

## Predictions and Realities of Distance Education

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**Abstract:** In 1999, noted educator and philosopher Andrew Feenberg, PhD, wrote “Reflections on the Distance Learning Controversy” in which he addressed the controversy surrounding distance learning and its impact on teaching styles and use of technology. Feenberg made a number of predictions as to how online learning would change as more institutions offered distance-learning education. Feenberg’s points included methods of delivery as well as the effects distance learning would have on faculty. Reviewing this paper in 2011 shows that although Feenberg was off target in some of his predictions, such as the widespread use of technology undermining teaching, he was correct in other areas, including the problems caused with pre-recorded videos. Feenberg’s predictions were closest regarding the increase in the numbers of adjunct faculty caused by distance education and the problems that has created in the industry.

### Video-based lessons

Feenberg wrote of distance learning changing from text-based materials to video-based lessons and intimated this would harm distance learning. Feenberg warned that although automating the classroom recreates a classroom experience because the instructor can be seen giving lectures, there is no human component in this pre-recorded material. By 1999, administrators were in favor of video materials because even though the initial costs to develop the materials were high, the pre-recorded videos could be used many times over and by different institutions, thereby eliminating the live presence of an instructor and saving money for the institution in the long run by not having to hire additional faculty to provide online instruction Donkor (2010) supported these points, too.

### Drawback of Pre-recorded Videos

It is difficult to determine how many post-secondary institutions are using pre-recorded videos, but Feenberg’s cautions have some merit today. Video materials present significant drawbacks. Winnie Wing-mui, Hing-keung Hung, and Yee-wing Yip (2008) detailed the problems of using pre-recorded materials; these included the high cost of creating the materials and the further possibility that a recording could only be used in specific applications, thereby limiting the usefulness of the material. There are also problems with the format; currently VHS, CD-ROM, DVD, and digitized materials are available online; a universal program is not available yet for sharing videos with every institution. But technology is catching up with this problem with Windows Media Video (WMV) and MPEG, available through Windows Media Player, which is included with all current Microsoft operating systems. Winnie Wing-mui, Hing-keung Hung, and Yee-

wing Yip did not address Apple's operating system, which is not used nearly as frequently as Microsoft, but for someone using a Mac, accessing video files may be a problem. Although video materials are used in some online classes, Feenberg's prediction has not seen widespread use or popularity; video materials are not replacing faculty and video-based materials can be effectively utilized in distance learning as evidenced by Whithaus and Magnotta Neff (2006). But Winnie Wing-mui, Hing-keung Hung, and Yee-wing Yip, as well as other instructors, were highly in favor of video materials if they are constructed and used properly.

### **Adjunct Faculty**

Feenberg (1999) was also concerned about the number of part-time faculty increasing as opposed to full-time faculty and how this would affect distance learning. From 1970 to 1995 part-time faculty increased by 250 percent while full-time faculty only increased by 50 percent. Today, adjunct or part-time faculty currently make up 70 percent of college faculty (Adjunct Nation, 2009). The number of adjuncts rose from 275,000 in 1975 to more than 800,000 by 2005, a greater than three-fold increase in just 30 years.

This increase can be attributed in part to the growing use of distance education. In 1995, "33 percent of [all] 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions offered distance education courses." By 1998, this figure had increased to 72 percent for public two-year institutions and 79 percent for public 4-year institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). These classes require faculty, and the solution has been to hire adjuncts to cover this dramatic increase in the number of classes that colleges and universities can now provide. Although Feenberg saw the increase of part timers as the first step to completely automating classrooms through technology, this is not so. But the rise of the part timer has created other problems in post-secondary education.

There are benefits and drawbacks in the practice of hiring adjunct faculty. The major benefit is to the post-secondary institution. The institution saves money by not having to provide expensive benefits and office space to part-timers and, in some cases, paying adjuncts at a lower per-class rate than full-timers (Adjunct Nation, 2009; Christensen, 2008). Institutions can also utilize adjuncts at the last minute as classes open unexpectedly at the start of a semester (Christensen). Some institutions hire established experts in their fields as adjunct faculty to supplement and enhance certain disciplines, such as nursing, medicine, and legal studies (Fagen-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White, 2006) and in design programs; these adjuncts are important contributors with knowledge of "regulatory and industrial concerns" ((Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, & Muth, 2010, p. 25). Due to these reasons, adjuncts serve an important part in post-secondary education today.

On the other hand, despite their importance, adjuncts face serious impediments to doing their jobs and completing professional development or research. In general, there is no encouragement or compensation for professional development, such as traveling to conferences to present papers or stipends for scholarship expenses (Christensen, 2008). For adjuncts who desire full-time positions, lack of publishing or conference attendance can be serious hindrances (Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, & Muth, 2010). Not only does this affect hiring possibilities, it can also affect the quality of the teaching

or lecture materials presented in classes; it is essential for faculty to be current and pass on relevant knowledge to students; if faculty do not have time or motivation to perform scholarship, then students suffer (Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, & Muth). Part-time faculty often have full-time jobs that are not teaching jobs or they teach as adjuncts at multiple schools in order to earn a decent living or in an effort to be hired full time at one of the institutions (Christensen, 2008). They are often stretched too thin and cannot do as good a job in their teaching as they would like to do. Because they are often ignored by administration, they do not feel that their efforts are noticed or appreciated and therefore go through the motions of teaching and monitoring their students (Christensen). This sense of isolation is also supported by Fagen-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, and White (2006) and Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, and Muth (2010) in that adjuncts need proper mentoring and support by administration. Ziegler and Reiff (2006) detail the mentoring process for adjuncts as it is being developed in many colleges and universities across the country and how it is being used to improve all facets of the adjunct experience in order to improve teaching standards. This is a step in the right direction to make adjuncts feel as if they are part of an institution and not just used on an expendable and unappreciated basis.

Another unpleasant reality of adjunct employment is that adjuncts are retained semester by semester and in some institutions, student evaluations are used to rate adjuncts (Christensen, 2008); this further serves to undermine teaching skills because adjuncts need to receive good evaluations from students and will therefore not be as demanding as necessary or inflate grades in order to curry favor with the students (Fagen-Wilen, Springer, Ambrosino, & White). It is somewhat understandable that instructors who depend on being offered continued employment on a regular basis want to be liked by their students and hope that student comments carry enough weight for them to be offered classes in the next semester. This, however, does not excuse or defend poor teaching or grading practices.

Another problem with employing too many adjuncts is that in community colleges in which adjuncts outnumber full-timers, the graduation rate has dropped during the last few years (Christensen, 2008; Stenerson, Blanchard, Fassiotto, Hernandez, & Muth, 2010)). However, studies have not been completed to show why the graduation rate has dropped, so the decrease cannot be laid entirely at the feet of adjuncts. Certainly, numerous factors are at play here but possibly the lack of support that adjuncts receive from administration is a major contributor to this problem.

## **Conclusion**

Distance learning is here to stay and predicting all of the changes and effects on learning are difficult to predict. Technology will continue to evolve and easier methods of delivering digitized materials will become available. At this time, a widespread change to using pre-recorded videos to replace live faculty has not occurred and is not expected to occur. But the problems with employing more adjuncts than full timers is not likely to change in the near future.

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