Distance Learning, Virtual Classrooms, and Teaching Pedagogy in the Internet Environment

Kumkum Sinha*

*Assistant Professor, Pioneer Institute of Professional Studies Indore

Abstract

Distance learning and teaching has been implemented for decades already. With the technological advances of the internet over the past two decades, both Online and Distance Learning Programs have become increasingly popular. The Internet and distance learning has created a new business and a new teaching pedagogy. The purpose of this paper is to highlight what Distance Learning Program / Virtual Classrooms and teaching Pedagogy in the Internet Environment is all about along with understanding the current issues as well as challenges in the same.

In terms of MBA programs however, it is fair to say that neither modes of learning are as well respected by employers as the traditional, on-campus full- and part-time versions. However , a recent poll on TopMBA.com asked visitors to select the programs that they might be considering applying to; while 54% chose full-time, 29% selected either online or distance learning MBA programs. Unfortunately, for the distance learning MBA study mode, there has been a lot of negative press over the years, as some Institutions have been accused of acting as 'diploma mills', where MBA hopefuls pay their tuition fees and are awarded a diploma on the back of un- proven 'life-experience'. But still after such pitfalls it has been noticed that Distance Learning Programs still prevails.

Introduction: The goal or the major stuff of education is learning. Thus learning effectiveness must be the first measure by which online education is judged. If we can't learn as well online as we can in traditional classrooms, then online education itself is suspect, and other clearly critical issues, such as access, student and faculty satisfaction, and (dare we say it) cost effectiveness are largely irrelevant. Indeed, when online learning was first conceived and implemented, a majority of educators believed that it could never be as good as face-to-face learning. Many still do. In fact, however, we now have good and ample evidence that students generally learn as much online as they do in traditional classroom environments.

Distance Learning: An Overview

Almost every new media has touched the educational system in some way but distance learning is a re-invented method of education, rather than a new one. In its early days, distance learning consisted of correspondence education, televised courses, collections of videotapes, and cassette recordings. Slide projectors, microchip, and microfilm allowed students to recall history via photo negatives. Cable television, VCR's, and Satellite TV allowed students to participate in classes on their own time. The Internet, Intranets, and the creation of local area networks (LAN) and wide area networks (WAN) have given students the opportunity to experience distance learning beyond pre-recorded classes and films. While the field of distance learning using the Internet and large networks is still young, finding a clear and concise definition for it is no easy

task. It is stated that distance learning involves teaching through the use of telecommunication technologies, which transmit and receive numerous materials through voice, video, and data.

In the early applications of distance learning, the major forms of communication between a student and a remote location were television, video cassettes, or audio tape cassettes. With the growth of the Internet and large networks, students now have an opportunity to utilize asynchronous and synchronous communication tools, as well as to choose the time, place, and pace of their education.

If used correctly, distance learning holds a great promise for education. A frequently cited advantage of distance learning is the potential reduction of financial burdens for colleges, universities and other educational institutions. Distance learning allows remote classrooms to reduce overcrowding and improve teacher to student ratios. It also gives students the opportunity to interact with a diverse group of fellow students. Distance learning gives businesses the opportunity to retain a workforce that is capable and up-to-speed. Employee training, fees for conferences, educational seminars, and the costs of hiring consultants can be reduced when companies utilize distance learning and computer based training (CBT) courses. They enable organizations to cross geographic boundaries, cut costs, and share knowledge. But it is expensive: instructors must be paid, and funds must be allocated for the creation, maintenance, and operation of networks that support distance-learning classrooms. In some cases, distance learning can also increase costs for both students and the institutions.

The History and Evolution of Distance Learning: Distance learning is an old idea with a new name. Its foundation goes back to the early 1700s when through correspondence students and instructors exchanged information (assignments, notes, and tests) through the postal system or other modes of transportation. Correspondence courses grew because of a need to educate and entertain people. But on-time delivery of mail was a problem in the early days. Because the postal service was slow, students and teachers could not count on regular deliveries.

As the population grew, college and university faculties sought new ways to share information across geographic boundaries. In a rapidly growing economy, the education of a large segment of society became a necessity. In 1890, many states passed laws that required young people to attend school. In an attempt to combat low attendance and high dropout rates, schools turned to correspondence education to help relieve some of these problems. While correspondence courses were started by academic institutions, it soon became a way to train employees. Institutes used correspondence courses to train individuals.'' Businesses began to use it as a way to train and re-train employees, to supplement in-class instruction and to cut costs. As early as 1928, courses were offered via radio. Television provided educators with a new medium. This integration of technology and education became known as distance learning. The current widespread use of computers, networks, and the Internet, is yet another medium that offers much more than correspondence courses could offer in the past.

Current Issues: The most important issue is instructor preparedness and student attitudes. If distance-learning courses are properly designed and delivered, students can learn as much as in traditional on-campus courses. But if students do not perceive the technology as useful, they will not be receptive to distance education .There are also geographic issues that must be addressed. While distance learning can cross geographic boundaries, it also has the potential to break cultural rules, norms, and educational learning systems.

The inability of teachers to develop the necessary skills, to adopt a positive attitude, and to develop the needed pedagogy are other important issues affecting the creation of distance-learning communities. These communities must also address technical and curriculum issues. To create a virtual classroom, one must plan for the following tasks: advising, curriculum development, content development, articulation and credentialing, learning delivery, hardware choice, and assessment. There are four major issues related to distance learning in both higher education and business environments:

(a) Curricula change,(b) new patterns of interaction,(c) changes in structure of organizations, and (d) roles and activities of participants.

Distance Learning and Higher Education: While distance learning has been used electively by many in Institutions, the real growth has been in adult learning and higher education. More colleges are following this new ''trend'' by offering certificates and degrees using distance courses. The distance education allows states and universities to achieve four principal goals: to expand access, to alleviate capacity constraints, to capitalize on emerging marketing opportunities, and to catalyze institutional transformation. The growth of, and the interest in, distance learning is great, but the question remains how distance learning will impact education.

Current Development and Challenges: While distance learning has its share of success stories, it also has failures. Many failures can be attributed to the fact that managers often do not take enough time to create systems that meet the needs of their users. There are several ways in which businesses incorporate distance learning: intracompany collaborative learning research, remote university education, and telecommuting applications. Intracompany collaborative learning and research enables companies to include all departments when creating new products. This type of distance learning requires networking software and visual/audio capabilities. Corporations also make large grants to universities as a way of providing employees with educational alternatives that include degree programs offered during after-work hours, as well as continuing education. While there is no doubt that technology is readily available to create distance learning courses, implementation, maintenance, and ongoing monitoring remain a challenge to be shared by business. Knowing what specific technologies are available to the clients of distance learning is essential. Other challenges in the corporate environment include instructor attitudes, resistance from employees, high capital cost, and inadequate review and performance systems.

Conclusions: Distance learning has undeniably changed the way people are educated. It will continue to change the way business is conducted and it will continue to change the global market place. While universities, corporations, and governments are rapidly embracing this tool for learning, many issues remain. This paper has attempted to identify some of these issues. It is imperative that the pedagogy continues to evolve and grow as technologies change. The biggest concern is how distance learning and technology will change the educational system in the long-term. Educating children using models of teaching and learning that are grounded in concepts of knowing and understanding that are linear and finite will not help them succeed in a technological global factor where multi-disciplinary, holistic approaches predominate.