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DISTANCE TEACHING-LEARNING IN ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Dr. Morton Isaacs

The course of the stream of education is widening each year (though perhaps not deepening); more people desire higher education both for the experience and for a degree which is now an entry-level requirement for many positions in the work-force. Along with this increased desire, though, is a lessened opportunity for older persons to leave their accustomed surroundings, and for those who are employed to leave their jobs, in order to attend a daytime, full-time college curriculum.

In an effort to meet these diverging needs, the former "night-school" and/or "correspondence school" approaches to education have been incorporated into the traditional college/university curriculum. This has been aided by the development of computing capabilities, so that it is no longer considered extraordinary to arrange for students to obtain and know how to use a modem to access a computer system and thus have daily contact by computer if desired between faculty and students.

The computer program NOTES which runs on the RIT VAX system allows faculty to post topics to be discussed by students, students to post replies and comments to the topics, and other students to directly interact with these comments by answering the replies. It has been used successfully by Liberal Arts faculty in the past (e.g., Dr. Norman Coombs, John Sanders, and others), but each course has to be individually crafted to fit the needs of the particular discipline. This year I conceived of, designed, and taught the first distance teaching/learning course in Abnormal Psychology and I would like to share my experiences.

The advantages of this method of teaching

Degree of student participation

In lecture classes, some students talk not at all while others tend to monopolize the classtime by volunteering many comments. Some people are shyer than others and don't wish to push themselves forward; others think more slowly so that by the time they would
make a comment the class has moved on to a different point; still others might speak English poorly and hesitate to volunteer for fear of being laughed at by the class. A good teacher of course encourages the quieter ones to talk but it is an uphill battle.

In a distance learning course, all comments are in writing with no face-to-face interaction required. Therefore, shyer students can volunteer without having to be "the focus of all eyes"; those who think more slowly can ponder what they want to say for as long as they wish before typing it into the computer and still be "on time"; and those whose grammar or spelling is poor can correct them prior to sending them along (or ignore their errors as many do) without concern for class ridicule.

I found that many more students participate and interact in the Distance course than I ever found do so in the equivalent lecture course.

Reading the text material and viewing the videos

In a lecture course, getting students to read the text material on a timely basis is often difficult. Students often come to class feeling that the teacher will cover the material needed and that reading the text is just a reinforcer for what the teacher says. There are ways of counteracting this (e.g., giving exams every period, or giving quizzes on a "surprise" basis), but students then can become antagonistic to the entire learning process.

In a distance course, the text and/or videos is the only material of a factual nature that the students will receive. They are therefore aware that, if they don't read the text or see the video series, they will be totally unprepared for the exams. I have found that the students have a better knowledge of the text and video material than when taught in a lecture mode.

Depth of student participation

Students have opened up during this course with material that I have never heard them discuss in the usual lecture course (see Appendix A for example). Not only was the content in depth, but there is good demonstration that the text has been read and thought about.

Student evaluation and student performance
Student Evaluation forms collected by the Office of Distance Learning seem to show that the students enjoy the method and felt that they learn from it, at least as much as they do from lecture courses and perhaps more. As far as performance, to be conservative there is no evidence that distance learning groups are any different in quality than students in my lecture classes.

**The disadvantages of the method are also important to note**

**Computer problems**

Several of the students have difficulty using the computer through lack of experience with the machine, compounded with the lack of ever interacting with the NOTES program. This causes intense frustration through the first two or so weeks of contact. Unfamiliarity by the instructor with the method and computers may also contribute to start-up problems.

**Time problems**

Distance Learning usually requires much more time than a lecture course. This is the downside to the professor of the advantage that more students contribute to the class discussions. Since the students are informed that part of their grade is determined by their NOTES participation, students write comments on four or five topics each week for the entire course. If they write them, the professor is obligated to read and sometimes to respond to them. The upside is that the comments tend to be more focused on the topic and more interesting, and I gradually found that I could audit more and respond less, as the students are then interacting with each other happily.

In general, then, I find that the advantages seem to exceed the disadvantages, and I would recommend this method to other faculty looking to expand their repertoire of teaching techniques and their usefulness to the Institute.

**APPENDIX A**

**ONE OF THE TOPICS AND ITS UNSELECTED REPLIES TO CHAPTER ON POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER TOPIC**

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER: Do you know of anyone who was raped and still suffers after-effects? The text seems to indicate
that most females recover from the psychological effects of rape within a year; what do you think? Dr. I.

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UNRETOUCHED NOTES FOLLOW BELOW IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER AS POSTED ON THE NOTES PROGRAM TO THIS TOPIC

i actually did have a friend who was raped in the downtown area about 1975. it really did take her a long time to get over the incident due to the fact that counseling wasn't really something suggested to her back at that time. i think today there is so much more help and a person really bounces back more quickly with professional help. we as her friends tried to help but it is not like having sometime trained in that area assisting her.

I totally disagree with the text. I dated a girl who was raped when she was 16. She had terrible difficulty relating to men. While being passionate, on occasion, she would become hysterical or just become paralized with fear. No I don't agree with the text at all.

I am not aware of any acquaintances of mine that have suffered this horrendous act. I sincerely hope that remains true, but statistics indicate otherwise. I cannot imagine how anyone thinks this type of an encounter could be easily overcome - a burglary on your home is a bad enough violation, but to be internally violated against your will by anyone, I can only begin to imagine how much damage to one's head this would result in. Emotional abuse not related to physical rape is hard enough to acknowledge, perhaps impossible to overcome. I don't know how people deal with this - therapy would definitely be a need.

I sadly am going to have to disagree with the text on this. I personally know of someone who wasn't raped but the attempt was made by an aquantance. I later learned of this incident and found that the women had blocked the episode out of her memory. Only until a significant time later did she remember the incident. Therefore I find it hard to beleive it only would take a year to recover from rape if even unsuccessful attempts produce such trauma. How can someone deal with somthing if it takes them time even just to recall the incident.

After re-reading the highlight regarding rape, I wonder what people that know rape victims can offer concerning "the strongest determinants of adjustment in the long-term post-rape period were associated with the victim's level of prior functioning". This makes sense to me, but I can only speak (thankfully) from no experience. It
would appear that if a person is relatively able to function to life's experiences and deal with things rather than burying them, one would be able to cope. For sure, some experiences require more intensive coping mechanisms including support and therapy than others, ultimately, if a person is stable to begin with, does it help? Frankly, this analysis sounds a little cold. I know, when I read articles by rape victims, I can only imagine how horrendous an encounter this truly is. I try to compare the emotional turmoil within ones self to the tragic death of my stepson in a New Year's Eve alcohol related accident. I was able to cope with the situation through much support and I know that prior to this incident, I was not the most stable person in the world, due to my current life style.

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Although I do not know of any close acquaintances, Maya Angelou (I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS) comes to mind. She spoke to the attendees at a conference I attended in San Francisco this fall, To Heal A Wounded Soul. She told us how not a day goes by but what she remembers her rape as a young child. She has obviously found a way or ways to deal with her trauma for she is a world renowned scholar and educator. If statistics are correct in that one of every 3 or 4 children is sexually abused, then there are many people especially women, who have found recovery.

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Over and over again in the readings, I notice the overwhelming line - how a person responds to a traumatic event depends on how they coped prior to the experience. I do believe this - having been through the year from hell in which my stepson died, my mother broke both wrists, my father was hospitalized with chest pain, my husbands office burned to the ground, I developed skin cancer and had major surgery, my sister in law suffered a miscarriage - I guess that was about all - between my faith and probably being totally numb for most of the year, I made it through. Now, looking back, I still remember the events leading up to each encounter and can see how I coped. My coping behaviors were nothing I remember learning, I just remember talking and telling my story over and over again. Had I been a different type of person, I am quite certain all these experiences would have pushed me over the edge. Actually, it got to the point where everytime something else happened, it just didn't matter any more - it almost got humorous - like Allen Funt was going to hop out and say smile, you're on candid camera! Seriously, my sense of humor, faith, family/friend support system and sick hospital humor made all the difference.

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I disagree with the book- I think that rape is something that victims lives with for the rest of their lives. A person who has had to cope with a traumatic experience prior to being raped may have an advantage over someone who has never had to cope with anything traumatic before. Then again, perhaps having to deal with a second traumatic experience could push someone over the edge. I think it depends on the person.

They may continue with their lives, but I believe that the memory of the incident is still there and will replay itself in the mind of the individual when it is cued upon by something that jogs their memory. This does bring up one of the points that I wanted to make when I began reading this topic. I believe that any traumatic event is never erased from your mind. Rather it becomes a part of who you are, and it can either act in a positive or negative force in your life. The difference between the two is what separates those who are crippled vs cured from such an experience. I strongly agree with Dr. I's statement about talking as a cure or an aid to overcome a bad incident. I have found that keeping things within only prolongs the problem and the sooner I can talk to someone that can relate to the incident/problem I have encountered/will encounter, the better I feel and the quicker I can overcome the This is probably the single most critical part that is missing is so many people's lives: not having the ability and/or opportunity to work through such events with other people. I think the growth in the psychiatric field (generic term including psychologist, counsler... ) can be a testimony to the need for such an outlet.

Fortunately, I do not personally know of anyone who has been raped. In my own opinion I think that the effects would last more than a year even with counseling. I'm sure they would lessen over time with the help of continuing counseling.

The effects of a sexual assault on a person are very traumatic. Like most people have stated, talking about it does help. Unfortunatly nothing can take the mental anguish and fear away. It also can be the beginning of a wall of distrust to all in the gender of the assailant. Time can heal wounds, but the scares left can be very deep and unforgettable.