

From the Guest Editors

In recent years the education system has been challenged with providing more learning opportunities with fewer financial resources. Many institutions are responding to this problem by providing at least some of these opportunities from a distance. Essentially, distance education (also referred to as distance learning) occurs when the instructor and student(s) are separated from each other by some physical distance, and various technology media (e.g., Internet, videoconferencing, and e-mail, CD-ROMs) are used to replace and/or augment traditional face-to-face communication. Distance education programs can, for example, provide clinicians with opportunities for continuing education, reach those whose time and location prevent attendance at traditionally delivered courses, be accessible to those with physical disabilities, and help to keep people up-to-date in their field of employment.

An important question is whether students who “attend” a course from a distance acquire as much knowledge and skill as those who participate in more traditionally formatted courses. A rapidly expanding body of literature indicates that distance education can be as effective as, and sometimes, more effective than face-to-face instruction, provided that (1) the teaching methods and technologies used are suited to the instructional tasks, (2) there are opportunities for interaction between students and between students and instructors (e.g., via a CHAT program or a discussion forum, and (3) feedback from the instructor to the student is prompt and thorough.

Today there are available numerous technological options that enable the delivery of effective distance education courses. Some, such as printed materials or audiotapes delivered by post, have been used for many years. Others, such as the Internet, are much more recent. The relatively recent advent of broadband transmission enhances the retrieval of web information in an efficient manner.

Usually a distance education course will entail the use of a variety of media with each type being suited for

a specific purpose. For example, print media may be best for providing the syllabus, and day-to-day schedule. Interactive audio or video conferencing are an excellent and relatively inexpensive way to include guest speakers. CHAT and electronic mail are ideal for sending messages, assignment feedback, and other targeted communication to one or more class members.

A successful distance education program requires the coordinated efforts of instructors, students, and technical support staff:

Students – When instruction is obtained from a distance, additional challenges result because students are often separated from others sharing their backgrounds and interests, have few if any opportunities to interact with teachers outside of class, and must rely on technical linkages to bridge the gap separating class participants.

Instructors – In a traditional classroom setting, the instructor’s responsibility is limited to putting together the course content and developing an understanding of student needs. Special challenges confront those teaching at a distance. In addition to this, the instructor of a distance education course must understand the special difficulties faced by the distant student whom he or she will likely never have met. Moreover, the instructor must acquire an appreciation for the various technologies that are used to provide the course even if he or she has full technical support.

Technical Support Staff – As in any application of technology, reliable and competent technical expertise is essential.

Today, many distance education courses of interest to clinicians are available around the world. To view some examples of internationally available distance education courses currently available in English view the following URLs:

- The School of Physical and Occupational Therapy and McGill University (Montreal, Canada) will be starting a distance education master's degree in rehabilitation science this coming academic year. www.medserv.mcgill.ca/spot/
- Occupational Therapy Seminars for therapists who treat patients in acute care and/or long term care facilities, available from the University of Wisconsin. <http://www.uwex.edu/disted/catalog/fall97/e271.htm>
- The School of Occupational Therapy at Belmont University (Nashville, Tennessee) offers a post-professional Master of Science degree through distance learning. <http://www.belmont.edu/OT/index.html>
- Graduate level courses by distance at the School of Occupational Therapy (Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada) throughout the year provide the opportunity to pursue new depths in clinical practice. <http://www.occtherapy.dal.ca/grad.htm>
- The Department of Physiotherapy at Curtin University (Perth, Australia) provides a number of courses, including anatomy and functional anatomy via online learning. <http://physiotherapy.curtin.edu.au/academic/anat550.shtml>

In Hong Kong, in the Department of Rehabilitation Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, web-based teaching was developed in the last three years. Initially, the course "Occupational therapy for physical dysfunction", focusing on patients with rheumatoid arthritis. Subsequently, a web programme on "Splinting principles and practice for occupational therapy students" has been developed. The WEBCT platform has been operational since 1999, providing a relatively easy platform for uploading teaching materials. The Department is planning to develop a master

of science programme in Rehabilitation Sciences at the Cyber University of the HKPU by 2002.

In Israel, in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Haifa, a web-based course on the topic of ergonomics was taught this year to third year students. The effectiveness of this course is currently being evaluated; the results will provide valuable information as to the desirability of making use of these technologies for other courses in occupational therapy.

The objective of this special issue of *WORK* is to increase the awareness of readers of the many possible applications of distance learning, be they for the purposes of a clinician's own continuing education, or to enhance the teaching of safe, ergonomic practice.

In their article, "Learning technologies at the service of higher education: Global trends and local Israeli opportunities", Beller and Or provide an insightful overview of global trends in distance learning as well as a discussion of the opportunities opened by harnessing learning technologies. Harrison, in her article on "Instructional design for the Web" and Tam in his article on the "Application of multimedia in computer-assisted rehabilitation education" provide important guidelines and helpful advice to therapists and educators wishing to commence using this valuable tool. Finally, Li and Weiss in their article "Evaluation of a Web-based rheumatology course for students in rehabilitation sciences" and August and Snider in their article "A multimedia case based approach to the study of office ergonomics" share their experiences in implementing this medium in the education of therapy students.

Cecilia W.P. Li-Tsang
Patrice L. (Tamar) Weiss
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