

The Relevance and the Concerning Sides of the Distance Education

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Abstract: *Distance Education is becoming very popular and important nowadays, not only due to the pandemic moment that we are living, but also due to the several advantages it offers over the traditional teaching models and a need there is for it.*

This article presents the main characteristics and concepts, as well as the relevance and the concerning sides of the Distance Education.

Keywords: Distance Education, Multimedia, Video Conference, Community of Inquiry, Cognitive Learning, Synchronous Learning, Asynchronous Learning.

I. Introduction

Distance Education, a term also known as Online Teaching or Online Learning, meaning all the same, represents a method of teaching, in which the students and the teacher are in contact but at a distance, by means of modern Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources that permit the creation of rich, interactive and appellative teaching environments.

In contexts that prevent or limit access to face-to-face education, distance learning is a particularly important resource for further studies, for updating knowledge and for the professional development of citizens.

Thus, it is in this domain of the importance of Distance education and its usefulness that we focus the development of this article in order to identify the main positive (advantages) and/or negative (disadvantages) aspects of this type of education.

For this purpose, we rely on bibliographical and documental research and on the testimonies observed in this area and disseminated in the specialty literature.

II. General Characterization of Distance Learning - conceptual and developmental aspects

Distance education, as we have already mentioned, is a teaching modality that facilitates the interaction between teacher and student as an alternative to the regular practice of face-to-face teaching, where multimedia plays an important role in the formation of useful visual and audiovisual contents that combine videos,

text, audio, graphics, images, animations, drawings and so on.

Another aspect of the Distance Education comes from the excellent research that has been made for many years in the Learning area, in general, and, more recently, in the Remote Learning, which resulted, for example, in the foundation of a framework called Community of Inquiry Model, which is about the exploration of the education experience that considers three dimensions of presence - social, teacher and cognitive - and has been useful in creating and fostering interaction and dynamics in online environment [1][2][3].

In fact, Distance Education has been benefiting from all the research existent today in the area and enriching, more and more, its techniques of distance learning.

The Community of Inquiry Framework was created by Garrison, Anderson, Rourke, and Archer [3] and defines three presences as being necessary to establish a community of learners in an online course: teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence, as described below:

Social presence is “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities.”

Teaching Presence “is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes”

Cognitive Presence “is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse”.

Thus, considering now the intersection of the elements cognitive, social and teaching, besides enriching all the Distance Education, it can be set, as stated by the Distance Education practitioner and researcher *Negin Mirriahi* [2] in conversation with George Siemens [1], Principal Distance Education practitioner, theorist and researcher, during a session of the Course edX- Pivoting to Online Teaching and Practitioner Perspectives [4], the following:

*“high expectations for your students to have that student inquiry--helping foster students to ask questions, helping students go out and find answers to those questions and bring it back to the course for learning. Developing learning activities that are really relevant, challenging, and engaging--and that's when you try to build in some active learning elements. Really trying to probe students and challenge them to-- even though it's an online course, you really want to think critically about the types of questions you ask of your students, **just like you would in a face-to-face setting.***

It's not really much different.

And probe them and ask them and try to engage with them in those sorts of conversations and in that cognitive learning element and encouraging them, coaching them through reflection, for example” [2][4].

Distance Education has also been benefiting and enriched from many other Online Learning research, developments and applications, such as in Fostering Online Social Interaction [1], Connectivism theories [1], and Assessment and Evaluation [4] [5].

Another good aspect to consider about Distance Education is also a need that there is for it, particularly, in the circumstances when does not exist another means of teaching being offered.

For example, let's see what is happening in parts of India, where many far away regions have no schools at all and there is a lack of transport infrastructures, as related below by Susma M. Kerketta [6]:

“In a developing country like **India**, education is still a dream for many. Though we are living in the 21st century there are lots of barriers in the formal education system. As formal education is not so economical Non-Formal education system is gaining more popularity in recent years. Distance learning is a modern way of learning allowing students to study within their own space and time without being physically present in the school/college/university. As distance learning plays an important role in today's education system it has increased the number of programmes year on year” [6]. Thus, Distance Education can help the development of the **nation** (India).

Another good example of success is the Distance Education experienced by the Australian Aboriginals, often in remote communities, described by Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Professor of Distant Education at the University of South Australia [7].

III. Common Types of Distance Education

The Distant Education can be done through several different platforms, websites, and both mobile and PC applications. There are various methods of learning at a distance and below are presented some of the most popular ones:

- 1) Video Conferencing - is a common way for teachers to interact directly with students in live lessons through telecommunications technology means. This could be a one-on-one session or a class-like scenario in which multiple students interact with the teacher live.
- 2) Hybrid Learning - is a specific type of mixed learning where some students are physically present learning the same lesson in real-time while others are learning remotely.
- 3) Synchronous Learning - is when all the students learn together **at the same time**, remotely, in a videoconferencing like.
- 4) Asynchronous Learning - is when students do not learn at the same time. Normally, students learn from instruction—such as prerecorded class video or assignments to do.

IV. Identification and analysis of Distance Learning results

From the research carried out, we identified a significant set of elements and factors that help us to understand distance learning in its different functions and the advantages and disadvantages resulting from its action, which are described shortly below, in the next section.

IV. I Positive Aspects (Advantages)

There are several advantages to study online rather than to be present physically in a class daily. Here are just a few of those advantages:

- 1) Flexibility – students do not have to go to school every day or be restricted to fixed learning hours.

- They can study whenever they are free and for however long they want.
- 2) Easy Access – there are no transport or traffic problems. Distance Education programs offer every student the opportunity to learn and improve themselves in the environment they find the most effective.
 - 3) Time-Saving – there are no loss time in transports or traffic. Online learners have more time to study efficiently and quickly.
 - 4) Saves Resources – it saves on many resources, as, for example, tutoring, training, space and facilities. Thus, it cuts down in the costs.
 - 5) It is Important - there is a need for it, especially, in the circumstances when does not exist another means of teaching being offered.

IV.II Negative Aspects (Disadvantages)

There is also a concerning side with the study online. Here are just a few of those disadvantages:

- 1) Lack of Proper Resources – online learning is not ideal for everyone, especially those without the proper resources to use them. Indeed, not everyone can afford a PC or a smartphone to study on.
- 2) Bad Access - not everyone has access to a good internet connection. In this case, it becomes a big problem studying online.
- 3) Strong Motivation is required - a substantial part of the training material is mastered by the students themselves. This requires responsibility, willpower, and self-control. Not everyone is able to maintain the right pace of learning without control.

- 4) Limitation on Development of Communication Skills – the development of the communication skills, confidence, or teamwork skills can be partly affected since the students' personal contact with each other and with teachers is minimal.

V. Conclusions

Distance Education is nowadays a popular, modern, effective, flexible and important means of teaching, since there is a need for this type of education and has been benefiting with all the excellent research and advances in its area. It is flexible, since it can work as a standalone or as complement of a formal education system. As all means of teaching, Distance Education presents relevant and concerning sides.

As George Siemens [1][4] has said *“teaching online is quite different from teaching in a classroom. It's not better. It's not worse. It's just different”*.

And as Negin Mirriahi [2][4] has said *“even though it's an online course, you really want to think critically about the types of questions you ask of your students, just like you would in a face-to-face setting. It's not really much different”*.

Indeed, Distance Education is not the same as Formal Education, but we can also say that *“It's just different”* [1] or *“It's not really much different”* [2].

In terms of final conclusion, and based on data collected from the research, identifying advantages and disadvantages of distance education, it is considered that for this type of teaching to be promising, it must be based on the willingness of students or trainees regarding access (motivational component) and in the existence of the means and support tools indispensable in this path (material component).

It is also concluded that, once these requirements are overcome, distance learning significantly contributes to different dimensions such as personal and professional fulfillment, the qualification of the population and the reconciliation of family and professional life.

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