Distance Learning: Does it work for wildlife Rehabilitation?

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This workshop will consider the effectiveness of delivering accredited training in wildlife rehabilitation by distance learning mode. We will look at the pros and cons of providing training in this way and discuss the issues of providing learning to those who are socially disadvantaged and its implications for wildlife care and rehabilitation. Also considered will be learning styles which are compatible for online learning. Finally, we will investigate the issues of developing a national standard for wildlife rehabilitation training, some of which may be delivered using distance learning courses.

For the past few years I have been delivering a short course in wildlife rehabilitation, which was constructed jointly with Wildlife Victoria. It has been delivered in an on-campus and on-line mode. The following is a summary of the online mode.

1. Practical Experience

   Each student is required to link up with a mentor. The mentor is someone experienced in wildlife rehabilitation and has agreed to undertake and/or oversee basic skills training with the student. Each mentor is required to submit a resume to the course coordinator.

2. Learners Guide

   This is a comprehensive book, which contains instructions on how to access and work with the online environment of the course. As well as all the required activities (assessment tasks and competency checklists).

3. Activity Requirements

   Each topic has activities or assessment tasks that require the leaner to actively research and engage the broader wildlife rehabilitation community.

4. Competency or skills checklist

   Students are required to have a number of basic skills or compentcies to be signed off by their mentor. These are used as part of the evidence to pass the course.

5. On-line resources

   ❖ Lecture Notes

      A series of lecture notes are provided on line in the form of power point or other formats

   ❖ Communication

      o Chat sessions
      o Bulletin boards
      o E mail
      o Direct

6. Course Topics:

   ❖ Biology/Ecology
   ❖ Husbandry
   ❖ Law and Ethics
   ❖ Rehabilitation
   ❖ Animal First Aid

❖ Rescue and release
❖ Animal Health
❖ Units by species
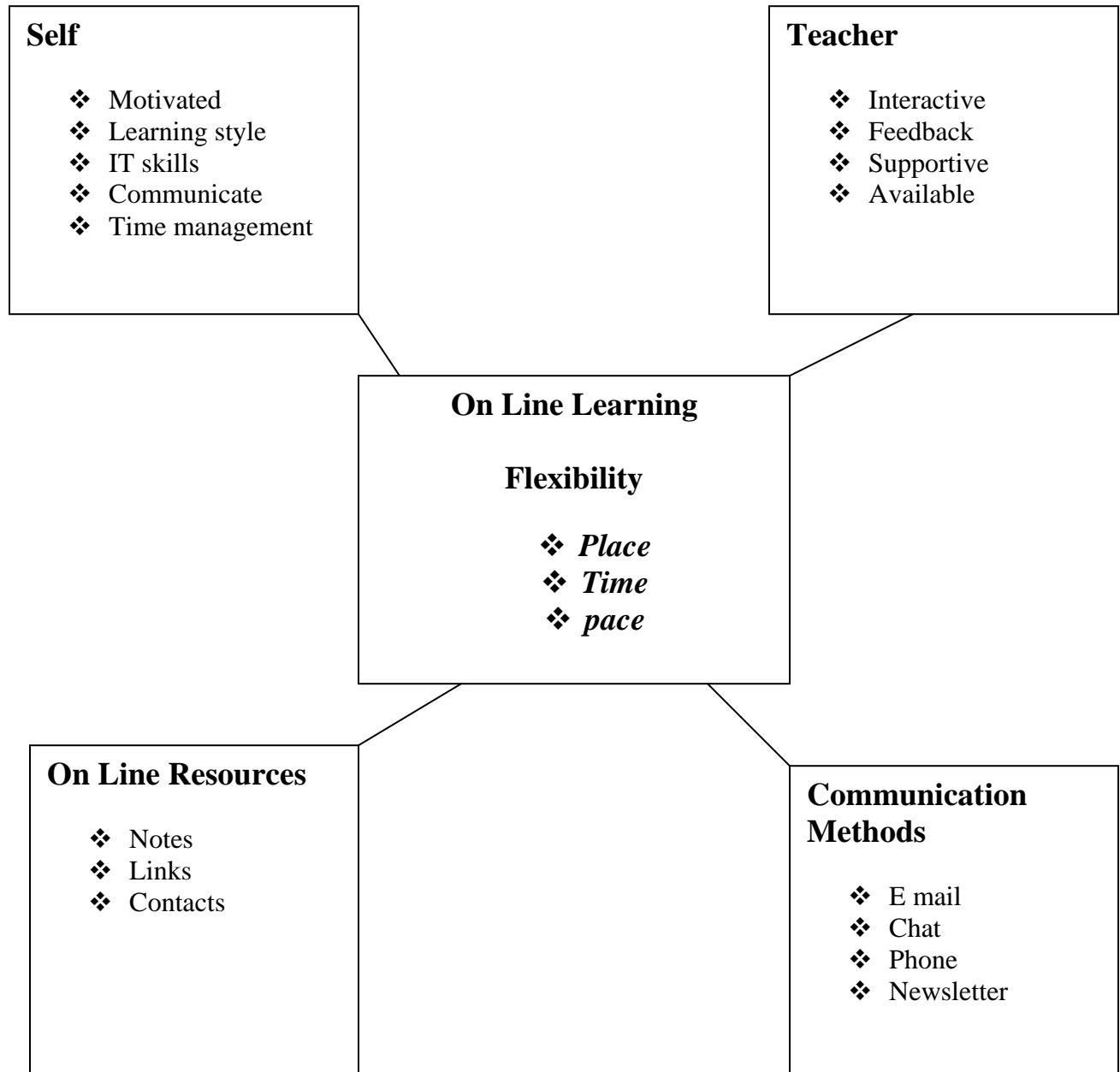
Key Advantages of the course

1. Provides maximum flexibility
2. Engages the learner to seek out and obtain information, that is relevant to the state or territory they live in, from a variety of resources
3. Provides an opportunity for the leaner to develop networks and develop confidence from others experiences.
4. Allows for a range of learning styles and abilities.

Key disadvantages of the course:

1. Dependent on the learner to be self motivated
2. Requires access to the internet and some basic IT skills
3. Some learners are not suited to the non face-to-face method of learning
4. Dependant on mentor abilities, which in some cases are not clearly known

Discussion Point: What is distance learning?

There are a number of strategies to deliver distance learning and with the advent of new technologies ones knowledge and understanding of what is available may be limited. The learning method of choice is very much linked with this understanding and its effectiveness can be related to the various learning styles.

Self

- ❖ Motivated
- ❖ Learning style
- ❖ IT skills
- ❖ Communicate
- ❖ Time management

Teacher

- ❖ Interactive
- ❖ Feedback
- ❖ Supportive
- ❖ Available

On Line Learning

Flexibility

- ❖ *Place*
- ❖ *Time*
- ❖ *pace*

On Line Resources

- ❖ Notes
- ❖ Links
- ❖ Contacts

Communication Methods

- ❖ E mail
- ❖ Chat
- ❖ Phone
- ❖ Newsletter

Distance Education

This is the more traditional method of distance learning where a student completes a number of assessment tasks by correspondence, (Post or e mail). Material may also be provided on a web site.

Flexible Learning

This provides a wide range or mix of methods for learning. It can give the learner a variety of choices and can be self-paced. An example may be assignment-based learning combined with in-house intensive workshops.

Online Learning

This is where learning occurs predominantly using the Internet. Such learning tools as video conferencing, real time chat rooms, and on-line resources are used. This method can be combined with flexible delivery mode to account for as many learning styles as possible.

Discussion Point: Can this form of learning and wildlife rehabilitation in general, works for the socially disadvantaged?

The main reason that we undertake the various courses and workshops in the rehabilitation of native wildlife is to improve our ability to provide the best possible care and increase the chances of re-introduction to the wild. From my experience with providing the on-line course for wildlife rehabilitation I have encounted a number of individuals who would be loosely regarded as socially disadvantaged. These have included:

- ❖ Inmates of a prison that has a registered wildlife shelter
- ❖ Individuals who have emotional or mental health issues
- ❖ Individuals who have learning disabilities

It is well known that working with animals can be very therapeutic for these groups of individuals. Should this be extended to the care of wildlife?

Discussion Point: Is distance learning only suited for certain types of learning styles?

To gain the most from any learning experience it is important to understand how you prefer to learn and process information, and to identify your learning strengths. Most of us who are involved with wildlife rehabilitation take responsibility for our own leaning, which for many could be far more effective if these learning styles are clearly understood. A well-designed distance learning course, as the one I have presented here, accounts for all these styles.

Discussion Point: Should there be a nation-wide standard for training in wildlife rehabilitation?

By its very nature to set a standard implies accreditation. With accreditation come many processes and criteria that must be meet, such as;

- ❖ Trainer qualification
- ❖ Assessment
- ❖ Moderated course material
- ❖ Records
- ❖ Course advisory Group (National Body?)

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