

Current Issues in Online Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance education has become an important aspect of the education systems of many countries including the USA, Australia, Thailand etc.. Distance education allows greater access to education for those people separated from schools by physical distance, as well as those whose work, family life and lifestyles make it difficult for them to attend schools. There are many problems and challenges with this unique form of educational delivery. This paper explores three important areas in relation to distance education, 1) constructivist learning theories, 2) faculty issues, and 3) the role of culture in online distance education.

Introduction

Distance Education (DE) is not a new phenomenon. In the 1800s correspondence study materials were delivered by mail via the postal service in America and Europe. Later from 1925 on radio and then television were used to broadcast classes to students at a distance. In recent years the ability of computers to be connected by networks has led to a vast expansion of distance education. In America, 75% of colleges and universities offered distance education classes during the 2002-2003 school year (Dianis, 2004). In 2003, 1.9 million students were studying in online classes in the USA, which was an increase from 1.6 million students in 2002 (Sloan -C , 2004).

Moore (2004, p. 2) defines distance education as, “planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching, requiring special course design and instruction techniques, communication through various technologies, and special organizational and administrative arrangements.” Distance education can take place via any of the delivery methods mentioned above, i.e. mail, radio, television, internet, but here the main focus will be on the online delivery of courses via the internet. In this paper I will explore three issues related to distance education (DE) that I feel are important to the future development of DE policies and practices. The first is the idea that DE encourages “constructivist” learning. Much research has been done with the goal of proving that DE can be as good as face-to-face (ftf) learning. However, the question arises whether constructivist learning practices used in DE could lead to better learning than ftf.

The second area to be explored is faculty attitudes towards teaching DE classes. Are faculty motivated to develop distance classes because they see its potential for leading to better learning? What do faculty see are the incentives and drawbacks of teaching in the distance mode? Are teachers being pressured to teach online by schools that are hoping to increase profits? Are teachers being compensated properly for the work they are doing developing and teaching online classes? Do teachers view it in their best interests to teach DE classes? These are some of the questions I hope to answer in the second section.

Finally, the third area is in regards to the cultural dimension of online instruction. Research shows that gender and personality differences influence the experiences and expectations of DE students (Sullivan, 2001, Taplin & Jegede, 2001) , and the question arises if people from different cultures also have different experiences and expectations for online classes, and does program design and teaching methodology need to be adjusted accordingly.

Section 1 – Constructivist Learning Theory

It is interesting to consider that views on online distance education may be limited by questions of whether this form of delivery can be “as good as face to face” instruction. Some researchers Swan (2004) , McDonald (2002) argue that this way of posing the question may lead to our ignoring some of the unique benefits of online distance learning. McDonald asks if online education has in fact “opened the door to enhanced strategies in teaching and learning”. Some of the possible ways that learning in online environments may be enhanced are: 1) increased access (freedom from constraints of time and space) allows for a potentially more diverse group of students to join a class. 2) increased social distance leads to a more democratic arrangement whereby “cues regarding appearance, race , gender, education, or social status bestow a sort of anonymity to participants”(McDonald), which can free communication from constraints that can function in a face to face situation and allow for the message communicated to take precedence. 3) Asynchronous threaded discussions provide time for

deeper thought and reflection on the topics and questions presented. 4)

Computer conferencing lends itself well to the application of a constructivist learning theories. It is this 4th point that I want to look at in more depth.

Boulton (2002) discusses how there are two main constructivist learning theories relevant to online instruction, 1) cognitive or critical constructivism and 2) social constructivism. Both see learning as a student- centered, active process where learners construct knowledge as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. However, there are also differences between the two constructivist learning theories. With cognitive constructivism the focus is on the inner workings of the individual's mind whereby he/she creates an understanding of the world through experiences and stores these as schemas or mental model. Further experiences lead to the adjusting , enlarging improving of the schemas. The importance of students being able to independently decide what areas or questions to explore is an important aspect of this view.

Social constructivism on the other hand, is of importance to online distance education because the focus here is on the generation of knowledge through social interaction. Online distance education is conducive to this type of knowledge creation because networked computers and software such as Blackboard, Lotus Notes, WebCt and Moodle can provide an environment where interaction between group members can take place, for example, via threaded discussions.

Threaded discussions encourage interaction and collaboration between group members. During this interaction participants “share information, insights, personal experiences with the hope of gaining appreciation, understanding of other views and potentially creating new knowledge”(McDonald). It is through communication with others that one discovers what one thinks, and through considering the ideas of others and negotiating meaning one may adjust what one thinks. The role of peers is important in constructivist learning, as peers together co-create knowledge.

The role of the instructor in a constructivist learning environment is different from that of one working in an “objectivist” learning environment. The instructor in a constructivist learning environment is more of a facilitator than a “sage on the stage”. Of particular importance to instruction is Vygotsky’s idea of the “Zone of Proximal Development”. Vygotsky thought that learning took place in this zone which exists between what was known and what could be known. The teacher’s role is to see the students’ present level of knowledge and help them build on this knowledge by “scaffolding”. “Scaffolding requires the teacher to provide students the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The teacher must engage students' interest, simplify tasks so they are manageable, and motivate students to pursue the instructional goal” (Riddle).

Application Issues

The teacher's role in constructivist learning is considerably different from that of a teacher teaching in a traditional classroom where knowledge is disseminated to passive students. Of course online education does not always employ constructivist learning theories. Teachers can merely transfer lecture notes to online form and or add video or audio lectures to web pages. It goes without saying that improved learning theories are not worth much if they are not employed. Zemsky and Massey (2004) in an article published this last summer, "Why the E-learning boom went bust" express the opinion that "faculty often use electronics to simplify tasks not to fundamentally change how they teach the subject".

I will discuss faculty issues in the next section, but will make the general point here that expecting technology to miraculously transform higher education practices that have been developing for centuries may be overly optimistic. Professors themselves must feel the need to do so. Importantly, training and support for teachers learning to teach in new ways may need to be provided, especially with teachers that are late to learn to use these technologies.

Finally another application would be in the area of online course management software like Blackboard, where the software is improved to support constructivist methodologies. A journal function has been recently added to Blackboard, for example. In the next section I will explore the teacher's role in online distance education and explore the factors inhibiting or motivating or teachers to make the change to teaching in the distance mode.

Section 2 – Faculty Issues

In speaking with teachers I have found a variety of opinions on the merits and difficulties of teaching online distance courses. Some are impressed with the learning that occurs in DE classes compared to their results teaching in traditional classes. Some are bothered by the greater distance between teacher and student, whereas others are concerned with the technical issues that arise or issues of compensation for work provided. The purpose of this section is to review what the literature says about faculty attitudes towards distance education and try to see why some professors embrace distance learning while others resist it.

First, looking from the broader perspective, some wonder why faculty would embrace technology when as in other industries it is “being deployed by management to discipline, de-skill and displace labor”. (Noble,) In a large factor-analytic study done by Muilenburg and Berge (2001) on barriers to distance learning one of 10 factors isolated was the “threat of technology. Nobel also mentions that distance education is leading to management’s greater control of the curriculum as well as increases in working time. With a systems approach to distance education one professor can work to create a course and another less expensive worker can be employed to teach it. Once a course is created the professor’s work could be considered finished. Some professors have asked if it

is in their interest to design courses and leave the teaching to others. In addition to the fear of losing work, some teachers may feel that technology and all they don't know about it threatens their sense of competence or authority in the class. I mention these underlying issues because they may be behind the practical concerns often mentioned in interviews with teachers when the topic moves to technology use in education.

Workload was the practical issue most cited as of concern to teachers in a survey done in a large community college in the Southeastern United States on obstacles to distance education (O'Quinn & Corry, 2002). Four groups of teachers were surveyed, 1) distance teachers, 2) classroom only, 3) classroom teachers who also taught distance classes and 4) department chairs. It is interesting that in this study the distance only teachers were less concerned about workload than the other groups (distance only 3.57, classroom only 3.74, combined 3.92 and chairs 3.92). It may be that distance only teachers develop strategies for reducing workload. A more significant difference was that classroom only teachers were more concerned about the quality of distance classes (3.75) than distance only teachers (2.14). This large difference may be due to the distance only teachers having had convincing experiences of the efficacy of online education. The classroom only teachers might change their opinions after teaching distance classes. In fact, the combined class teacher's mean of 2.94 was close to the midpoint between the two groups. Other factors that were of mild concern to teachers in this study were 1) the compensation for the extra work, 2) the lack of

credit toward promotion and tenure and 3) the lack of training or support from the university, all points typically mentioned in summaries of research into areas of faculty concern (Moore, 2004)

Rockwell, Fritz and Marx looked not only at obstacles to teaching via distance courses, but also incentives. The top obstacles they found have all been mentioned above with “time requirement” (69%) (similar to workload) being the highest. Also high was a related obstacle, “time taken from research”(61%). This points to how professors have to prioritize their energy expenditures in regards to areas of work they sense are the most important. Apparently distance classes and the time demands they bring threaten to upset the balance professors have developed and this points to the possibility of giving professors more credit for teaching distance classes towards promotion and tenure or reducing workload. The latter option being easier but more costly. Training requirements were also seen as being obstacles, and one wonders if as online distance education moves from being done by “techy” early adopters to less “tech savvy” professors to late adopter “hold outs” whether training sessions will become viewed as a positive experience, or further infringement on teacher’s valuable time.

Looking towards incentives in the Rockwell study, the results indicate that the incentives for teaching distance classes are intrinsic, for example, the top two, “providing innovative instruction” and “applying new teaching techniques” were both mentioned by 83% of teachers. This supports the idea presented in the first section that teachers may choose to teach distance classes

because they see its potential for leading to better learning. It may also be due to the attraction of using new technology itself. Thinking positively, perhaps we can trust teachers to keep student's learning foremost in their minds even when the current reward system is geared towards research, publication and community service.

Application Issues

Teachers do need to be made aware of the potential benefits of teaching online, and know that their concerns about time and compensation issues are being considered. Reasonable arrangements need to be worked out in regards to copyright issues as well. In regards to workload, a big difference between online teaching and face to face classes is that in a face to face class the amount of time a teacher spends with students is quantifiable. Teaching hours can be calculated and workload determined. In an online class teacher's time working on a particular class reading posts, etc. can vary considerably depending on the class or the teacher. This makes it difficult for administrators to determine a teacher's workload. Especially with a constructivist viewpoint, "guide on the side" teachers can assume that much of what student's learn is due to their interaction with the written materials provided by the teacher or via the interaction with other students in threaded discussions etc. Teachers with heavy research, service or committee schedules may leave students to "Do IT themselves". The extent to

where students can and left on their own will depend on students. The extent to which it is beneficial for teachers to be involved in threaded discussions will also vary. It may be there is a certain point where teacher involvement becomes a negative. It requires a lot of sensitivity to the personalities, gender and as I will argue in the next section, the cultural background of the group. It will be interesting to see the extent that this opaque situation regarding workload will be accepted by administrators used to quantifiable ftf contact hours. I wonder if just as we now have tracking features in Blackboard for student online activity, whether tracking features will be added for administrators to get a clearer view of teacher activity in online courses.

Section 3 – Cultural Influences in Online Learning

Considerable research has been done into how gender and personality differences influence student's experiences and expectations for online learning, and the argument has been made that these differences need to be taken into account when designing DE programs and courses (Sullivan, 2001, Taplin & Jegede, 2001). Swan (2004) in a review of current research suggests that cultural differences may also be an important factor to consider. Cultural differences could increasingly be important because of growth in the distance education market due to globalization trends bringing teachers and students from various parts of the world together. There are two different ways this is happening, 1)

(Import model) classes are being created and marketed to students from abroad who will take part in multi-cultural classes in country they are created in. 2) (Export model) classes are being created to be used in culturally homogenous classes outside of the country they were created in. The main question then becomes whether there are differences between cultural groups that are significant enough to warrant our concern. This section will look at what research has been done in this area and how the results might be applied to program and course design.

Most instructors who have taught online classes to students from other countries will have some anecdotal accounts of differences in student attitudes and expectations, but there has been little research done in this area (readers – if you know of any let me know). Most studies into attitudes towards online learning have been with culturally homogenous groups or have ignored differences between sub-groups. Swan cites a small exploratory study done in New Zealand by Morse (2003) on the differences between the attitudes and experiences of two groups of students in an online class she was teaching. The class contained 12 Asian students from China, Thailand, Malaysia and Japan and 12 students from western countries, (Australia, Britain and America). All 24 students were living in Australia at the time. Morse presents several definitions of culture and a combination of two of them yields “shared systems of understanding and behavior held by people of the same ethnic group”. She uses the idea of ethnicity rather than nationality to distinguish the two groups in her

study. She defines ethnicity as “people who have the culture, language, history and traditions in common. The western group share European ancestry and the Asian countries all have substantial Chinese influence presently and historically. According to Morse, ethnic group differences are reflected in educational systems and learning styles.

There are various systems for understanding cultural differences, of which Hofstede’s four dimensions of national culture and Hall’s high-context / low context continuum are perhaps the best known. Morse utilized the “high context” / “low context” distinction first presented by Hall (1976). In a low context culture (western) participants “share low levels of programmed (mutually understood) information” (Morse) and hence communication must be explicit. The written word and contracts are important in low-context cultures. In “high-context” cultures (Asian) high levels of mutually understood information (context) facilitate communication, but require extensive programming. Face to face communication greatly facilitates decoding because so much information is expressed in non-verbal ways. The language can be left vague because the context of the communication provides a lot of information. Based on this information it would seem that a text based online environment would be more comfortable for western students than Asian students.

Morse reviewed the literature, and other differences between low and high context cultures also emerged: 1) low context learners (western) favor student-centered learning and are concerned with educational outputs and high

context learners (Asian) place a greater emphasis on teaching inputs. 2) Low context learners are more open to a wider range of assessments and than high context learners. 3) There are also differences in expectations for the teacher/student relationship. Low context learners preferred a more informal mentor relationship whereas high context learners were more accustomed to more formal hierarchical relationship with their teachers.

Looking to Morse's study, students in Morse's online course were asked to rank the perceived advantages of online study. The western group (low context) ranked personal convenience as the biggest advantage. Being able to participate at the time and place of one's choosing was seen as the most desirable element. This is consistent with the idea that student-centered, independent learning was valued by the western group. The Asian group (high context) ranked the ability to "say what they thought was appropriate" as the biggest benefit to online learning. Morse concludes that this may be due to Asian students' previous experiences in a relatively structured educational environment. Looking to the open question section of the results, it was interesting to see that the high context participants all complained that they could not get to know class members well. Not one of the low context learners mentioned this. This is consistent with the value high-context cultures place on "participative" learning. One problem with this study is that the Asian group all had one thing in common, they were second language English speakers, so the

differences between the two groups could also be differences between native speakers and language learners rather than western/Asian.

Another study done in this area of cultural influences on learner's attitudes towards online learning was done by Thongprasert (2004) and presented at a conference I recently attended. Thongprasert did a mixed methods study where she surveyed 240 students and interviewed several professors and administrators in the four Rajabhat universities in Thailand. She used Hofstede's work on the dimensions of national culture as the basis for her approach to culture. Unlike Hall who based his idea about culture on personal experiences, Hofstede (1997) analyzed IBM survey data collected in the late 1960s to develop his ideas about 4 dimensions of national culture (later expanded to five). They include, 1) Power distance, 2) Individualism, 3) Masculinity, and 4) Uncertainty Avoidance. Hofstede felt that each national culture varied in these 4 areas, and he assigned a score for each dimension to each country. Thailand for instance is considered to have high power distance, low individualism, high uncertainty avoidance, and low masculinity. This is similar to Japan, however, Japan has a high Masculinity index, which makes the differences between the sex roles more pronounced.

Thongprasert discusses how 3 of the 4 cultural dimensions affect students' knowledge sharing in online learning. 1) High power distance (Thailand = 64) is found in countries where it is seen as natural and even desirable for some people to obtain higher levels of wealth, status and power. Interviewees felt this

dimension (described as Bhun Khun in Thai language) led students to be unwilling to share ideas in online discussions. Students were used to teachers being the source of knowledge and reticent to express their own ideas. The second dimension was Individualism (Thai = 20) This low score points to strong collectivist (Kam lang Jai in Thai language) tendencies. This was seen by Thongprasert as being an inhibitor to participation online and because students were reluctant to work independently, often a requirement when studying from a distance. The third dimension was Uncertainty Avoidance (Thai = 64) . Uncertainty Avoidance (Kreng jai in Thai language) points to how some people will see the new and different as dangerous and how ambiguity is to be avoided. This medium/high score for Thailand was seen as an inhibitor to online learning because online learning would be unfamiliar ground for both students and teachers and thus anxiety provoking. Traditional approaches would be favored in countries with high uncertainty avoidance.

Thongprasert looked at how three dimensions of Thai national culture were viewed in relation to online courses, and found that some cultural traits may be inhibiting student's abilities to take part in online learning. This research is not only important to Thai universities which are now expanding their online offerings, but also to universities in Australia, America and Europe who are hoping to attract Thai learners to their undergraduate and graduate programs.

Application Issues

In fact there has been little research done on cultural differences in approaches to online learning, but the two studies cited point to the need for program designers, course creators and instructors to be aware that Asian students may have culturally programmed expectations for educational experiences that are different from the predominant western views on the students' and teacher's role in the online educational process. 1) Asian students may prefer more interaction with fellow students, and in fact be better suited to a hybrid class where ftf communication is available. In distance classes it would seem particularly important to have off-topic chat areas. Also, the teacher may want to assign more group work than in a class of western students. 2) Asian students may have stronger expectations for the teacher to be in charge of organizing their learning experience, so all assignments should be well-explained and ample support for learning given throughout the learning process. The teacher may consider either being more of a class presence, or carefully explaining the reasons for not doing so. 3) Asian students may find the promise of independent access to study at times and places convenient to them less appealing than western students. If less intrinsically appealing, perhaps extrinsic rewards for participation need to be added. 4) Asian students may require more direction and support to get them oriented to the rules and expectations of an online class. As mentioned earlier, computer help desk and a teacher's area

where course related discussion with teacher about assignments may be recommended.

Although it is unlikely to have a class full of students of a particular personality type, courses may have students from a particular country, or region. Knowing the learning styles and expectations for a particular cultural group could be useful because it would allow the teacher to adjust the course design and his/her own expectations for these learners. This could help improve the educational experience for both teachers and learners.

Conclusion

In this paper I have chosen to look at three issues in distance education that interested me and that I feel are important for the development of future DE policies and practices. The first issue is concerned with a theory of learning, constructivism, that DE is conducive to utilizing. The independence of learners who study from a distance necessitates motivation and self direction, while the connection to networked computers makes interaction between course participants possible through which learners can co-create new understandings. The promise of constructivist online learning is tempered by the fact that it requires the efforts and commitment of faculty, who may have considerable reasons to feel resistance towards teaching online. Faculty may view DE and technology in general as threatening for a variety of reasons. Technological

advances may lead to the need for fewer teachers, greater control of administrators over what is taught, greater surveillance of teaching activity and greater demands on teacher's valuable time. Clearly, faculty support for distance education is integral for the success of education in this delivery mode.

Finally, even with faculty on board utilizing the latest teaching theories and cutting edge technologies, if students' from non western cultures feel that the online educational environment, and its practices and expectations are in conflict with their own, the acceptance of distance education will be slowed and one of its distance education's great advantages, that it can bring students and teachers together from all over the world, will be diminished. It seems important to explore this cultural dimension further, to determine the extent to which cultural factors influence learning style, and how fixed these culturally determined traits are. From here decisions could be made on how to adapt the online learning environment to suit the needs of specific groups, both homogenous and heterogeneous.

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