

Chapter 53

Distance Learning From Itinerant Teachers to Cloud- Based Technologies

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge explosion, the increased complexity of human life, and the ubiquitous, 24/7 nature of technology coupled with the globalization of the marketplace herald the need to embrace the most effective methods and platforms of teaching and learning. Currently providing powerful educational opportunities, the science and technology of distance teaching and learning continues to multiply at unprecedented rates. While historically traveling from village to village verbally disseminating knowledge was the only process of training those at a distance, today's learners eagerly embrace the rapidly expanding cloud-based technologies of the 21st century, offering a plethora of informational and educational opportunities. With this exponentially expanding global educational landscape, one must question what exactly distance teaching and learning is, how it has evolved, what the current state of affairs is, and what we anticipate in the future?

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge explosion, the increased complexity of human life, and the ubiquitous, 24/7 nature of technology coupled with the globalization of the marketplace herald the need to embrace the most effective methods and platforms of teaching and learning. Currently providing powerful educational opportunities, the science and technology of distance teaching and learning continues to multiply at unprecedented rates. While historically traveling from village to village verbally disseminating knowledge was the only process of training those at a distance, today's learners eagerly embrace the rapidly expanding cloud-based technologies of the 21st century, offering a plethora of informational and educational opportunities. With this exponentially expanding global educational landscape, one must question, what

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exactly *is* distance teaching and learning, how has it evolved, what is the current state of affairs, and what do we anticipate in the future?

BACKGROUND

In very simplistic terms, distance learning is just that--learning that occurs at a distance (Rumble & Keegan, 1982; Shale, 1990; Shale & Garrison, 1990) or that which is characterized by a separation in geographical proximity and/or time (Holmberg, 1974, 1977, 1981; Kaye, 1981, 1982, 1988; Keegan, 1980; McIsaac & Gunawardena, 1996; Moore, 1973, 1980, 1983, 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Ohler, 1991; Sewart, 1981; Wedemeyer, 1971). Over 30 years ago in his 1986 theory of transactional distance, Moore (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) defined distance not only in terms of place and time but also in terms of structure and dialogue between the learner and the instructor. Dramatically changing the concept of distance learning, in this theory distance became more pedagogical than geographical. As structure increased, so did distance. As dialogue increased, distance declined thus establishing the foundational role interaction plays in the distance learning environment. A few years later, Saba (1998) furthered this concept concluding,

the dynamic and systemic study of distance education has made 'distance' irrelevant, and has made mediated communication and construction of knowledge the relevant issue So the proper question is not whether distance education is comparable to a hypothetical 'traditional,' or face-to-face instruction, but if there is enough interaction between the learner and the instructor for the learner to find meaning and develop new knowledge. (p. 5)

To facilitate greater interaction in the geographically and/or organizationally dispersed distance environment, today the convergence or fusion of technologies enables individuals to not only overcome the barrier of separation, affording institutional and learner opportunity to transcend intra- and inter-organizational boundaries, time, and even culture but to virtually erase it. By definition, the paradigm of distance, online, or cloud-based learning revolutionizes the traditional environment; however, even with this change, learning that involves some manner of interaction with content, professor, peers, and even external experts remains at the core of the educational process and also at the hub of the ongoing traditional versus distance argument.

The Traditional versus Distance Argument

Even in today's society with wearable smart technology and information literally at our fingertips, some traditionalists still fear that with anything other than face-to-face instruction, interaction somehow will decrease thus making learning less effective. Compounding that fear, two of the distinguishing characteristics of the nontraditional environment--individualized learning and flexibility--often arouse suspicion and caution among that same group of individuals. Many are convinced that with any form of study outside the confines of the typical brick and mortar, "every vestige of intellectual rigor [will] disappear into oblivion. . . . [In fact, these skeptics interpret] individualized learning as individualized isolation, especially from faculty, and they look on flexibility as no more than a synonym for escape from regulation and responsibility" (Gould, 1972, p. 9). Despite this skepticism, as early as just before the turn of

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