivation.
4. Distance learning is cost-effective.
5. Distance learning allows for higher student/teacher ratios.
6. Course-in-a-box is an effective approach for distance education.
7. Distance learning learners don't learn as much as face-to-face learners.

CONCLUSION

I think it is important to note that the questions asked certainly do not represent every challenge present today in the field of distance education. It can be argued they are a representative sample.

Distance education in its present form is a unique and evolving entity which could not have existed 25 years ago. Yusra Visser certainly reflects that fact in her responses. She sees higher education on dual paths both fraught with the perilous trappings of academic tradition. She clearly feels that distance education and the face-to-face format are separate but equal experiences. She states that with this thought in mind evaluation of course effectiveness should also be separate but equal by applying applicable standards for each.

The issue of faculty moving into the online environment before they are ready also emphasizes the separate but equal status. She states there can be a disconnect when it comes to teaching online; "Many faculty are clueless about the online experi-

ence since it did not figure in their own education." This reflects a major problem in attempting to assure separate but equal paths to an acceptable student outcome, only one of which has been addressed in traditional education. Teacher preparation may just now be reaching the point of being up to the challenge of preparing future practitioners for the virtual world.

More importantly, Visser challenges institutions of higher learning to rethink their learner-as-customer approach and once more concentrate on the quality of the educational experiences offered to students and not the quantity of students enrolled. This emphasis on quality, she

believes, should extend to both face-to-face and distance education courses. Part of this return to glory, in her opinion, should involve dispelling myth and rumor about the difficulty and quality of distance education—something best done by the institutions themselves.

Ultimately, I think Visser would have us realize that distance education should be given the respect it deserves as a great equalizer and not a usurper or pretender to the throne. Her message reflects her belief that distance education is an important trend in higher education and should be nurtured and allowed to mature to its full potential.