

  
**Crossing Another Chasm**

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**Entering the Electronically-Delivered Class Setting Involves Change for Both  
Student And Teacher**

Dr. Melvin Anderson

**Abstract**

The author of this paper addresses his recent experiences as he “crosses the chasm” from the traditional live classroom environment into the production and delivery of distance learning courses in the electronically-delivered class setting. Beginning with first reactions (and cautious resistance) to the emergence of “cyberschools” and college courses delivered via video tape and internet, he investigates his five-year path to acknowledgement, acceptance and appreciation for the distance learning environment as a viable delivery medium for business management courses and the realization that both student and teacher face adjustments in this journey.

At a later point in the process of self-development, the author is offered the opportunity to create and deliver two graduate management courses using video tapes, internet, specially-designed course materials and written examinations to be taught not only by himself, but by a number of other qualified teachers via an interactive internet link to hundreds of students worldwide. This paper is based on these experiences.

The transition from traditional classroom teacher to on-screen professor proves to be much more than gaining an appreciation for the value of distance learning in the modern academic environment. Despite ample experience in the business world and in teaching courses in the modern high-tech classroom, creating distance learning versions of “standard” management courses presents previously unimagined challenges in both course design and delivery.

Reflecting on his immersion into the distance learning environment, the author suggests that each professor must indeed “cross a chasm” in both method and willingness to do the same things in different ways. Each teacher must first discover the real “chasm” that separates hem from the new distance learning environment, and then replace the illusion of what s/he considers to be the “modern electronic classroom” with an enlightened view of what that “modern electronic classroom” really is.

The paper concludes that students entering the electronically-delivered class setting also cross a chasm of uncertainty, and that their success in doing so also depends on the organization and relationships that facilitate it and prepare teachers to use it.

## Crossing Another Chasm

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### Entering the Electronically-Delivered Class Setting Involves Change for Both Student And Teacher

Melvin J Anderson, Ph.D.

### Foreword

Not too many years ago, the traditional live classroom learning environment focused mostly on a chalkboard or whiteboard. Most teachers lectured from prepared notes and perhaps overhead slides. In recent years, however, new high-tech teaching tools emerged that include TVs and videotapes, computers, LCD projectors and the ability to access the internet actively during lecture sessions. With interactive computer simulation software, teachers discovered that they could immerse students in exercises and programs that emulate the real world in a way that no textbook or one-way videotape can.

Enhanced by a resurgence of Socratic teaching methods, the traditional classroom has become a place of inquiry where students can learn not only the right answers, but more importantly, how to ask the right questions. The classroom is still a classroom and teachers are still teachers, but these methods and the new teaching tools combine to provide tremendous new opportunities for enhancing learning outcomes. It's an exciting time for academe, and today's classroom learning environment is an exciting place to work.

However, another and very different learning environment is gaining in popularity as we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Whether it's called Distance Learning, Online Learning, Web Learning or one of the not-so-complimentary names like "Cyberschool," it means, among other things, that teachers are faced with meeting a new challenge. And this new challenge is much more than learning how to use new tools in the classroom. This challenge involves crossing a *chasm* that seems wider and deeper than anything most educators have ever experienced, but it is not unlike the chasm that businesses encounter when new technology products and services emerge.

In 1991, Geoffrey Moore wrote a book entitled *Crossing the Chasm: Marketing and Selling Technology Products to Mainstream Customers*. This thought-provoking work begins by describing new efforts to keep the means of production—our products and services—in touch with evolving social and personal conditions. Marketing expert and author Regis McKenna writes in the Foreword of this book:

In an era when the pace of change was slower, the variety of products and services fewer, the channels of communication and distribution less pervasive, and the consumer less sophisticated, marketing could enjoy prolonged periods of relative stability, reaping profits from "holding the customer constant" and optimizing the other variables. That is no longer the case.

McKenna explains that in the present age of greater choice, we are continually bombarded with new alternatives in every aspect of our lives; people demand more and more, which leads to increasingly fragmented markets for services and products that are truly customized to meet each customer's needs. We may celebrate change and growth, but that does not make either one less demanding or painful:

Our emerging and evolving markets are demanding continual adaptation and renewal, not only in times of difficulty but on the heels of our greatest successes as well . . . It is only natural to cling to the past when the past represents so much of what we have strived to achieve.

*Crossing the Chasm* addresses the gulf between two distinct environments for the acceptance of technology products. While producers of new technology products generally have great initial success in increasing their acceptance among a few early adopters, it requires immense effort and radical transformation to make them popular in the mainstream market. Both customer and vendor are challenged in their ability to absorb and make use of new things.

Americans don't get comfortable with innovative things very quickly, especially if there are conflicting opinions about it. Old things, despite their hazards, are fine. Natural gas kills 200 people a year, but we accept it because it's old. We accept coal but we're terrified of nuclear power. We let 16-year-olds drive cars weighing two tons, but the automobile would probably

never make it off the drawing board in 2001. IBM used to refer to the challenge of complex decisions as the "FUD factor"—the fear, uncertainty and doubt that plague decision makers when confronted with unfamiliar products and services.

McKenna and *Chasm* author Moore both believe that what is perceived as a chasm is in reality a state of mind based on uncertainty and doubt. *Crossing the Chasm* confronts the uncertainty of a large segment of the high-tech market about adopting new high-tech products and services, and proposes that overcoming this uncertainty involves creating organizational relationships to buffer the shock of change.

### **Another Chasm?**

In the academic environment, a similar chasm and a similar FUD factor exists. We are being confronted by new teaching technologies, usually without the inspiration for change promised in business by new market successes, greater profits and the attendant job enhancement factors.

Academicians have long enjoyed the comfort provided by tenure, status, rank and the assurance that our tried-and-true knowledge would enable us to keep doing what we've been doing in order to keep getting what we've been getting. The reality of today is that we are confronted with not only the gradual appearance of new technologies in the traditional classroom learning environment, but the sudden and perhaps terrifying prospect that we will soon be

plying our trade in the netherworld of the television studio and internet.

Distance learning is here to stay. It is already a major segment of higher education. For those of us with long experience in the traditional classroom with or without the new teaching tools, there is yet another chasm to discover and cross—in that order.

## Discovering the Chasm

A relatively small number of today's educators are thinking, "If Dan Rather (with his new hair style) can talk to TV cameras, then I can talk to TV cameras." In every profession and every market, there are a few innovators and early adopters who are at the cutting edge of new technologies, methods and theories.

In the business world in any era, a few visionary companies and individuals possess the courage and foresight to look into the future and dream of things that do not yet exist or are not yet popular. These visionaries not only reap enormous financial benefits from their efforts; they also produce dramatic change in their industries and in the world around them--eventually. A few, sensing the true value of innovation, really do "get rich quick."

### Fears and Fads

Higher education is not known for its tendency to spring forward with every new teaching method and learning theory. Along with the comfort of the status quo there is also the fear that innovative methods will fail to attract the

needed new enrollments, not to mention fall under the scrutiny of accrediting organizations and mainstream public opinion.

Like new management theories, new teaching methods tend at first to be labeled as "fads" and either trampled by the fearful or simply ignored in hopes they will fade away. As a result, a healthy caution concerning genuine fads is often transmuted into unreasoned fear that change, especially radical change, will jeopardize the known, comfortable, working-well methods that should change only through evolution. Before change occurs in academe, a number of layers of resistance must first be peeled away.

Peeling away layers of resistance to change is not simply a matter of exercising authority or emotional appeal. Learned, professional people must first be convinced about making any change, based on a number of legitimate concerns.

- (1) Is there a need to change?  
"What's wrong with the way I'm doing it now?"
- (2) Is this the right change? "What if it does more harm than good?"
- (3) Can we overcome all the obstacles to such change?  
"Good idea, but what if we can't make it work?"
- (4) Can we get the others to do it?  
"If I do it, I don't want to be the only one."

## **A Personal Chasm**

These are all legitimate responses to change based on perceived individual concerns about career, professional status and personal financial future. No intelligent educator is likely to slide comfortably into a new learning environment without first having confronted these personal concerns. The chasm that each of us perceives about entering into the new distance learning environment is a personal chasm.

Only when a person discovers what is on the other side of a chasm will s/he be willing to cross it. Alas, for too many of life's challenges, there is no way to really know what is there without "being there and doing that." The chasm that separates those who have ventured into the distance learning environment from those who haven't is purely a lack of knowing what it's like "over there"—a lack of visibility about what lies on the other side.

Distance learning, for most present-day classroom teachers, is a set of unknowns and mistaken impressions—illusions—about how this new learning environment works and what one does to make it work. This illusory chasm, as we would describe it, is in reality a lack of knowledge, not some ominous rift that one must cross and from which one cannot come back. There is a bridge that can provide an enlightened view of what this new environment really is.

The majority of today's educators want improvement in our academic world, but we want evolution, not revolution. Most of us would prefer that this new learning

environment enhance, not overthrow, traditional classroom teaching. Also, most of us don't want to have to debug what someone else has devised; we want it to work properly and to integrate appropriately with existing methods. This contrast just scratches the surface relative to the differences and incompatibilities between the early adopters and the majority. And because of the majority's concern for not disrupting their organizations, good references are important before they actually move ahead.

So what we have here is a catch-22. The only suitable reference for the majority, it turns out, is another member of the majority. But few upstanding members of the majority will recommend moving into the distance learning environment without first having consulted with a suitable reference—someone who's doing it, likes it, and can describe some of how it works. No matter that a university is moving into this new environment with effective, balanced courses; overcoming personal uncertainty depends mostly on relationships between those who are informed and those who aren't.

### **Relationships: the Bridge Across**

Illusions replaced by other illusions are no closer to enlightenment. Crossing an illusory chasm requires a real—not illusory—bridge of understanding. But when a new concept or technique is presented, there is often a lack of information about it. There is little to overcome the imagined sight of "bodies in the chasm"—academics who've tried to cross and fallen into its depths. This

is evident with most distance learning transitions today; those who've tried it are as yet few and unskilled in training and motivating others about it. There is no bandwagon—yet.

For most of us, crossing the chasm depends on how we relate to those who have already been across. And that is complicated somewhat by the fact the each of the early adopters has a unique experience in his first attempt at distance learning. Each, in developing distance learning courses, prepares outlines, syllabi and study guides, creates visual aids and in most cases, delivers lectures to video cameras. And after all that, each of us will be invited to deliver these courses on the Worldwide Web using specialized software and conducting near-real-time dialog with students.

These last two events—video taping lectures and online teaching—separate all of us from what lies on the other side of the chasm, and from each other as well. One may think s/he knows what the studio experience and online teaching tasks will be, but for anyone who is about to do them for the first time, there is little to provide a true understanding of what these tasks are like. These, or rather the illusions about them, are what really constitute the chasm.

## **Crossing the Chasm**

### **Individuals, Groups and Organizations**

Each individual teacher confronted by the distance learning chasm is also part of an undefined “group” that is for the most part only a group, not an organization. Each is simply a member of the majority—a group of individuals—who could shed little light on what lay just across the perceived chasm. Several speak highly of the merits of distance learning because they know it is an innovation whose time has almost come. Each probably believes that after others get the hang of it, there will be some more information and encouragement from the group that will provide a view of what's across the chasm. Unfortunately, waiting for others when others are waiting for you is not likely to create much motion. That is the nature of informal groups; position is more important than motion.

What must happen next is beyond individual and group. It needs someone to actually explain what a distance learning course entails--someone who is part of a formal organization committed to developing distance learning programs and capable of leading the newcomers to both motivation and understanding.

The magic word here is “organization.” What uninformed individuals can never supply for themselves, and what an uninformed group can only confound further, a capable organization—a team—can present as a clear and believable account of what a traditional classroom teacher would do in creating and delivering a distance learning course.

With this clarity, the chasm moves closer to being nothing more than a scheduling problem, complicated perhaps by having to address a TV camera and learn how to use online learning software. Again, with the direction of a knowledgeable team, these steps are procedural and learnable. Anyone competent in the new high-tech classroom lecturing with the aid of PowerPoint presentations will find doing the same thing in a TV studio is not really much different.

Distance learning online software is not difficult to master by either teacher or student. We must remember that it has to be simple enough for all students to use, driven by menus and prompts that aren't confusing to students who are perhaps less computer-literate than the average teacher. The programs can do a lot of the teacher's work; they track student activities, exams, log-ins and online discussions without confusing anyone. And yet they should be flexible enough that the teacher can customize his own site or just use the basic pages; it works well either way.

### **Getting Beyond the Chasm**

Distance learning is all about relationships. The teachers don't change and the course content doesn't change. Most of the course materials don't change. The relationship between teacher and student is different, but no less academic and certainly not a compromise in student learning or teacher involvement.

The distance learning chasm motivated by uncertainty yields to clarity and

eventually no longer exists. With a professional organization team leading and assisting, any teacher who can design and deliver a classroom college course can also design and deliver a distance learning course.

The pre-chasm teacher is motivated by noble academic and personal goals. To truly leave the chasm behind, a teacher must recognize that s/he has added new confidence and skills, but has not become a different person. All the skills and talents a teacher possesses in the classroom are enhanced by having crossed the chasm and entered the distance learning environment.

The post-chasm teacher recognizes that the chasm separates not only those who've crossed it from those who haven't. It also separates the colleges who have done it and done it well from those that haven't. To leave the chasm behind and not fall back into it is to move from being a "pioneer" to being a "settler." But settlers require leadership and organization, lest they operate in vacuums or gravitate into uncooperative groups.

The student who's completed even one distance learning course has probably overcome any uncertainty about how it works and how it expands learning opportunities. But the remaining challenge for academe is to ensure that students' learning goals are truly achieved. If the goal of higher education is preparing people for life, then the purpose of any learning environment is to serve that goal. As we build a balanced approach in the new learning environments, we must always consider

how students, even more than teachers, adapt to it, use it and learn in it. And to do that, we must begin by making sure teachers understand it clearly and use it effectively.

The answer to the chasm is, as claimed, organization—an organization empowered and capable of leading its members across the chasm and past the illusions caused by uncertainty, misconceptions and fear about the distance learning environment we will all be invited to enter.





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