

Cultural Issues in the Globalisation of Distance Education

Lucas Walsh

Deakin University, Australia

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses ongoing cultural challenges faced by distance education providers seeking to deliver programs of study transnationally. Focusing on a key period of distance education during the late twentieth century, this discussion begins by tracing the impact of global economic and technological developments, such as the growth of mega-university enrolments, privately owned education providers and the Internet. The 1990s saw intense interest in the use of Internet-based applications for distance learning and the subsequent arrival of important new actors in this marketplace, such as Blackboard and WebCT.

The author then examines some of the key cultural challenges arising from this convergence of economic, educational and technological dimensions of globalisation, such as the problematic use of models of independent learning in distance delivery.

Turning to future trends, three recent developments in the Internet pose significant challenges to these markets and approaches: open courseware and other initiatives seeking to provide open access to educational resources; the diffusion of user-generated applications, tools and environments; and the fragmentation of online information sources. These trends invite education providers to reflect on the cultural dimensions of distance education. It is argued that while new approaches to e-learning present new opportunities to enhance distance learning, certain key lessons from the 1990s should continue to inform the contemporary development of distance education.

BACKGROUND

The 1990s was a period of tremendous growth internationally in distance education, evident in the expansion of mega-universities, virtual campuses and Open University courses throughout the world. Distance education involves “the provision of programs of study which provide both content and support services to students who rarely, if ever, attend for face-to-face teaching or for on-campus access to educational facilities” (Cunningham et al., 1998, p. 23). Designed to appeal to students seeking greater choice in

relation to the time and place of study, and to the mode and pace of learning, these programs tend to be taken by students who find on-campus attendance impractical due to factors such as geography, work and family commitments (Ryan, 1998). Open learning frameworks further allow students to enrol in off campus programs of study irrespective of their previous credentials (Cunningham et al., 1998).

Mega-universities were established throughout Asia in response to the new commercial realities of globalisation. At the time, a mega-university such as Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University of Thailand attracted around 250,000 students, while Indonesia’s Universitas Terbuka had more than 350,000 enrolments. Other mega-universities in India, Korea and China had equally massive enrolments (International Centre for Distance Learning, 1995).

By the mid 90s, more than 2 million students from the Asia-Pacific region were enrolled in informal and formal distance education programs (Commonwealth of Learning, 1994; Latchem, 1997). Public universities across South East Asia were encouraged to develop distance education programs as a low-cost basis for mass education. Universiti Sains Malaysia and Hanoi Open University expanded their distance education programs, targeting potential students among working adults and those residing in more remote regions (Ziguras, 2000). Privately owned education providers within Asia also responded to the market potential of distance learning. Malaysia’s first virtual university, Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), opened in 1999 and used technologies such as the Internet to teach students exclusively by distance mode (Ziguras, 2001).

UNITAR was one of a number of virtual universities seeking to exploit changing markets in distance learning. Institutions such as The University of Phoenix and Western Governors University were already providing distance education in North America. The first Web-based university courses emerged around 1995 (Bates, 2005). Like UNITAR, Western Governors University operates without a conventional home campus (Gilbert, 1996). While The University of Phoenix developed a flexible distance program for working adults, Western Governors University—a nonprofit online provider—sought to “expand the marketplace for instructional materials, courseware, and programs utilising advanced technology,” as well as “identify and remove barriers to the free

functioning of these markets” (Noble, 1998, p. 361). With the growth in distance education in regions such as Asia, many Western education institutions saw an opportunity to capture potentially lucrative global education markets. Growth in the number courses offered via distance mode during this decade was significant. In 1997, 1,000 institutions throughout the world offered roughly 33,000 distance education courses and programs, a tenfold increase since 1991 (Latchem, 1997).

The latter 1990s was a watershed period of technological diffusion; namely, of the Internet. Important new actors, such as Blackboard and WebCT, entered the global education marketplace late in the decade and soon dominated the market for global provision of learning management services and systems. By 2001, WebCT had sold over 1 million student licences across 80 countries (Bates, 2005). During this period of uneven development, many transnational distance education providers struggled to effectively deliver educational courses and content within this confluence of market growth and changing technology.

CULTURAL CHALLENGES OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Demand for distance education provided a powerful incentive for higher education, professional development and training providers to collaborate with commercial software developers to create Learning Management Systems (LMS) capable of efficient, low-cost delivery of course content and educational resources. Much of the early e-learning software was developed through these collaborations and then sold to other universities. LMS, such as WebCT, were developed during the latter 1990s to enable easier access to course materials, teaching tools and learning objects via Web-browsers. Designed to standardise online course development and simplify technological training and support at the deliverer’s end, these systems came to dominate online provision in this education sector.

One of the major appeals of e-learning is the capacity of the Internet to enable geographically dispersed students to engage with their “virtual” classmates as part of an online community of independent learners. An important motivation for distance learning was the strategic interest of educational providers in using new technologies to grow student numbers and facilitate greater economies of scale in course-delivery. Reliant on Western content, many online providers failed to take into consideration the cultural dimensions of transnational delivery (Ziguras, 2000; 2001). The “one-size fits all” model underpinning transnational delivery presumed that Western standards, content and modes of delivery were “universally relevant and universally welcome” across different cultural settings (Patrick, 1997, p. 2).

During the 1990s, influential e-learning frameworks and software were developed in the English language (mainly in North America), and adopted Western models of learning. These were then used in other cultural settings without sufficient consideration of their appropriateness to the pedagogical and learning needs within those settings. To make distance courses simpler to use and more marketable for transnational delivery, distance courses were globalised to remove any cultural specificity of content. Seeking to provide curriculum and materials which “transcend local cultural and language barriers” and that are “relevant to learners wherever they happen to reside,” many online courses were offered internationally but not modified to suit local sites of delivery (Bates & de los Santos, 1997, p. 49).

When delivering distance courses across different cultural settings, the models of independent learning underpinning distance education were in some instances problematic and in others, disastrous. During the 1980s, for example, Indonesia’s Universitas Terbuka adopted a model of distance education based on the UK Open University. The Western approach to independent, self-directed learning that underpinned this model was unfamiliar to students and teachers from heteronymous Indonesian cultural backgrounds. Courses used text-based resources, which in an orally-based society characterised by low levels of reading and writing further contributed to the failure of this model (Dunbar, 1991).

The University of the South Pacific (USP) experienced similar problems when it adopted a distance education program. The program delivered resources to over 5,000 students spread across numerous islands, languages and cultures. The cultural backgrounds of this diverse group of learners were not taken into sufficient consideration in the course design. Like Universitas Terbuka, the program’s emphasis on independent learning and use of the English language was unsuitable to Pacific peoples accustomed to learning from one another through physical interaction, observation and imitation, and through intimate relationships with their teachers (Thaman, 1997).

These examples highlight the kinds of cultural challenges associated with the globalisation of distance education; particularly the need to understand how the pedagogical and learning assumptions of a given distance framework impact upon different cultural settings. Courses via distance mode typically assume that students are self-motivated, self-directed learners (Cunningham et al., 1998), which may not be favourable to students (or teachers) from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

The cultural problems of the USP and Indonesian examples described above can, in part, be attributed to the dangers of a “quick fix” approach. Due to the somewhat *ad hoc* approach adopted by providers, implementation of technologically-assisted open and distance learning during the 1980s and 1990s was marred by a lack of coordination

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