New Methods and Challenges of Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Distance Education today is one of the most commonly used types of educational delivery method. Almost every major and medium size university around the world has some kind of distance education services, regardless of the subjects taught. In this paper, I intend to discuss instruction such as seminars, lectures and direct classroom instruction which can be shared by distant institutions. Time differences between two distant institutions can be overcome by employing the satellite technology or recording facilities of institutions. Immediate presence of an instructor in the classroom is always sought after. However, the screen where one student can interact with an instructor provides no less opportunity.

Keywords: Distance education, e-learning, online learning, teachers and students, full-time workers.

Distance learning, also called distance education, e-learning, and online learning, form of education in which the main elements include physical separation of teachers and students during instruction and the use of various technologies to facilitate student-teacher and student-student communication. Distance learning traditionally has focused on nontraditional students, such as full-time workers, military personnel, and nonresidents or individuals in remote regions who are unable to attend classroom lectures. However, distance learning has become an established part of the educational world, with trends pointing to ongoing growth. In U.S. higher education alone, more than 5.6 million university students were enrolled in at least one online course in the autumn of 2009, up from 1.6 million in 2002 [1].

Characteristics of distance learning. Four characteristics distinguish distance learning. First, distance learning is by definition carried out through institutions; it is not self-study or a nonacademic learning environment. The institutions may or may not offer traditional classroom-based instruction as well, but they are eligible for accreditation by the same agencies as those employing traditional methods. Second, geographic separation is inherent in distance learning, and time may also separate students and teachers. Accessibility and convenience are important advantages of this mode of education. Well-designed programs can also bridge intellectual, cultural, and social differences between students. Third, interactive telecommunications connect individuals within a learning group and with the teacher. Most often, electronic communications, such as e-

mail, are used, but traditional forms of communication, such as the postal system, may also play a role. Whatever the medium, interaction is essential to distance education, as it is to any education. The connections of learners, teachers, and instructional resources become less dependent on physical proximity as communications systems become more sophisticated and widely available; consequently, the Internet, mobile phones, and e-mail have contributed to the rapid growth in distance learning. Finally, distance education, like any education, establishes a learning group, sometimes called a learning community, which is composed of students, a teacher, and instructional resources—i.e., the books, audio, video, and graphic displays that allow the student to access the content of instruction. Social networking on the Internet promotes the idea of community building. On sites such as Facebook and YouTube, users construct profiles, identify members ("friends") with whom they share a connection, and build new communities of like-minded persons. In the distance learning setting, such networking can enable students' connections with each other and thereby reduce their sense of isolation [2,3,4].

Early history of distance learning. Correspondence schools in the 19th century. Geographical isolation from schools and dispersed religious congregations spurred the development of religious correspondence education in the United States in the 19th century. For example, the Chautauqua Lake Sunday School Assembly in western New York state began in 1874 as a program for training Sunday school teachers and church workers. From its religious origins, the program gradually expanded to include a nondenominational course of directed home reading and correspondence study. Its success led to the founding of many similar schools throughout the United States in the chautauqua movement.

Technological aides to education. One of the first technological aides to education was the lantern slide (e.g., the Linnebach lantern), which was used in the 19th century in chautauqua classes and lyceum schools for adults and in traveling public-lecture tent shows throughout the world to project images on any convenient surface; such visual aides proved particularly useful in educating semiliterate audiences. By the start of the 20th century, learning theories had begun concentrating on visual approaches to instruction, in contrast to the oral recitation practices that still dominated traditional classrooms [5]. The first significant technological innovation was made by the American inventor Thomas Edison, who devised the tinfoil phonograph in 1877. This device made possible the first language laboratories (facilities equipped with audio or audiovisual devices for use in language learning). After World War I, university-owned radio stations became commonplace in the United States, with more than 200 such stations broadcasting recorded educational programs by 1936.

Web-based courses. By the beginning of the 21st century, more than half of all two-year and four-year degree-granting institutions of higher education in the United States offered distance education courses, primarily through the Internet. With more than 100,000 different online courses to choose from, about one-quarter of American students took at least one such course each term. Common target populations for distance learning include professionals seeking recertification, workers updating employment skills, individuals with disabilities, and active military personnel. Modern distance learning courses employ Web-based course-management systems that incorporate digital reading materials, podcasts (recorded sessions for electronic listening or viewing at the student's leisure), e-mail, threaded (linked) discussion forums, chat rooms, and test-taking functionality in virtual (computer-simulated) classrooms. Both proprietary and open-source systems are common. Although most systems are generally asynchronous, allowing students access to most features whenever they wish, synchronous technologies, involving live video, audio, and shared access to electronic

documents at scheduled times, are also used. Shared social spaces in the form of blogs, wikis (Web sites that can be modified by all classroom participants), and collaboratively edited documents are also used in educational settings but to a lesser degree than similar spaces available on the Internet for socializing [6].

Web-based services. Alongside the growth in modern institutional distance learning has come Web-based or facilitated personal educational services, including e-tutoring, e-mentoring, and research assistance. In addition, there are many educational assistance companies that help parents choose and contact local tutors for their children while the companies handle the contracts. The use of distance learning programs and tutoring services has increased particularly among parents who homeschool their children. Many universities have some online tutoring services for remedial help with reading, writing, and basic mathematics, and some even have online mentoring programs to help doctoral candidates through the dissertation process. Finally, many Web-based personal-assistant companies offer a range of services for adults seeking continuing education or professional development [7].

One of the most prominent types of educational institutions that makes use of distance learning is the open university, which is open in the sense that it admits nearly any adult. Since the mid-20th century the open university movement has gained momentum around the world, reflecting a desire for greater access to higher education by various constituencies, including nontraditional students, such as the disabled, military personnel, and prison inmates.

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