

Distance Education Theory and Practice

At Northwestern University School of Continuing Studies (SCS), we believe that an effective distance education should be based on theories of learning and cognition that are purposefully and strategically incorporated into the learning environment. In this way, students' academic experiences within any given program are cohesive and consistent, yielding deep and meaningful learning.

A Model of Active Learning

SCS courses are grounded in our belief that students must be actively engaged in their own learning. We want our students immersed in vibrant discussion of important concepts, application of high-end skill sets, and creation of solutions to real-life problems. This stands in contrast to prolonged periods of lecturing to students, which yields a passive, often ineffective, learning experience.

Our faculty use a variety of techniques to engage each learner, facilitating creation of knowledge and content mastery. These techniques can include projects, case studies, experiments, problem sets, interactive practice modules, discussions, journals, fieldwork and more. Reflection and sharing real-world experiences are essential in this model. Because each student builds on his/her prior knowledge and experiences to create new knowledge, faculty should strive to understand existing knowledge sets and experiences for each student; this can be accomplished through regular and ongoing discussion, as well as from students' introductory biographies and student surveys. Faculty can thus effectively guide and challenge each student at an appropriate level of rigor.

SCS also incorporates elements of cognitivism and connectivism within our distance education model. Cognitivism, which recognizes that learning is built upon subject-specific knowledge, supports our use of textbooks, articles, and other traditional course material. Connectivism, which posits that knowledge exists within the world at large, rather than simply within individuals' minds, is reflected in our use of discussion boards and other socially-interactive forums.

These learning theories and models are not mutually exclusive, and often support each other. By selectively drawing on elements of each, SCS creates a highly effective learning environment that accommodates students' diverse learning styles.

The SCS Course Experience

Our faculty teach within a Community of Inquiry (COI)¹ framework, placing students' learning at the center of three interdependent elements — social, cognitive, and teaching presence. At the intersection of these three constructs, students encounter intellectually challenging material within a trusting and safe environment, taught by an actively involved faculty member.

Our courses are mostly asynchronous, meaning that each course provides a baseline level of asynchronous content and forums for faculty-student interaction. Then, faculty and students layer in live elements as appropriate; for instance, many faculty schedule and record two or three live online sessions through the 10-week quarter. Student attendance at these sessions is optional, and many students choose to watch the recording at a later time. Some students schedule one-on-one time with faculty, analogous to office hours, or with other students, meeting through video conferencing, online chat, or a phone call.

Courses are designed to maximize faculty-to-student, student-to-student, and student-to-faculty interactions. Faculty are present in the classroom in very real and tangible ways nearly every day of the week, skipping no more than two consecutive days. Students are required to engage actively with the classroom materials, discussions, and assignments. To further engage students and assess their mastery of course content, faculty are encouraged to use authentic tasks and assessments that represent real-world projects. These can take the form of a paper, spreadsheet, website, data warehouse, presentation, quantitative or qualitative analysis, report, video, memo, portfolio, and so forth.

Universal Instructional Design

SCS designs and teaches courses according to the principles of universal instructional design, a process that considers all learners' needs. Our students bring diverse cultures, comfort with technology, physical abilities, learning styles, and other differences to the classroom. By carefully considering and planning for these factors during the design and teaching of the course, we help ensure that students achieve their desired learning goals. When employed correctly, universal instructional design benefits all students in the classroom, creating a rich learning environment in which every student can succeed.

In Sum

Our distance education programs at SCS are built with the express goal of helping each learner succeed. We integrate elements of various learning theories, effective educational technologies, and rigorous curriculum. Together, these provide an exceptional learning environment in which our faculty challenge and engage all students.

¹ <http://www.communitiesofinquiry.com/model>