

Traditional Education and Distance Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The main concern of this article is the comparison of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) with the traditional, face-to-face educational approach. It aims to pinpoint the advantages and disadvantages, as well as the similarities and differences of both approaches, and answer the question of when and under what circumstances one particular method has an advantage over the other. This question makes educationists anxious when it comes to designing a new curriculum, so in this article we consider Open and Distance Learning as a multidisciplinary evolution and part of a broader framework.

In order to address this question, we first consider the needs that led to the evolution of Open and Distance Learning (ODL), thus proving its necessity in the contemporary world. Second, we consider the technologies that make its application possible and use them to help define the core points of space, time, and flexibility that differentiate ODL from the traditional educational framework. The grid of similarities and differences between these pillars is discussed in detail. Finally, we conclude by pinpointing cases where the application of an ODL method is recommended, at the same time emphasizing various sensitive points that require further investigation and evaluation.

HISTORY

Open and Distance Learning is not a new concept. Its roots can be found in the industrial revolution due to the accelerated development of economies culminating in present-day, information-based economies and globalization, where information has become the fourth component of productivity, next to nature, labor, and capital. During this relatively short period

(the second half of the 19th and the 20th century), new terms such as specialization, knowledgeable workers, and management emerged (Laudon & Laudon, 2000). This was the result of rapid and fundamental changes in the working domain, where, especially nowadays, it is common to cut back employment posts because they no longer correspond to contemporary needs, while there is lack of supply in occupying the new, demanding positions that have emerged.

It is clear that the traditional methods offered by schools and universities could no longer effectively help in the area of continuous vocational education and specialization, so mankind had to find a more versatile solution. Consequently, one arrives at the first core polarization point where educational needs that have emerged cannot be fulfilled through traditional methods. Concepts such as the aforementioned continuous education, specialization, and life-long learning, together with post-graduate studies and the globalization of available knowledge make it clear that nowadays “the sciences,” as described by Aristotle, are not a few, but are spread over a broad spectrum of human knowledge.

EXAMPLES

Given the great variety of existing ODL-environments and the diversity of the needs they are supposed to cover, there is a great deal of difficulty in distinguishing between the real similarities and diversities they provide, compared to the traditional ways of providing education. We shall attempt to make an “approach of the mean,” that is, for most cases, not accounting for existing ODL variations.

There is a broad spectrum of ODL environments starting with Anadolu Open University in Istanbul—which, in terms of students (about 470,000 persons)

is one of the largest in the world, but where only basic means of instructional material are used (mainly printed material and audio cassettes) (HOU, 1998)—and culminating with the American and Spanish Open Universities—which use videoconferencing and Web-based instruction. After printed material, radio and television broadcasts occupy an outstanding position worldwide, directly opposing the notion of “freedom of time” that we discuss later.

First, we provide some representative examples from the domains of Traditional Education and Open and Distance Education:

1. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH, <http://www.auth.gr>) is one of the greatest educational institutes in Greece and a typical, traditional university. It was founded in 1925 and has been through various changes before arriving at its present form. Today it consists of 38 Departments, organized into 10 Faculties and three independent departments. According to AUTH itself, “each department covers the cognitive field of one science (subject) and offers one specific degree title. The department has the responsibility for the educational and research activity in the cognitive field of the science covered,” while “each department is divided into sections, which coordinate the teaching of part of the cognitive field covered by the department, which corresponds to a particular field of that science” (AUTH, 2000).
2. The University of the South Pacific (USP) has its main campus in Suva, Fiji, smaller campuses in Vanuatu and Samoa, and serves 12 nations: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The countries are comprised of Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian cultural groups and an enormous variety of languages (about 200) (Mugler & Landbeck, 2000). Obviously USP is obliged to provide Distance Learning curricula to its undergraduate students and Open and Distance Learning to the postgraduates, as well as further training.
3. The Open University (OU, <http://www.ac.uk>) of England is the largest university in the United Kingdom, with more than 200,000 students. Since its foundation in 1969, OU has educated
4. more than 2 million students (OU, 2000). It offers 300 under- and postgraduate curricula in arts, modern languages, social sciences, health sciences, mathematics and information, theology, business and management, education, and law. The lessons make use of the University’s printed material, radio and television programs, audio and videocassettes, computer software, and experimental kits for use at home. The communication between instructor and students is realized through a network of 330 local centers in the United Kingdom and overseas, annual meetings, and seminars as well, usually during the summer. The OU also places importance on the use of the new technologies: more than 150 programs with 62,000 students use computers, information, and technology, virtual tutorials and discussion groups, multimedia instructional material, and computer-supported conferences. The students read more than 170,000 e-mails and newsgroups daily. Five of these OU programs are provided exclusively over the Internet, including the Master’s degree in Open and Distance Learning.
5. The Hellenic Open University (HOU) was founded in 1992 and took its present form in 1997. It consists of four faculties (Human Studies, Social Sciences, Exact Sciences, and the Faculty of Technology and Applied Arts), while its character is depicted mainly through the adoption of a modular system that provides the “Thematic Unit” as the basic instructional unit. Every “Thematic Unit” covers a distinct cognitive domain at the under- or post-graduate level, and the combinations of different “Thematical Units” form the various curricula provided by the four faculties of the institution (HOU, 1998). So, in place of the notion of a traditional university department offering “one specific degree title” exists the notion of a Thematical Unit (encountered in the relative literature as “Subject”), the combination of which (Thematical Units) leads to the completion of the particular study cycle (modular system).

From the aforementioned examples, one can infer that the traditional live instructional method has three limitations: space, time and flexibility. The

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