Research Paper Education

Distance Education- Challenges and Responses.

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with problems associated with distance education and their instantaneous tentative solutions. It identifies those problems which were faced by distant learners during their course of study. Then, it provides tentative solutions to these problems and some recommendations for the betterment of distance education. The problems were associated with nature of study material, lack of multi-media instruction, insecurities about learning, lack of feedback or contact with the teacher, lack of support and services, lack of social interaction among learners, lack of student training, absence of a teacher, etc. Keeping in mind these problems, tentative solutions were suggested such as - providing equity of educational opportunity to all, careful consideration to be given to the special needs of distance learners, use of multi-media technologies, proper planning and cooperation on the part of all those who are associated with distance learning. Further, research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning.

KEYWORDS Distance Education, Learning, Motivation, Retention, Technology.

Introduction

Distance learning can be defined as a process whereby tutor and student are separated spatially and by time (Liu, 2008). Distance Education refers the interactive, educational process between student and teacher separated by physical distance (Harry et al., 1993). It relates to programmes of study which are delivered entirely off-campus. Distance learning is being delivered through placing course material online, using e-mail and social networking media as support. Distance learning is becoming an increasingly popular way to deliver higher education, which is illustrated by the range of distance learning courses provided in higher education establishments (Liu et al., 2006).

Reflecting its roots in distance education, the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) was, until 1982, known as the International Council for Correspondence Education. However, distance education has undergone a significant transformation from its origins in independent or correspondence study. Open universities may be viewed, from many respects, as forerunners in tackling the challenges that now confront higher education systems worldwide. In addition to the growth of open distance learning universities, however, we are now witnessing the growth of corporate involvement in education, including distance education.

In 1973, Moore introduced the theory of independent study- an important foundation of distance education; it suggests that successful teaching can take place even though teacher and learner are physically separated during the learning process. This separation can occur in several ways depending on the nature of the course content and delivery medium. The early development of distance education, after the mid-nineteenth century, was driven mainly by the private sector, which applied printing and postal service technologies to create correspondence education. The extremely successful University of South Africa is the oldest of the world's distance universities, and the University of London's pioneering work in distance learning has long been felt. In the United States and Canada, public educational authorities were leaders in distance public education.

SIGNIFICANCE

Distance Education is a new, global technology-based education to facilitate easy, immediate learning and interaction for communicators, teachers, and students in education programs. Distance Education can provide mass-education for everyone. It provides creative and qualified ideas and information to motivate students from diverse backgrounds. Pedagogy in traditional institutions of learning has been affected by distance education. Cantelon, in his 1995 book, Facilitating Distance Education, projects "... most of higher education will take place off-campus through technological methods of delivery. Distance education enables people to learn individually at any time or place. Distance Education is really related by the discovery of truth for gaining antithesis sides of the thoughts to get the exact knowledge (Willis, 2002).

Technology has also changed the face of education. Advances in telecommunications technology has opened up the possibility of personal and group interaction in distance education. Both computer and audio conferencing permit the introduction of class discussions without the group meeting face to face. The distance learner can now have almost the same instructional contact and interaction as the student on campus. In fact, the proliferation of the modem, teleconferencing, and the World Wide Web provide a rich expanse of both information and contacts that were previously unavailable. Distance learning has the potential to address the skill shortage in a range of sectors, through providing targeted flexible training, addressing the realities of work/life pressures (Wall et al., 2006).

Distance Education is potentially attractive to those who face significant work/life pressures and for whom regular attendance at a higher education institution for a traditional form of delivery is neither practicable nor desirable (Gammie et al., 2002). Further, benefits of distance learning can be identified for both the students and the institution. For the student these include the opening up of new opportunities for those who were previously excluded or disadvantaged due to geographic and social issues: location (rural or isolated); transport; family/caring needs; and time constraints can also be overcome through flexible delivery (Lake, 1999). Gaining certified qualifications can be a route to improved job prospects and potentially increased job satisfaction. The advantages for higher education establishments in providing Continuous Professional Development consist of providing closer links with industry and professional bodies; potential funding for research; and cascading information down into undergraduate programmes to keep them up-to-date with the latest industry position (Thomas, 1995).

Challenges in Distance Education

Challenges and barriers in Distance Education fall into several distinct categories. Personality, intellectual abilities, cognitive

and learning styles are important concerns in distance education (Harry et al., 1993). To design effective distance education programs, it is important to understand how learning occurs and the factors that influence motivation, communication, perception, and learning. Learning strategies may consider 1) cognitive learning strategies 2) meta- cognitive activities for planning and self-regulation 3) learner's goals and motivation. Therefore, learner goals and motivation highly influence the cognitive strategies.

Contact and Isolation
Distance learning is different from regular learning in the classroom. One of the main factors which influence the effectiveness of the learning process is the interaction that exists between the teacher and the student.

The challenge of perceived lack of feedback or contact with the teacher may trouble in self-evaluation. (Keegan, 1986) believes that the separation of student and teacher imposed by distance removes a vital "link" of communication between these two parties. The link must be restored through overt institutional efforts so that the teaching-learning transaction may be "reintegrated" (Keegan,). Research by The Higher Education Academy (2008) found that 22% of distance learning students mentioned 'the risk of feeling isolated' as a challenge for student learning (Ipsos MORI, 2007). Isolation can be understood as being in terms of such dimensions as time (concurrent study); space (geographic dispersal); social (awareness of others), intellectual/experience (academic ability and life experiences); profession (subject related expertise); ICT knowledge; sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers); cultural; and subject (if anyone else is studying the same topic). Psychological isolation may result from the physical and temporal isolation experienced by learning at a distance (Lake, 1999). This issue is also raised by Wegner et al. (1999); Barrett and Lally (2000); Hartley et al. (2001); Rovai (2001); Dickey (2004); Lorenzetti (2005); and Stodel et al. (2006). Encouraging student participation in online discussions and therefore interaction with peers may help to reduce isolation, however making this compulsory may not be effective (Gulati, 2008).

Diverse Learning Style of Students
Students' individual learning style and motivation for studying may affect their willingness and need to interact with others (Liu, 2008). The availability of distance learning has lead to a greater diversity in student type, which is a key challenge for delivering online programmes (Connolly et al., 2005; Lorenzetti, 2005; and Lake, 1999), as students in higher education use a wide variety of learning styles. Lynch (2004) suggests that aural learners perform well in traditional lectures whereas those with a visual learning style would favour the Internet. However, much online teaching may 'fall into the trap of "one-size-fits-all" approach' (Wall et al., 2006). The skill of course design for teaching adults is therefore in 'finding alternative ways of conveying information and ideas' (Rogers, 2001).

Student motivation
The distance education requires intrinsic motivation (Gibson, 1997). Motivation is the most important factor for effective learning according to (Rogers, 2001). Students studying whilst in related employment should be motivated from the outset by recognizing the rewards from their education (increased salary, more responsibility, better job prospects and so forth) (Rogers, 2001) or fear of a penalty (having to repay course fees). For students who are studying on their own, learning can be time-consuming and consequently requires heightened levels of motivation. Self-discipline, careful planning (Liu, 2008) and time management (Alexander, 2001) are skills which need to be embedded into the course. Physically attending lectures demands accountability from students (Dickey, 2004), which in turn may assist motivation: distance learning does not have this benefit.

Information and communication technology (ICT)
Another challenge of Distance Education is the lack of student training in technical issues. Using electronic medium in distance learning can inadvertently exclude students who lack computer skills. The technology (ICT) used to facilitate distance learning requires an increased level of learning discipline and motivation, particularly as using new technology at the same time as engaging with new subject material can be difficult. Students can experience ICT related problems including: incompatible software; incorrect hardware; inability to use software correctly; and computer viruses. These can lead to frustration and anxiety (Salmon, 2000; Connolly et al., 2005).

Student expectations
Students in distance learning programmes may feel uneasy about what to expect or the standard of work required. This anxiety may adversely affect students' ability to learn (Rogers, 2001). Students undertaking a formal education process expect their learning to be structured (Gulati, 2008). Without physical attendance students cannot observe the input being given by their peers or understand what constitutes an appropriate amount of study (Lake, 1999). Therefore, 'instilling appropriate expectations among all participants' is a key element to success (Carswell et al., 2000).

Drop-outs
Distance learning courses experience high drop-out rates for many of the reasons identified in the sections above, with isolation being a significant contributory factor (Lake, 1999; and Hartley et al., 2001). If appropriate support is not provided for students, student withdrawal from the course may be more likely (Gammie et al., 2002). Not withstanding the impact on students and their peers, withdrawal from courses has 'economic and social concerns for the university' (Gammie, 2002,) and is something that needs to be considered.

Delivery
The delivery of course programmes is a significant challenge for distance learning. The traditional lecture comprises the most common method of providing higher education learners with information (Fry et al., 2003); however, this does not generally translate well into online learning (Weller, 2002). Placing material on the Internet and merely providing materials for tuition is not sufficient for learning: better use must be made of technology (Chee, 2002). In addition, the needs of the learner must be addressed otherwise online learning will not produce successful results (Willis, 1994; Hamid, 2002). The teacher is responsible for 'preparing the instructional environment' (Wegner et al., 1999) which guides student learning; however students may experience difficulties in undertaking their own knowledge construction (Alexander, 2001).Providing online activities has particular challenges, including difficulty of encouraging participation (Gibson et al., 2001), potential for mistaken beliefs to be generated and shared (Weller, 2002), difficulty of tutor facilitation of online debate (Hughes and Daykin, 2002) and ability of the tutor to answer queries promptly.

Study Material and content
According to Connolly et al. (2005), 'developing appropriate study materials is a major challenge' for distance learning. Substantial time is required for preparing and delivering material (Willis, 1994), and this requires continual updates and maintenance. Material must not infringe copyright; material must be up-to-date yet it is 'costly to make constant changes'; and the material must be in an appropriate format. On the other hand, the availability of material on the Internet provides learners with flexibility and a wide range of information sources and different media. This can however present difficulties for tutors in terms of addressing the tension between rigid structure and responsive flexibility in terms of designing online material that meets learners' changing needs (Stodel et al., 2006).

Responses to Overcome Challenges in Distance Education
Distance education basically caters to the need of people who really have an inner-quest to grow academically, in spite of various constraints. Open and distant learners, can be understood as more sophisticated learners, are, in spite of several challenges, trying to cope with regular learners, as far as academic development is concerned.

Potential responses to overcome the challenges and difficulties of distance learning, and to maximize the student learning experience, have been suggested and discussed:

Effective Contact and Interaction

The communication technologies facilitate rapid dissemination of new concepts. Various methods can be used in distance education to 'reduce feelings of alienation' (Dickey, 2004). The notion of building an online community for learning has been explored, suggesting that this can overcome the absence of physical contact between students (Liu, 2008) and improve teaching (Thomas, 2002) by allowing for structured interaction (Garrison et al., 2000) or as a peer support network (Hartley et al., 2001). Blogs have been shown to create a sense of community among students which may reduce psychological isolation (Dickey, 2004). Online discussion forums may result in 'increased student engagement, critical analysis and reflection, and the social construction of knowledge' according to a review by (Thomas, 2002), provided the expected outcomes are explicitly stated (Stodel et al., 2006). The use of personal tutors, online/telephone assistance, work place mentors, peer learning, group induction sessions, study skills workshops and access to local libraries have been suggested by Talbot (2007). These mechanisms are used in the Government sponsored e-learning initiative, the Foundation for Government (F4Gov) programme, which is for improving individual and organisational performance in the Civil Service (Talbot, 2007). It is noted that these measures seek to overcome isolation not by technological innovation, but by introducing a degree of personal contact, either between peers, with work colleagues or between students and tutors. Open Educational Resource (OER) can be helpful for distance learners by providing open access to digital education resources(UNESCO, 2012).

Role of Teacher

To be effective, distance education programs need to redefine the roles of teachers and students in the learning-teaching process. The first and the foremost critic of the system of distance education is that it lacks the presence of a teacher as it is said that education is a Tripler Process- teacher, students and curriculum. Teachers must play a significant role in providing advice, support and guidance to distance learning students (Wegner et al., 1999; Lynch, 2004). Teachers should make use of modern means to improve their information and quality of teaching, and incorporate modern ideas to become innovative (Vig & Singh, 2004). Hughes and Daykin (2002) found that distance learning students preferred to contact the module leader, rather than fellow students or a 'frequently asked questions' option on the website. Venter's (2003) concept of 'surrogate teacher' for the tutor to guide and assure students is pertinent. Creating a sense of belonging and care as part of the relationship between student and tutor is essential (Venter, 2003). Increased dialogue is necessary in order to reduce perceived distance between student and teacher (Dron, 2006; So and Brush 2008).

Material and delivery

Various measures relating to the material, content and delivery of distance learning courses can be used to help the student learning experience. The standard of the material on the website must be appropriate and sufficiently maintained as it is the principal point of contact with the student. Assignment expectations and requirements need to be explicitly stated online (Lake, 1999). Regular assessment tasks encourage engagement with the material (Rust, 2002) as do embedded activities throughout the online modules. It may be appropriate to include videoed lectures online to introduce the topic and create a more personalised approach. Collaborative learning and student interaction is facilitated by the design of the distance learning course (Hughes and Daykin, 2002; Alexander, 2001; Liu, 2008).

CONCLUSION

With these problems, there is a danger of the system becoming stereotyped leading to inertia. Until and unless, this inertia is removed, the system of distance education may deteriorate. Thus, distance education requires better planning and implementation as this system has to operate in a challenging and difficult environment of openness. We may say in the words of Fred Jevons, 'distance Education should no longer be written off as second best. Distance education has some advantages which should be recognized more widely. Distance education has the potential to make equity and access to education a reality for all. We often forget that a majority of our youth lives in rural areas. They need courses more appropriate to their local context in upgrading their household occupation, agro-industries, and rural enterprises. We need to have open universities and schools in every states of the country to nurture this vast sector for human resource development. Hence distance education needs attention for developing competency among students for various occupations and careers.

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