The Concept of Distance Education and Electronic Learning

Presentation

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Distance education (DE), though has been in the existence for time immemorial, is one of the most important educational innovations of the 20th century. It is known by different nomenclature in different countries. Some refer to it as *correspondence education* and others it is *continuing education*. In fact, some go to the extent of describing it as *open and online learning*. That does not matter much. Indeed, what matters is that, DE is one unique way of helping as many people as possible to benefit from higher education.

Perraton (1994) defines distance education as an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space/or in time from the learner. He adds that in practice DE has used a combination of media, often print, broadcasts and some face-to-face. Distance learning, sometimes called e-learning, is also perceived as a formalized teaching and learning system specifically designed to be carried out remotely and flexibly, beyond the formal learning environment by using electronic communication (Rouse, 2005).

DE or distance learning is a mode of delivering education and instruction, often on an individual basis, to students who are not physically present in a traditional setting such as a classroom.

Distance learning provides "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance or both" (Oblinger, 2000). DE courses that require a physical on-site presence for any reason (including taking examinations) have been referred to as *hybrid* or *blended* courses of study. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), aimed at large-scale interactive participation and open access via the web or other network technologies, are a recent development in DE. The Sakai learning management system which is currently adapted by University of Ghana is just one of e-learning platforms.

One of the pioneer scholars in DE, Holmberg (2003), defines DE as a non-contiguous communication. It means that, with respect to the time and space, the learner and instructor are separated from each other. Keegan (1993) considers the separation of the **instructor** and **learner** at the learning time as a main feature of DE. Distance education, therefore, aims at delivering a quality university education to students who are not able to be physically present on campus. .More so, because distance learning is less expensive to support and is not constrained by geographic considerations, it offers opportunities in situations where traditional education has difficulty operating. Students with scheduling or distance problems can benefit, as can employees, because distance education can be more flexible in terms of time and can be delivered virtually anywhere.

Perhaps it is on this basis that Perraton et al (2002) indicate that supported open and distance learning improves the potential of profession, including teachers, to develop better links between new teaching practices, their own subject expertise and the application of new methods in their own classrooms. Shohel and Power cited in Mahruf and Shohel (2014) add that DE makes teachers become competent in using emerging technologies for teaching and learning purposes.

The Distance e-Learning (DeL) is the combination of Distance Education and e-Learning which is characterized by the extensive use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the delivery of education and instruction. It also involves the use of synchronous and asynchronous online communication in an interactive learning environment or virtual communities. It is done in lieu of a physical classroom to help bridge the gap in temporal or spatial constraints. Distance e-Learning combines the strengths and advantages of DE and e-Learning. The focus is shifted to the education transaction in the form of virtual community of learners sustainable across time.

The DE model has its traditional focus on content delivery or correspondence, and emphasis on independent learning. Distance e-Learning has its roots on computer conferencing and collaborative constructivist learning approach. It encourages collaboration in an interactive learning environment. Distance e-Learning is also different from e-Learning. Distance e-Learning goes beyond the use of ICT as tools to access information which primarily characterizes e-Learning use in classroom teaching or in the residential setting.

One of the most significant issues or challenges encountered in the mainstream correspondence model of DE is transactional distance. Transactional distance results from the lack of appropriate communication between learner and instructor. This gap has been observed to become wider if there is no communication between the learner and teacher and has direct implications over the learning process and future endeavours in DE. DE providers began to introduce various strategies, techniques, and procedures to increase the amount of interaction between learner and instructor. Service providers began to use e-Learning, the generic term for ***all technologically supported learning***, to deliver online courses or tutorial services.

These measures aforementioned engender more frequent face-to-face tutorials, increased use of Information and Communication Technologies, including teleconferencing and the Internet. There measures were designed to help close the gap in transactional distance. The increase in utilization of ICT, particularly the Internet, ushered in a new era in course design and delivery of instruction in ways never before experienced in the mainstream model of DE and traditional education paradigms. The marriage of the two concepts, DE and e-Learning, marked a new strategy in delivering course content for academic programmes and other learning resources developed by Open Universities and conventional educational institutions.

To Rouse (2005) popular distance learning technologies include voice-centred technology, such as CD or MP3 recordings or webcasts, video technology, such as instructional videos, DVDs, and interactive video-conferencing and computer-centred technology delivered over the Internet or corporate intranet. Studies indicate that distance learning can be as effective as the traditional format when the methods are appropriate to the teaching tasks, there is student-teacher interaction, and the teachers provide students with appropriate and timely feedback.

Indeed, with the advent of the revolution in information technology, universities and university colleges have begun to carry education beyond the walls of their respective campuses. Distance learning or DE is an attempt by institutions to reach the traditional college aged students, as well as an older population, without having them leave their homes. It allows these populations to earn college certificates, diploma, degrees, and even master's degrees using the internet, two-way television fibre optic technology, digital phone lines, and satellites. In short, distance learning is a non-traditional way of delivering, conveying, and learning information via the internet, the World-Wide-Web, the modem, satellite hook-ups, VHS tapes, CD-ROM, and

interactive multimedia courses. Tele-conferencing and video-conferencing are all channels of carrying out distance learning and education programmes. All adult education programmes are made effective through today's improved Information Communication Technology (ICT).

Today's DE programmes are facilitated by internet and electronic mail, due essentially to globalisation of education, making it possible for students to access their lecturers and professors courses and lessons on the internet. Thus, a student e-mail account allows a two-way exchange between students and professors. In addition to university accounts, there are a number of Websites that offer free mail. Two popular sites are ***Hotmail*** and ***Yahoo.com.*** First-time users log in to the Web page and fill out a questionnaire; within minutes, an account can be set up. E-mail can be sent and accessed from any computer around the globe that is connected to the internet.

Globally, higher institutions of learning have opted for distance learning so as to cater for learners who by the nature of their work may not have time for regular lectures. For instance, the major players in global distance education, also known as **mega universities**, including the University of South Africa (UNISA), enroll anywhere from 100,000 to over 500,000 students. In 2007, there existed 1,086 DE institutions, offering 28,295 courses in 107 countries (Hanover Research, 2011). In 2008, UNISA, enrolled roughly estimated adult learners of 265,000. The University of Ghana Distance Education which started in 2007/2008 academic year with enrolled students of 906 has grown to over 10,000 students in 2012/2013 academic year. The demand for tertiary education in Africa now, is high, and that has giving a boost to e-learning and distance learning programmes.

Indeed, Africa has also been identified as a potential market for expansion of global distance learning. The continent's current participation rate in higher education is less than 45 percent overall. In some sub-Saharan Africa countries, participation is less than 2 percent (Hanover Research, 2011). Barney Pityana, Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Africa (UNISA), observed that Africa has the greatest demand for higher education, and often the smallest capability to deliver it domestically. The continent currently only houses two major distance learning, UNISA and Virtual University. Accra Institute of Technology and public universities in Ghana, including the University of Ghana, Legon, are currently strongly coming into the picture as far as DE delivery is concerned.

It is also not surprising to learn that many Western, American and Asian universities are rapidly setting up satellite campuses in many African countries, including Ghana to deliver DE programme. Thus, the globalisation, initiation, acceleration and commodification of public services, including education, cannot be underestimated today.

To Murali (1996), India in particular, has one of the fastest rates of adoption for distance learning. This is due to legislation that ensures that a government or public sector employee who earns a degree through DE benefit from an increase in both pay scale and pensions. The Institute of Continuing and Distance Education (ICDE) of India reported that "approximately 24 percent of all higher education students in India are enrolled in DE institutions. Most of the students are enrolled specifically in the 13 national and state open universities and the 106 institutions which are mostly public which offer both on-campus and correspondence programme" (Prasad, 1998: 16). The Commonwealth of Learning (CoL) study conducted in 2007 confirmed the fact that, there remains vast potential in a country like India with millions of young aspirants eager to

receive higher education and with conventional universities and colleges simply not being in a position to accommodate them.

It is also not surprising to learn that in many African major cities and towns, today, there is a rapid expansion of private institutions, that is, academics, colleges and institutes that offer courses in computing. Some of the institutions offer **Microsoft Certificates**. This is one of the fastest growing areas of adult learning in Africa. The other practical example of internet usage in Africa is the Africa Virtual University. The accessibility of adult learners to e-mail account has promoted and expanded access to and improving the quality of tertiary education in Africa, especially in the field of science, engineering and business.

The above statistics is not surprising simply because of many advantages and benefits of DE. The fact really is that DE is an organized educational activities based on the use of learning materials in which constraints on learning are minimised in terms of **access**, **time**, **place** as well as **pace** and **method** of study. There is also increased interaction between lecturers and students and a reduced cost in learning. It also affords the use and application of new technologies which is the necessary pre-requisite of securing good jobs in today's job market. Additionally, the application of new technologies is effective in acquiring any innovative skills and knowledge in the face of today's era of information age or knowledge explosion.

In conclusion, the unique manner in which DE offer learners the opportunity to create and construct their own world as they think critically in responding to scenarios, help today's students in developing and constructing independent learning mindset.

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