THE ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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The present study investigates the phenomenon of distance learning – its specific character, its place in the educational environment as well as its advantages and challenges. The article throws light on some common difficulties that distant students face and also examines some factors determining the effectiveness of online learning and its compatibility with the students' personal needs and expectations. The study offers some grounds for suspicion that went along with the advent of distant learning as well as the standpoint of its early proponents.

Keywords: online learning, distance education, advantages, challenges, modern technologies

I. INTRODUCTION

The new phenomenon

Distance learning is the most significant phenomenon occurring in higher education today. Everywhere one looks, whether in colleges or universities, distance education is on the rise, and the rise is occurring at a rapid pace. Distance education and technology are major factors in the contribution to current and expected changes in the postsecondary education enterprise.

According to International Data Corporation in USA, distance education is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 33 percent. Analysis predicts that distance education demand will increase each year at a steady pace of all higher education students .

Never before in the history of higher education has there been a change that has had such an impact on those involved in this enterprise. According to Peter Drucker, "Universities won't survive. The future is outside the traditional campus, outside the traditional classroom. Distance learning is coming on fast". (*Gibson & Herrera, 1999, p. 57).*

The idea and advent of distance education have been instrumental in producing a range of emotions in those involved in higher education. Many faculty are resistant; some are confused; others are excited about the new realm of possibilities for their teaching. Some worry about the future of their livelihood; others see this change as an opportunity to expand their pedagogy and teaching opportunities. Critics of distance education say that this mode is inferior to the more traditional face-to-face, campus-based learning, where discourse is spontaneous and interactive, and where the faculty can see the students and pick up nonverbal body language such as facial expressions. Skeptical faculty argue that part of the learning experience is the connection made between student and student, and student and professor, or the experience of community. However, "in all fairness, there are few studies that measure the effectiveness of textbooks and lectures as an educational delivery system". *(Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001, p. 19).* But because of the newness of technology and the uncertainty of its use in educating students, institutions are held captive by questions related to its use.

Proponents of distance learning, on the other hand, argue that distance education technologies allow for increased access to a variety of courses. Distance education offers the student more convenience in scheduling classes, decreases travel time to and from a campus, and allows for student control over when participation in classes will occur *(Johnson, 1999).* Furthermore, distance learning technology, such as the Web, is the first medium that honors the notion of multiple intelligences-abstract, textual, visual, musical, social, and kinesthetic. Educators can now construct learning environments that enable a student to become engaged in learning any way he/she chooses. The anytime, anyplace nature of the Web allows students to spend as much time as they need searching for information, running simulations, or collaborating with peers. *(Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001, p. 5)*

Some have found that this new way of delivering higher education is just as good as traditional ways, and maybe even better *(Daniel, 2000; Johnson, 1999).* In fact, as Sir John Daniel stated in a speech to attendees at the Taiwan Conference on Distance Learning:

"Open universities have learned how to carry out distance education successfully at scale and I emphasize that this is not merely a technological success. Through the principle of course team we have become better at teaching than conventional universities, on both academic and pedagogical grounds."

Some say that students in distance education courses are more engaged with the learning process and that interaction happens more than in traditional face-to-face courses *(Carnevale, 2000b; Marchese, 2000).* Researchers also have found that distance education is "more effective than the classroom lecture and the traditional relationship between student and faculty member" *(Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001, p. 6).*

A large body of research acclaims that there are no significant differences between the learning outcomes of distance education and those of classroom-based education *(Barone, & Hawkins, 2001; Weigel, 2000).*

But why argue some hold up lecture-based class-room education as the benchmark for evaluating new educational delivery systems? If there is no significant difference between distance education and class-room-based education, advocates of distance education should hardly trumpet this claim; they should be deeply troubled by it. How could they think of making the status quo the standard for evaluating learning technologies that have so much more to offer? *(Weigel, 2000, p. 12)*

Proponents of distance learning

"With distance learning technologies, teachers can develop new teaching methodologies rather than adapting old pedagogy to their distance courses. The Web is a fundamentally new medium for education with the potential to birth new pedagogical methods" *(Weigel, 2000, p. 12).*

Charles M. Cook, director of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges' Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, comments on distance learning. He asserts that this mode of delivery "can provide a more active learning environment for

students than traditional education by engaging the student with interactive technology, instead of relying on a professor's lecture" *(Carnevale, 2000d)*. He feels that this type of educational delivery is more learner-centered than traditional delivery. In fact, in a survey of faculty, findings revealed that they "believed web-based courses do a better job of giving students access to information, helping them master the subject, and addressing a variety of learning styles" *(Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001, p. 19)*.

The Web can also be a great new medium for deeper forms of learning.The beautiful thing is that today's technologies, with their incredible abilities to connect, search, engage, and individualize, to prompt performance and assess understanding, are--in the hands of a teacher with the right ambitions--terrific enablers for deep learning. *(Marchese, 2000, p.4)*

Distance education serves the needs of not only the traditional-age college student, but also the most rapidly growing segment of the population, adult learners over the age of 35 years who have full-time jobs, families, and limited discretionary time. A report by the American Council on Education Center for Policy Analysis and Educause *(Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001)* cites seven distinct audiences for distance learning: corporate learners, professional enhancement learners, degree-completion adult learners, college experience learners (or the traditional student), precollege (K-12) learners, remediation and test-preparation learners, and recreational learners *(Oblinger, Barone & Hawkins, 2001)*.

In this age of technology, future college students (e.g., today's children) have and are using computers in their homes and schools. Today's students, increasingly comfortable with technology, expect online resources (a digital library, Web resources, simulations, video) as part of the learning tools and learning experience. In fact, colleges and universities of today are "dealing with the generations of students who have never known life without PCs (created in the '70s) or the Internet (largely a '90s phenomenon). Students entering higher education today have the knowledge and skills to use technology that exceed those of faculty and staff working in higher education. Students are not only computer literate, they are "technophilic" *(Cini & Vilic, 1999, p. 38)*.

Having this in mind we can conclude that the advent of technology has led to a transformation in the habits of individuals in sharing and acquiring knowledge.

Nowadays distance learnig turns out to be a usefull 'application' to the web-based life of the contemporary people. Information is now being developed in an environment which is not monopolized by anybody and this enables information to be produced by mutual interaction and cooperation.

II. DISCUSSION

Advantages

Let's start with a brief comparison between the traditional system of education and the online learning. There are several problems with the traditional system of education. First of all, you need to pay a huge amount of money to attend a prestigious school. With all those budget cuts, busy classrooms, and course shortages, you won't always get the chance to study exactly what you want.That is the reason why millions of students from all around the world opt for online degree programs or take at least one college course through an online platform.

Second, the flexibility factor. Traditional students must have enough time for their classes and schedules.They also waste time on commuting - a long commute can certainly make schedules difficult, especially if they're planning on working while in school. A benefit to taking online courses is that they offer flexibility to the student. This is a great option for those who already have time commitments with family and work. Online classes will mould with their schedule—and allow them to log into their online course at a time that works best for them, as opposed to having to attend a lecture at a specific time.

Third, discipline and self-motivation. When it comes to discipline and motivation, traditional students have the opportunity to be constantly reminded of upcoming assignments and they benefit from the face-to-face interactions with instructors. They are actually freed from responsibility to find and schedule time for studying. Online education develops high motivation and strong will because all college classes require students to keep up on required reading and assignments. The best online students develop strategies for staying up to date on their coursework. They've mastered things like setting aside time every week for studying and creating a work space with minimal distractions.

Online learning has to be the greatest revolution in contemporary education. It made a huge change in the system and opened great opportunities for everyone who wants to learn something.Nevertheless, online education is still related to stereotypes. People often think that online students are not smart enough for a traditional college or university, they are lazy, and they don't get "real" degrees. These claims discourage many people from taking online courses, so they get stuck in the traditional educational system that consumes a huge deal of money, nerves, and years of their lives.

A big advantage of distance learning via Internet is that this type of instruction can be used by several groups of people who need instruction: pupils, university students, employed persons as well as those who want to re-enter their jobs after time away.

A student who cannot go to school due to an illness has the chance of following the instruction at home and therefore has no disadvantages with respect to his fellow students.The same principle applies to a university student who spends a semester or one year abroad - distance learning enables him to "attend" the courses at his home university.

Employees are able to increase and update their specific knowledge at their place of employment. Perhaps they even have the opportunity to graduate from a university, without being constrained by schedules.

"Flexible time management" is especially important for mothers who want to work in their former jobs after their maternity leave, as the job market often changes drastically within a short time. They have the opportunity to further their professional skills while their children are in kindergarten, school, or in bed.

Students who are too far away from a university or disabled people now have the possibility to study as well. Furthermore, people from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds can be brought together.The fact that the courses are available at almost any time and in almost any place means that far more people can make use of them.The participants can work according to their own needs and concentrate on the contents they really need or have to learn. Thus, the learning process as such is improved and motivation and memory are enhanced. The computers used for distance learning on the other hand increase flexibility and interaction.

All things considered, it's possible to assert that, no doubt, distance learning fits perfectly and naturally to the way of living and studying of today's young people. It benefits their dynamic daily routine, and gives them the opportunity to prioritize and make the most of their time for studying. Moreover, the power and growing use of information and communication technologies and the resulting trend towards globalisation have reduced the world into that of a small village *(McLuhan and Powers, 1989)*. Distance education remains the primary mechanism for the information-driven age and serves as an avenue for developing intellectuals at all levels of their educational journey.It also facilitates a pedagogy for enhancing learning of both learners and teachers. When used to supplement distance education programmes, information communication technology – the technical medium through which people acquire knowledge – can contribute to the educational growth of our globalized world as people now have access to many different forms and channels of communication including e-mail, e-learning, tele- and video-conferencing, virtual learning, and virtual libraries.

Challenges

In comparison to common methods of studying, distance learning requires a substantial degree of maturity and commitment from students. The lack of these prerequisites could prove to be a disadvantage. Because distance learning is flexible, you need good organization, planning and work to make it happen. Academic leaders cited in *Growing by Degrees, Online Education in the United States, 2006* , stated, "Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses." Though the instructor is not seated in front of you, you still need to complete your assignments on time. Like all other forms of learning, there are deadlines to be met, "fixed-time" exams to be taken and assignments to be completed before the "Drop Box" closes. There are no compromises and you can easily get a zero! Distance learning is best suited for mature motivated learners who cannot afford the time to participate in a traditional classroom."

Format isn't ideal for all learners. Not everyone is an ideal candidate for online learning. If you know you have problems with motivation, procrastination and need lots of

individual attention from an instructor you may want to think long and hard before enrolling in an online learning program.

(Sometimes, students have difficulties determining which contents are important. Additionally, many of them need help organizing their studies and schedules.)

One has to bear in mind that the success of a course also depends on the equipment used for learning. Distance learning requires you to have constant, reliable access to technology.Students need total access to the equipment necessary to fulfil course requirements. For example, online courses require a computer with Internet access. For a course with material on CD or DVD, you need to have a multimedia player. Technical requirement may be difficult to meet for some students who may feel overwhelmed and challenged if they are not completely computer literate. Technical glitches and dealing with an unfamiliar learning environment can cause stress and frustration. As a result they lose the necessary motivation to work successfully, or they concentrate more on their technological problems instead of focusing on the learning matter. Often, students with better computer equipment are more likely to succeed.

As far as the relationship among students is concerned, it has to be considered that distance learning lacks the motivation resulting from the contact but also the competition among students. Distance learning is isolated. Although students are in a kind of a virtual classroom, the dynamics of interaction is not the same. Students may feel detached or lonely when they pursue a distance learning program but there are opportunities to send emails, post to message boards and engage in online group discussions. At first they might miss face-to-face contact with their instructor and other learners, but web collaboration can fill this void for many students. The offered courses are often not flexible enough to include unforeseen details of the subject, difficulties with understanding or students' reactions. Spontaneity falls by the wayside.

Another issue that turns out to be a disadvantage is fraud and cheating online

As evidence accumulates about how to make online learning effective, concerns are growing about problems that e-learning poses for students' academic integrity. Academic dishonesty has typically been characterized by the following offenses: "acts of plagiarism, using concealed notes to cheat on tests, exchanging work with other students, buying essays or, in some extreme and notorious cases, asking others to sit

examinations for you. Many institutions are exploring ways to address cheating in online courses, including having students take exams on campus or in testing centres or replacing high-stakes testing with assessments, such as longer-term projects, that are seen as less susceptible to cheating.

Distance learning does not always offer all the necessary courses online.Students pursuing a specific certificate or degree program may not have all the necessary courses available through distance learning so it is not suited for all subjects. For example, you can study a history lesson completely online but you cannot perform nursing clinicals online. For some courses, physical classroom attendance will be mandatory to complete the course. Also distance learning may not be acknowledged by a specific employer. Although most employers do acknowledge distance learning, certain employers do not. Students who want to work for a specific employer upon graduation should be sure of that employer's perspective about online education. Distance learning provides a new challenge for the teacher: his teaching method has to meet the needs and expectations of many different participants. The teacher also has to develop an understanding for the capabilities and needs of the students without personal contact and direct working experience with the participants of the course. The distance learning tutor is supposed to have the necessary knowledge and experience as well as the motivation to meet and manage the potential difficulties of this kind of education

Since distance learning is self-directed and individually oriented it can face different challenges and obstacles, both objective and subjective. A lot of them have their solutions however and one can follow different strategies to reduce the potential lack of motivation, technical problems, or other difficulties. Nevertheless the advantages that distance learning offers are far more worth to point out. The mere fact that it's applicable to all kinds of students, anytime, anywhere is simply enough to be viewed as a universal means of education.

III. CONCLUSION

Summarizing all the above-mentioned we can conclude that distance learning has proven to be an efficient, modern and I would say a preferable way of acquiring knowledge nowadays. The use of e-learning in postsecondary education has expanded

rapidly over the past decade, and all indicators suggest that growth will continue in the years to come. E-learning has also attracted intensive research interest, with thousands of studies over the past several decades examining its effectiveness. Although the dominant paradigm in this area—comparing e-learning with classroom instruction—has long been faulted, research is only now beginning to move away from the "does it work" question toward a greater focus on understanding the role of different instructional features and supports in determining the effectiveness of e-learning. Future research should use rigorous experimental designs to examine how e-learning programs that vary in terms of content, interactivity, and other important instructional features affect students' ability to acquire different types of knowledge and skills. Yet advances in e-learning design must also be coupled with efforts to eliminate current barriers to the widespread adoption of online instruction. Academics and institutions need to collaborate to address the challenges surrounding academic integrity in online environments, devise effective support systems for underprepared learners, evaluate the economic models that underlie e-learning, and understand how to deliver e-learning across geographic and cultural boundaries.

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