

Chapter 10

Trends in Distance Education: Theories and Methods

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reveals the trends of the research conducted in between 2007-2012 on distance education theories. The literature was examined and analyzed based on theories, topics, research methods, statistics used, and the data collected in the research. Within this scope, full-text papers in the databases of EBSCO, Springer, Elsevier e-Reference, ERIC, JSTOR, SAGE, and ULAKBİM were reviewed, and a total of 209 articles were identified. The analysis outlines the trends in distance education and attempts to determine the deficiencies and gaps. The discovery of deficiencies and gaps are believed to not only raise awareness about the existing needs but also guide further studies.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education emerged out of the need of people who are unable to meet their educational needs for any reason. Nevertheless, along with the improvements in the information and technology, today it stands as an opportunity for not only educational purposes but also personal growth.

According to many people who are familiar with the field of distance education, distance education history has been evolved through several generations. The medium of communication was text and instruction was the first generation by postal correspondence. The second one was teaching by broadcast radio and television. Third generation was not so much characterized by communication technologies, of course in 1980s, touchstone of distance education was open universities which is

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the new way of organizing education and the next generation was emerged with the real time group interaction with audio and videoconferencing by telephone (Moore and Kearsley, 2011). The reached end-point is the teaching and learning in virtual classes. It is observed that technology plays an important role in changing the dynamics of each delivery option on the development of distance education.

While technologies allows the enrichment of the educational environments, theories and models that guide the way of research and practice, directly affects the work conducted in the area (Simonson, 1999). It is important that conducted studies must be put on a robust construction as well as reliability and the maintenance of the area (Garrison, 2000). For this reason, studies in the field of distance education must be fit on a good theoretical framework. Moreover, studies aiming to define and see the impact of distance education have been increasing steadily since its beginning.

On the other hand the vast majority of literature appears to be either descriptive or experimental with weak methodologies (Panda, 1992; Naidu, 2005). Nevertheless, Moore and Kearsley (2005) point out the excessive number of studies on the evaluation of distance education. Most of these studies, yet, address the issues of impact and quality assessment from the point of distance education providers, directors, governments and subject matter experts; though they should target the learners (Jung, 2010). This limitation of the research reinforces suspicion over the opinions that distance education is an open and expanding field (Allen and Seaman, 2007). Given the deficits in the previous research, conducting studies to overcome such shortcomings is becoming more important.

This study reviews the literature on distance education theories conducted in between 2007 and May 2012 (May 2012 will hereafter be referred to as 2012) and seeks answers to the following questions;

Within the theoretical research on distance education;

- The effect of which theories are observed?
- What are the percentages of distance education topics studied?
- What are the percentages of research methods used?
- What are the percentages of statistics, data collection procedure and research design used?
- At which educational level were the studies mostly conducted?
- At what intervals is the sample size and duration of research?
- Are problem statements clearly and unambiguously stated?
- What are the percentages of preferred distance education learning environments?
- What are the percentages of dependent variables and independent variables?

These questions help determine the trends in theoretical research and guide existing and potential researchers to realize the gaps in the field of distance education.

METHODOLOGY

EBSCO, Springer, Elsevier e-Reference, ERIC, JSTOR, SAGE and ULAKBİM databases were selected for this study for several reasons; first, these databases are known to have recognized validity and reliability; second, they are indexing high-quality academic research accepted in all fields of education; lastly, the number of studies they hold about distance education theories are higher than other databases and they are accessible through the Library of Gazi University with which the researchers are affiliated. Full-text studies from these databases were analyzed through content analysis within the framework of descriptive method. The keywords of Distance

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