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DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A NEW METHOD OF TEACHING AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Стаття присвячена проблемі використання різноманітних методів дистанційного навчання, а також вдосконалення навчальних програм, в яких враховується відмінність в культурах різних народів. Автор демонструє доступність такої форми навчання для міжнародної спільноти та вплив на між культурну комунікацію.

Ключові слова: *дистанційне навчання, міжкультурна комунікація.*

This article deals with the problem of application of several distance education methods and curriculum improvement where cultural diversity of different nations is taken into account. Author shows availability of such form of education for international community and influence on intercultural communication.

Key words: *distance learning, intercultural communication.*

Due to the rapid development of technology, courses using a variety of media are being delivered to students in various locations in an effort to serve the educational needs of growing populations. Developments in technology allow distance education programs to provide specialized courses to students in remote geographic areas with increasing interactivity between student and teacher. Although the ways in which distance education is implemented differ from country to country, most distance learning programs rely on technologies which are either already in place or are being considered for their cost-effectiveness.

In order to understand how research and research issues have developed in distance education, it is necessary to understand the context of the field. Distance education relies heavily on technologies of delivery. Print materials, broadcast radio, broadcast television, computer conferencing, electronic mail, interactive video, satellite telecommunications and multimedia computer technology are all used to promote student-teacher interaction and provide necessary feedback to the learner at a distance. Research in distance education has focused on media comparison studies, descriptive studies, and evaluation reports.

However, recent developments in interactive multimedia technologies which promise to facilitate "individualized" and "collaborative" learning, are blurring the distinctions between distance and traditional education. These technologies also have the capability of creating new environments for learning such as "virtual communities". Students in traditional settings are being given entire courses on CD-rom multimedia disks through which they progress at their own pace, interacting with the instructor and other students on electronic

mail or face to face according to their needs [21]. Through international collaboration, students around the world participate in cooperative learning activities sharing information using computer networks[19, c. 230]. In such cases, global classrooms may have participants from various countries interacting with each other at a distance. Many mediated educational activities allow students to participate in collaborative, authentic, situated learning activities [4, p. 395]. In fact, the explosion of information technologies has brought learners together by erasing the boundaries of time and place for both site based and distance learners[3, p. 40].

Today there are distance education courses offered by dozens of public and private organizations and institutions to school districts, universities and large corporations. We agree with Desmond Keegan, who identified six key elements of distance education: 1) separation of teacher and learner; 2) influence of an educational organization; 3)use of media to link teacher and learner; 4) two way exchange of communication; 5) learners as individuals rather than grouped; 6) educators as an industrialized form [11, p. 35].

It should mentioned that the economies of size and distribution, both industrialized, and developing countries have embarked upon distance education programs. In the early 1980's, record numbers of students in developing countries have gained access to higher education through distance education programs [20]. In many cases, local experts are not available to develop original programs in the language and culture of the people. For this reason, the majority of educational programs are either used intact from the host country or are superficially translated with very few adaptations to the local culture. When this is done, the results are often unsuccessful. The cultural values of the program designer become dominant, desirable, and used as the standard. There are many examples of programs from North America, Australia, Great Britain, and Europe that were purchased but never used in Africa and Asia because the material was not relevant in those countries. Because the appropriate design of instructional material is a critical element in its effectiveness, the issue of "who designs what and for whom" is central to any discussion of the economic, political, and cultural dangers that face distance educators using information technologies [14, p. 222-223].

Until the advent of telecommunications technologies, distance educators were hard pressed to provide for two-way real time interaction, or time-delayed interaction between students and the instructor or among peers. Interaction between the student and the instructor usually took the form of correspondence of self-assessment exercises that the student completed and sent to the instructor for feedback. With the development of synchronous (two-way, real time interactive technologies) such as audio teleconferencing, audio graphics conferencing and videoconferencing it is now possible to link learners and instructors who are geographically separated for real time interaction.

Teleconferencing can be classified into four separate categories depending on the technologies that they use: audio teleconferencing, audiographics teleconferencing, video teleconferencing and computer conferencing. There are two types of computer conferencing: synchronous computer conferencing when two or more computers are linked at the same time so that participants can interact with each other, and asynchronous computer conferencing when participants interact with each other at a time and place convenient to them [16, p. 403].

The unique advantage of teleconferences is that they provide for two-way interaction between the originators and the participants. Teleconferences need to be designed to optimize the interaction that takes place during the conference. Monson [17] describes four design components for teleconferences: humanizing, participation, message style and feedback.

Audio teleconferencing or audioconferencing is voice-only communication. It has some major strengths: it uses the regular telephone system which is readily available and a familiar technology, it can connect a large number of locations for a conference, the conferences can be set up at short notice, and it is relatively inexpensive to use when compared with other technologies [16, p. 405].

Audiographics systems use ordinary telephone lines for two-way voice communication and the transmission of graphics and written material. Audiographics add a visual element to audio teleconferencing while maintaining the flexibility and economy of using telephone lines. Printed information can be exchanged during the conference using the fax machine so that visuals can be shared between sites [16, p. 406].

Video teleconferencing systems transmit voice, graphics and images of people. They have the advantage of being able to show an image of the speaker, three dimensional objects, motion, and pre-produced video footage. During a video teleconference, audio, video and data signals are transmitted to distant sites using a single combined channel as in the use of a fiber optic line or on separate channels. Audio is most often transmitted over a dial-up telephone line [16, p. 407].

Interactive Instructional Television (ITV) systems usually use a combination of Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS) and point-to-point microwave. They can transmit either two-way video and two-way audio, or one-way video and two-way audio to several distant locations. Therefore, large geographical areas can be covered by the combination of the two technologies. The shared communications feature allows the teacher and a group of learners separated by distance to work interactively on the same screen, sharing graphics, text, or data at the same time [16, p. 408].

Audiocassettes afford the learner control over the learning material because learners can stop, rewind, and fast forward the tape. They offer great flexibility in the way they can be used, either at home or while driving a car. Since audiocassettes are a fairly cost-effective medium they are easily accessible to students.

Videocassettes are like broadcast television in that they combine moving pictures and sound but unlike broadcast television are distributed differently and viewed in different ways. An important advantage in using videocassettes is that students can exercise "control" over the programming by using the stop, rewind, replay, and fast forward features to proceed at their own pace. Videocassettes are also a very flexible medium allowing students to use the cassettes at a time that is suitable to them. Bates, observing that the "videocassette is to the broadcast what the book is to the lecture" [1, p. 13].

CMC supports three types of on-line services: electronic mail (e-mail), computer conferencing, and on-line databases. In e-mail systems a message is routed by the system to the addressee's mailbox on the host computer and remain there till it is read by the addressee. This message can be read, replied to, left in the mailbox for later perusal, saved to the hard disk on the microcomputer, deleted, or forwarded to someone else. Most e-mail systems have a bulletin board feature which allows users to read and post messages and documents to be seen by all. CD-ROM is one of the most promising of the rapidly emerging technologies for education. An ever increasing amount of text, graphic and even full motion video data is being recorded and distributed on CD-ROM [1, p. 14].

Apple's introduction of personal digital assistants (PDAs) has opened a new realm of freedom and power for computing and telecommunications users that could well have important implications for educational users. PDAs offer convenient audio and data storage for the relatively small amounts of information that professionals working in the field need. Although they are used for writing notes and keeping track of schedules, their future value may be more in the order of complete wireless telecommunications devices.

Virtual reality offers the promise of training future students in ways that currently are far too dangerous or expensive. VR participants wearing visors projecting the computer images react to what they see while sensors in the visor and body suit send information on position and the head and eye movement of the wearer. The computer changes the scene to follow the wearer and give the impression of actually moving within an artificial environment [16, p. 409].

Having studied the early research in distance education we came to conclusion it was focused on comparisons between delivery media such as television, video, or computer and traditional face-to-face teaching. Other research compared the effectiveness of one distance delivery medium over another. Most of these media comparison studies found no significant differences (NSD) in learning [2], [5],[6],[10],[13, p. 7],[23, p. 48]. Critiquing these early media comparison studies, Spenser (1991) points out that they tended to report comparative statistics which gave no indication of the size of differences, if any, between the types of instruction [21, p. 23].

Thus, Clark made the following observation: "Learning gains come from adequate instructional design theory and practice, not from the medium used to deliver instruction" [7, p. 3]. Although Clark's statement has been debated, educational technologists agree that the quality of the instructional design has a significant impact on learning [12, p. 8].

We also want to attract attention to the issue of learner support and instruction in distance education. After examining one hundred seven articles to determine whether there were predictors of successful student support, Dillon and Blanchard) conclude that the reported research was mixed. They propose a model to examine the support needs of the distance student, related to institutional characteristics, course content and the technology [8]. In a study analyzing learner support services in a state-wide distance education system, Dillon, Gunawardena and Parker outline the function and effectiveness of one learner support system and make recommendations for examining student-program interactions [9, p. 30-,45]. Wright comments that the largest number of studies related to student support have been conducted outside the United States with large distance education programs. The student support activities reported are: pre-enrollment activities, tutorial services as well as counseling and advising services [24].

Combined with the institutions' responsibilities related to admissions procedures is the responsibility of counseling students into and out of programs where the learner and advisor are physically separated [18, p. 42]. Herein two issues arise. First, the nearly impossible task of understanding the life situation of the learner when distance and time interfere with communication, makes counseling a difficult task at best. Second, the monetary requirements of the distance education institution and the well-being of the student who may or may not be advised into a distance education environment must be considered. Reed & Sork obsrve that students counseled out of distance education represent a loss of revenue [18, p. 32].

Issues which examine course design in distance education cross geographic boundaries. There is a widespread belief that Western technologies, particularly the computer, are culturally neutral and can be used to modernize traditional societies. When distance education programs are delivered to developing countries, cultural differences are often dealt with by simply translating the existing software, or by writing new software in the local language. What remains is still instruction based on a set of cultural assumptions emphasizing the view that Western technology and science represent the most advanced stage in cultural evolution. This rationalist, secularist and individualist philosophy remains at the tacit level and suggests that, for any country, true modernization relies on the scientific method and the adoption of culture-free technology. The imported technology boasts capabilities based on assumptions which are frequently in direct opposition to traditions and social practices in the local culture. The cultural values of individualism, secularism, and feminism are

not all recognized as desirable in other cultures which place higher values on religion, group efforts and well defined gender roles [14, p. 230].

Actually, moral issues surrounding loss of local culture can result from wholesale importation of foreign values. At the minimum, educators engaged in technology transfer should analyze local social customs and consider those customs, whenever possible. Such social conventions as extended hospitality, differing perceptions of time and the perceived importance of the technology project can all affect the credibility of the program and, ultimately, its success [15, p. 22].

We consider that distance learning is not new but it has not received respect in the academic community because of the number and seriousness of problems presented here. The dramatic growth of the adult learner population is making distance learning an increasingly popular choice of learning techniques. Further study of student demographics and motivators will help target the adult learner population and will help institutions develop course materials and techniques appropriately. Although distance education has been difficult to establish in a number of European countries, influential networks are being established to facilitate future growth. The European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) have combined with Eurostep (which organizes educational television across Europe using satellite) and the Budapest Platform (providing satellite television to central and eastern countries) to develop a system of distance education programs throughout Europe. Distance education programs will become major components facilitating economic progress throughout the world. Further research into course development techniques will help learning institutions understand which methods work best in the distance learning classroom.

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