

Distance Learning Stigma, Then and Now

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### Abstract

This paper will discuss one of the greatest threats to distance learning: stigmas. The various stigmas surrounding distance education will be discussed as well as the history of distance learning and how the stigmas have changed over the years and in the eyes of employers. Stigma has waned in recent years due to changes in technology, which will also be discussed.

*Keywords:* distance learning, stigma, history, university, education, myths, accreditation

### Distance Learning Stigma, Then and Now

One of the greatest threats to distance learning is stigma. Stigma has kept distance learning from growing more and being adopted by many educational institutions ([Pinantoan, 2012](#)). While the stigma surrounding distance learning has waned quite a bit over the last few years, it is still present today. Just like state universities and community colleges were once seen as being inferior to other more elite colleges, distance learning has been, and still is, viewed as inferior to traditional face to face learning ([Lenson, 2012](#)).

### **A Brief History of Distance Learning**

If one asks when distance learning began, one would get varying answers. Some attribute the beginning of distance learning to the year 1728 when the world's first distance learning course was established in Boston, with lessons sent via mail ([Dumbauld, 2014](#)). Others may say it began with shorthand correspondence courses done via mail in Great Britain in 1840. However, *online* distance learning only dates back to the 1960's with the creation of PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations) ([Wooley, 1994](#)). The University of Illinois scientists created a classroom system using linked computer terminals. These terminals allowed students to access informational resources while listening to a professor who was lecturing remotely, via some form of television or audio device. By the mid-1980's, college resources often included online access to course information and student networking tools ([Smarty, 2010](#)). It was also during the 1980s that the personal computer era began with Macintosh and PC clones. The computer era enabled online communities to begin sharing information, slowly paving the way forward for online learning.

However, it was not until the creation of the Internet and its widespread adoption in the 1990s that really advanced the field of online distance learning. By the mid-1990s, the World

Wide Web was founded and created an infinite amount of possibilities when it comes to online learning. This created another chapter in the history of online learning. The face of distance learning changed drastically as online learning experienced rapid growth. It also was during this decade that email communication took off. The dawn of a new era in online learning surfaced where virtual learning environments took shape and online learning, or eLearning, became a widely recognized term (Gogos, 2013).

Early computer-based distance education used proprietary learning software and electronic bulletin boards that students could dial into and leave messages for their instructor or classmates. This way of learning was not very interactive and did seem like more of an independent study for online learning. The first major foray into computerized online education came in 1983 with the launch of the Electronic University Network (EUN). EUN enabled students to take online courses using proprietary software that ran on DOS on Commodore 64 computers. John Bear, author of numerous distance learning guides declared, "The grand opening of the Electronic University Network was one of the defining moments in online distance education." Two years later Paul Levinson started Connected Education, which was described as "a not-for-profit corporation that offered graduate and undergraduate and graduate level courses in conjunction with The New School for Social Research and Polytechnic University" (Baker, 1999). In such programs, a typical student logged into the central computer system at a convenient time, read the latest materials online or downloaded them for offline reading, then posted comments for others to respond to. Later, the instructor and other classmates followed the same sequence and posted their comments, with the result being an asynchronous discussion conducted through bulletin board postings. In 1987, the Electronic University Network was purchased and changed into a support organization assisting colleges and

universities develop virtual campuses. By 1992, EUN hosted numerous virtual campuses and online degree programs, including a Ph.D. in Integral Studies from the California Institute of Integral Studies, on America Online ([Baker, 1999](#)).

The year 1989 saw the birth of the University of Phoenix, a for-profit online only university. Online degrees started becoming widely available in the mid-1990s. During the 1990s, the focus on online learning was centered around convenience rather than learning. Promotional materials advertised that students could participate in programs no matter where they lived, even if it was across the world. Duke University proclaimed that “students can work and live anywhere in the world while participating in the Global Executive MBA program”. Even though student interaction was not dismissed or minimized with these statements, these promotional strategies suggested that student interaction was not a high priority at the time ([Baker, 1999](#)). The growth of enrollment in such online universities created stigmas that are still in place today.

### **Stigmas of Distance Learning**

Many viewed online degrees and programs such as the University of Phoenix simply as "diploma mills" due to their rapid growth. The [Federal Trade Commission](#) defines a "diploma mill" as a company that offers "degrees" for a flat fee in a short amount of time and requires little to no course work. These degrees are usually not legitimate and can cost a student more than just their money ([Federal Trade Commission, 2012.](#)). In 2011, the University of Phoenix was the world's most popular for-profit school, boasting 307,871 enrolled students - the most of any degree-granting college in the United States ([Everitt, 2014](#)). This "diploma mill" reputation is still present today. Many brick-and-mortar universities have started offering online only degrees,

but even these well-established universities are still having to shake the stigmas of distance learning.

Many employers and even many professors felt that learning could only take place in the classroom in the early years. The distance between teacher and student provided too many obstacles to quality learning. Many prospective students are hesitant to enroll in online classes due to concerns that future employers may not take their online education as seriously as they would a traditional program ([Pinantoan, 2012](#)). Other individuals who are opposed to online education believe that online classes are not as challenging as traditional face-to-face classes. Another common stigma is that online programs are of lower quality than traditional programs due to the idea that online classes and colleges are not properly accredited. Even prestigious universities such as Harvard and Stanford offer online course that are still subject to these stigmas.

### **Myths of Distance Learning**

Along with the stigmas of "diploma mills" and lower quality learning, many online programs are subject to numerous myths. These myths possibly even drive a lot of the stigma that online learning faces, such as:

- online courses being easy credits
- the acceptance of procrastination
- doing all of the work at one time
- how easy it is to cheat in online courses

An even greater myth of online learning is that students are pretty much on their own, absent from a group learning environment.

Online learning is not easier than traditional brick-and-mortar learning. In fact, it can be more challenging. A certain self-discipline skill is required of distance learning students. Not only do students have to complete the same material as traditional courses, but they also have to learn how to manage their time online because they do not have to report to class at a certain time on a certain day. Distance learning students have to hold themselves accountable to due dates for assignments and projects. Distance learning courses require more self-direction than a traditional course ([Williams, 2015](#)). Distance learning does allow flexibility and convenience, but there are still definite time frames and deadlines.

Most distance learning classes require students to log on numerous times during a learning module. This is put in place to ensure active participation and maximum learning. It is also put in place to aid learners in avoiding procrastination. Avoiding procrastination is definitely a skill that needs fine tuning for many students. The nature of online learning requires more interaction to establish community and presence in the virtual environment of a distance learning course.

Procrastination is one of life's biggest stressors and it is easy to procrastinate in an online course when you do not have to report to a physical location every day. However, procrastination does not make life easy and it is an impediment to learning. As with the myth that online learning is easy, procrastination is not acceptable because students must rely on their own time management skills and develop a discipline to adhere to schedules ([UNLV, n.d.](#)). The most successful distance learning students are those who are self-directed, independent learners.

The creation of plagiarism detection software gives distance learning teachers more defenses against cheating than in traditional courses where a student can hand in a paper. The requirement of a physical presence on campus for final exams is also another defense against

cheating in distance learning courses. Many distance learning courses use more competency based learning over traditional testing in order to ensure that students are grasping the concepts taught successfully (Williams, 2012).

Another common myth that circulates about online learning is that students are on their own when they take an online class. This myth does seem like it has many examples to back it up. After all, it is just a student and their computer. It is hard to imagine that a course that is taken from the comfort of one's home can offer an environment with social and collaborative engagement. However, it is possible, especially today. Many online courses can even be more interactive than traditional face to face courses. How is this possible? Communication in the digital age is what makes this possible. Applications such as instant messaging, video chatting, and even online gaming, and learning management systems cater to both synchronous and asynchronous learning.

In an online course, learners are given the opportunity to research their answers and think before they post these answers. They are also given the opportunity to edit their answers even after submitting their original answers. This eliminates the awkwardness of shouting out the wrong answer in class and provides ample opportunity for a thoughtful, well-rounded answer. The extra time and space allows students to provide a more reasoned and researched responses.

Even with the advances in technology, many still view online learning as independent studies. However, the advancement of technology has been able to debunk a lot of these myths recently, helping to lower the stigma online learning has faced in the past.

### **Changes in Technology**

Advances in technology and the adaptive and accessible nature of the internet have all had a big impact on the trend of distance learning ([Stenger, 2013](#)). The creation of collaborative tools such as discussion boards, Skype, video conferencing, instant messaging, Blackboard Collaborate, and webinars has changed the face of distance learning. While teacher and student are still located physically apart from each other, these advances in technology have eliminated a lot of the distance barriers to where most distance learning is extremely similar to traditional learning. Other than the fact that most distance learning remains asynchronous, technology has allowed a certain closeness between teacher and student.

These changes in technology have allowed students to customize and even personalize their learning. Distance learning is becoming more and more popular because physical boundaries do not matter anymore. Online learning is actually becoming more of a norm instead of an exception ([D'Arpino, 2014](#)). Online learning has allowed many people in the world to gain additional education and even multiple degrees. Online learning has helped to define the concept of individualized learning by allowing access to a wealth of information via college courses and general informational courses to adults everywhere. Online learning has become commonplace. In the fall of 2013, about 5.3 million United States students took at least one online course ([Williams, 2015](#)).

### **Employers' View of Distance Learning**

Distance learning was initially created for students who were unable to participate in traditional programs, such as older students and working parents. Today, individuals from every age group and background are enrolling in online degree and certificate programs ([Pinantoan, 2012](#)). One of the best things about distance learning is that education is accessible to talented

students everywhere. The world is not losing talent because of the lack of availability and to provide educational opportunities to all students.

To many people, a degree is a degree. However, to others, especially employers, there can be an issue of trust or lack of reputation and familiarity (Zupek, 2010). This is partly due to the newness of distance learning and online education versus the trusted reputation of traditional courses and degree programs. However, times are changing and employers are starting to change their views on distance learning. Excelsior College and Zogby International conducted surveys of employers online to see how they really view online learning. Eighty-three percent of executives that took the survey said that online degrees are just as credible as a traditional degree earned through a campus-based program (Zupek, 2010).

There are still holdouts who believe in the stigma and myths presented thus far. Some view online education as less of a commitment than traditional learning. Many employers think that those who take online courses are just looking for excuses such as the cost being cheaper. This tends to say something of the individual. What these employers fail to see is the flexibility and the ability to personalize and individualize learning. While employers may pay for employees to take classes, eliminating the cost excuse, employers are not willing to allow their employees to relocate to take on campus courses tailored to their interests and skill sets. Employers who feel this way obviously are not in-tune to the fact that many feel that distance learning requires more of a commitment than a traditional on-campus classes because distance learning students must hold additional and fine-tuned skills such as time management and self-discipline. In fact, many employers are using online classes for professional development since they can be incorporated into employees' work schedules.

### **Conclusion**

Now, in 2016, it appears that the stigma of distance learning is fading. While there are still some holdouts, the advancement of technology and the ability to personalize and individualize education is making distance learning more appealing and popular than traditional face-to-face learning. The adoption of distance learning at many prestigious and state level colleges and universities is giving prospective students more choices. With these choices, graduates of these programs are going out into the work force and proving that the myths and stigmas related to distance learning are mostly false. Time will continue to prove these myths and stigmas inaccurate, but there will always be skeptics as with anything. Not only are these myths and stigmas being debunked, but employers are gaining talented and valuable employees due to the flexibility, convenience and the breaking down of barriers that distance learning provides.

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