

**Big thanks to distance education students from one instructor, Dr. Mieke Delfgaauw**  
*by Dr. Mieke Delfgaauw,*  
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**Since September 1997, I have had the pleasure of working with University of Waterloo distance education students in a virtual learning environment. I call it a pleasure, as this is the dominant feeling I have as an instructor working with students who continue their education while working in or out of their home.**

**I had been teaching Environmental Economics (Env S 220) since 1979 on campus. I moved into a virtual learning environment in 1996. When I was asked to provide this course for distance students, I did not hesitate at all, but I did say that I would like to do this in a virtual or asynchronous environment where campus and distance students would interact in the same course.**

**The very nature of the Web means that teaching online involves the instructor in an ongoing redesign of the instructional model of the course. It requires incorporation of audio, video, conferencing and other modes of interaction. It also involves cognizance by the instructor of some students' reluctance to engage in a different instructional mode of learning and updating URLs, course content and projects to name a few.**

**For example, because I have both UW distance and campus students in my course, it became apparent from the first offering that the campus and distance students are two distinct groups and this posed some unique pedagogical challenges for me. Time zone differences, working hours and job requirements are some of the more technical challenges. When these challenges are placed in the context of working in groups comprised of campus and distance students, one truly has a unique pedagogical challenge.**

**Some of these challenges were addressed by using a different conferencing system, others by redesigning the nature of the assignment. I also introduced learning progress maps (i.e., graphical representations of what the course material is about each week) and I relied heavily on the feedback from the participants in the course.**

**Without the ongoing enthusiasm, assistance, feedback and participation of so many of the students over the last number of years, Env S 220 would have been a very different course.**

**I have had great experiences as an instructor of distance students. What I really want to do in this article, is talk about some of those experiences.**

**I had little experience in teaching distance students when I started out in the online environment in September 1997. Some of you will remember the confusion all of us had working in a conference system. Questions such as how do I sign on, how do I know to which conference to go, came fast and furious. I did not expect such full participation in the discussions and at one point felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of all those great postings. But you took it all in stride, reassured me that this was all fine, and waited patiently for me to “catch up”. That gave me my first inkling that teaching students in an asynchronous environment was going to be a different teaching experience for me.**

**I was fortunate in that one of the early participants in Env S 220, Mark Rose, a distance student, took up my call for a Teaching Assistant. For the past two years, he has been one of the best Teaching Assistants any instructor could wish for.**

**Through the conferencing system, I feel as if I got to know many of you. One time, when the two Stephens did a great presentation, I could “see” them “high fiving” each other when they read the feedback from other students and me; at least that is the “visual image” the tone of their posting conveyed.**

**Other students took on the role of leader in their groups. They did this with great humour and absolute dedication, spending hours online, coaching the others in the group, cajoling them to “get cracking” and to hand in their contributions on time. Peter, Brian, Gary, Thomas, Janet and so many others: many thanks!**

**What continues to amaze me is the dedication distance students have in completing their assignments while travelling for work. Some even have babies or kids who are sick, but the work continues.**

**Assignments may be due in other courses or work occurs in different time zones, but that does not stop anyone from handing in assignments. Some students live abroad while taking my course, giving a whole new dimension to time zones. Many students take their computers on the road to sign on to the conferencing system and participate in the online discussions.**

**One of the learning experiences for me in working with distance students is their willingness to share their work experience freely with other students. Their accumulated knowledge and their enthusiasm encourage other students to contribute and respond. Feedback provided to other students is often done in-depth and often with the use of examples to highlight comments. When students do not agree with one another, they do so in a courteous manner and usually with humour.**

**Broken sound cards, original poor quality of the spoken lectures, computer crashes, difficulties in installing programs and fears of not being able to hand in assignments on time through sometimes unavoidable technical glitches were some of the difficulties we experienced early on. Distance students seemed to take most of it in stride and enjoyed the learning experience of interacting with me as the instructor and with the campus students.**

**So, to all you UW distance education students, you should know that your enthusiasm, your dedication and your joy in learning are what inspire me to teach and to continue to learn with you in the virtual learning environment. My thanks to all of you who took the course in the past. I am looking forward to working with many more of you in the future.**

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