Distance Education: Trends and Redefinition

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Abstract

Distance Education has become widespread in the United States. Many have questioned the appropriateness of distance education when the research clearly demonstrates that most learners prefer to learn in traditional educational settings.

Because of the availability of sophisticated telecommunications systems there has been a redefinition of distance education, and an attempt to use technology to make equivalent the experiences of all learners no matter when or where they learn. This paper discusses the redefinition of distance education and the philosophical position taken by many in the field.

Introduction

Research demonstrates that students prefer not to learn at a distance [1]. Certainly, there are times when the convenience of distance education outweighs other considerations, but if given a legitimate choice, students prefer sitting in a classroom, laboratory, or conference room with other learners and the instructor. Students report that they value the presence of a learning group, and that the informal interactions that occur before and after, and sometimes during, a formal class are valuable components of the total learning experience. Basically, learning at a distance is not what most students prefer [1]

If students really do not want to be distant learners, then what is behind all the recent excitement about distance education? In the last five years, distance education has become a major topic in education [2]. In 1995, there were over 30 conferences dealing with some aspect of distance education, and almost every professional organization's publications and conferences have shown a huge increase in the number of distance education related articles and papers.

This paper will compare the popularity of distance education to an earlier debate about technology. Next, there will be a proposal for how distance education in contemporary education should be defined. Finally, a theoretical position about distance education will be proposed that gives guidance about the involvement of educational institutions in this approach to learning.

Media in Education - An Earlier Debate

The discussion about distance education is somewhat reminiscent of the recent debate in the educational technology field that began when Richard Clark, a researcher and theorist, published a classic article containing his now famous "mere vehicles" analogy. Clark summarized over five decades of educational media research. It was obvious to him that many researchers were attempting flawed studies involving media. Clark believed that they did not understand what the last 60 years of research about media and learning indicated [3].

It was even more alarming [3] that many practitioners were making unrealistic claims about the impact of technology on learning. According to him, there was a large segment of the educational community who felt that mediated instruction was inherently better than teaching when media were not used.

In 1983, Clark wrote in volume 54 of the Review of Educational Research that:

> "the best current evidence is that media are *mere vehicles* that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in nutrition...only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement. " (445).

Clark's article went on to convincingly claim that instructional media were excellent for storing educational messages and for delivering them almost anywhere. However, media were not responsible for a learning affect. Achievement was not enhanced because instruction was media-based. Rather, the content of the instruction, the method used to promote learning, and the involvement of the learner in the instructional experience were what influenced learning.

While many did not, and still do not, agree with Clark, [4] his article caused a reassessment of how the field looked at the impact of media. Clark [5] has continued to implore the education community to "give up your enthusiasm for media effects on learning," which was them theme of his most recent publication on this topic. *Give up your enthusiasm* has become the new rallying cry for those to do not believe there is a media effect.

A second analogy by another great technology pioneer also has relevance to distance education. In the 1960s, Jim Finn from the University of Southern California talked about the stirrup as a technological innovation that changed society. He often told a story that went like this[6]:

The Anglo-Saxons, a dominating enemy of Charles Martel's Franks, had the stirrup but did not truly understand its implications for warfare. The stirrup made possible the emergence of a warrior called the knight who understood that the stirrup enabled the rider not only to keep his seat, but also to deliver a blow with a lance having the combined weight of the rider and charging horse. This simple concept permitted the Franks to conquer the Anglo-Saxons and change the face of western civilization. Martel had a vision to seize the idea and to use it. He did not invent the stirrup, but knew how to use it purposefully.

Finn summarized the implications of the story as follows:

The acceptance or rejection of an invention, or the extent to which its implications are realized if it is accepted, depends quite as much upon the condition of society, and upon the imagination of its leadership, as upon the nature of the technological item itself. . . The Anglo-Saxons used the stirrup, but did not comprehend it; and for this they paid a fearful price. . . . It was the Franks alone -- presumably led by Charles Martel's genius -- who fully grasped the possibilities inherent in the stirrup and created in terms of it a new type of warfare supported by a novel structure of a society which we call feudalism. . . For a thousand years feudal institutions bore the marks of their birth from the new military technologies of the eighth century. (p. 24)

What Clark strongly proposed with his "mere vehicles" and "give up your enthusiasm" arguments was that media and technology do not directly affect learning. He forcefully argued that educators should not claim that technology-based learning had any inherent advantage over other methods of learning. Like Finn, Clark proposed that technologies may provide ways of accomplishing tasks that are new and not readily obvious. Finn advocated that practitioners should attempt to identify unique approaches for changing society by using new technologies in new ways. Finn's story explained that the stirrup not only made getting on and off of a horse easier, but also made possible a new, previously unheard-of consequence, the emergence of the knight, and it was the knight that caused significant and long-lasting changes in society.

The implication of the arguments of these two educators was that when new technologies emerge they often allow users to be more efficient. However, it is not technologies themselves that cause changes; rather changes occur because of new ways of doing things that are enabled by technologies. The stirrup made riding horses easier and more efficient, but it was the knight that changed medieval society.

Distance Education Today and Tomorrow

Distance education is one of the most dramatic of recent technology-based innovations in education. Many educators are making grand claims about how distance education is likely to change education and training [7]. Certainly, the concept of distance education is exciting, and recent hardware and software innovations are making telecommunications systems more available, easier to use, and less costly. Distance education has begun to enter the mainstream.

Distance educators are being confronted by two conflicting pressures. First, *students do not really want to learn at a distance*. They prefer to meet with the learning group and the instructor in the lecture hall, the classroom, the seminar room, or the laboratory [1]. Second, *students are increasingly demanding to be allowed to learn at a distance*. They want to be able to supplement, and even replace conventional learning experiences with distance education experiences [7]. This is because there are many other considerations than personal preferences that motivate learners, especially about where and when they learn.

These opposing forces pose a dilemma for the educational community. Should resources be dedicated to improving the traditional educational infrastructure of buildings, classrooms, laboratories, and offices, or should resources be used to develop modern and sophisticated telecommunications systems.

Because of advances in technology, effective educational experiences can be provided for learners, no matter where they are located. In other words, technologies are now available to develop cost-effective

distance education systems, and there is considerable pressure to do so [2]. However, the limited availability of resources force educational leaders to make choices about whether distance learning is appropriate for their institution.

The practice of distance education has dramatically changed in the last five years. Traditional approaches to distance education based on the delivery of print and linear media technologies are no longer as relevant to the field as it is practiced in the United States [8]. As a matter of fact, a redefinition of the distance education has occurred. Distance education is now often defined as:

"institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated geographically, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors [9]."

This definition is based on an position about the correct practice of distance education. If distance education is be successful:

"its appropriate application should be based on the belief that the more similar the learning experience of the distant student is to that of the local student, the more similar will be the desired outcomes of the learning experience [9]."

In other words, the successful incorporation of distance education into mainstream education will depend on providing learners with equivalent learning experiences no matter where they are located. The research clearly demonstrates that in general, distant learners achieve as well as local learners [1]. However, less is known about the differences of the learning processes of distant and local learners. Probably, distant and local learners employ different strategies for learning. For example, distant learners may study longer in order to assimilate course information [10]. Certainly, more research is needed.

If distance education is to gain widespread acceptance, it should not be necessary for any group of learners to compensate for different, possibly lesser, instructional experiences. Thus, those developing distance educational systems should strive to make equivalent the learning experiences of all students no matter how they are linked to the resources or instruction they require. Institutions that can provide equivalent, or nearly equivalent, learning experiences for local and distant learners should pursue distance education. Those institutions that can not, or will not, institute systems that provide equivalent experiences will ultimately be relegated to a secondary and peripheral place in the distance education field.

Conclusion

Separation of the student and the teacher is a fundamental characteristic of distance education. Increasingly, educators are using technology to increase the access of the distant learner to the local classroom, and to make the experience of the remote student comparable to the experience of the local learner. Distance education is a dramatic idea. It may change, even restructure, education, but only if it is possible to make the experience of the distant learner as complete, satisfying, and acceptable as the experience of the local learner. If distance education is to be a successful and mainstream approach, then it is imperative that distance education systems should be designed to permit similar learning experiences for distant and local students.

Distance education using telecommunications technologies is an exciting emerging field. Practitioners should not promote distance education as the next great technological solution to education's problems, nor make grand claims about the impact of telecommunications systems. Rather, those in the field should strive to use technology and technological approaches to make the experiences of distant and local learners positive and equivalent, at least until someone's genius identifies an approach to learning using telecommunications systems to change education, just as Charles Martel's use of the stirrup changed society.

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