

Chapter XXIV

Trends and Lessons from the History of Contemporary Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the rapidly changing field of distance learning with a focus on trends and lessons for contemporary developments. Beginning with central concepts of distance learning, the chapter traverses the span of developments and technologies on a high level. At a time when it is no longer a matter of whether learners should engage in distance learning, but when, it is vital to address selected issues, controversies, and problems facing the field. The chapter presents topics of solutions, recommendations and future trends, problem based learning, delivery models, and assessment.

INTRODUCTION

While the most compelling reasons people pursue distance learning opportunities may be the convenience and flexibility of the instruction, from an educational perspective there are many other motivations (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Indeed, the multitude of people engaged in informal learning via Internet searches, audio books, podcasts, and television programming highlights the fact that people of all ages seek learning opportunities

when they have a critical need to gain knowledge and skills. (Berg, 2005; Christiansen, Johnson, & Horn, 2008; King & Sanquist, 2009; The Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2004; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2008). The dominant formal education efforts and perspectives (schools, colleges, trade schools, corporate training, etc) have mostly overlooked this fact.

Instead, informal distance learning opportunities create learning experiences which are on-demand, highly dynamic, and which turn the

tables on traditional formats. Especially since the advent of the VCR, DVR and Internet, formal and informal learners are in control and “time shift” their learning (King & Gura, 2009). The general public now expects to be able to start and stop, choose topics, schedule at will, and pace their learning how they see fit. Control and flexibility have become major characteristics of continuous information gathering, learning and entertainment.

In fact, distance learning has a much greater place in formal education than it ever could have without this widespread social adoption of technology use for everyday needs. Fueled by the technological delivery of 24/7 global information, users expect to pursue academic studies with the same tools, convenience, and global reach as their work, entertainment, and social engagement. (Allen & Seamen, 2007; Tapscott, & Williams, 2006).

One of the greatest challenges to this ubiquitous technology experience may be that our educational institutions need to set aside their preconceived notions of student-teacher relationships, program study restrictions, and student responsibility and allow for new models to emerge. When we are able to embrace what technology offers and learners seek, we stand to reach an educational revolution. Moreover, if not, many educational leaders expect that many learners will go outside traditional venues, and schools, colleges and universities will have a difficult economic struggle (Berg, 2002, 2005; Christensen et al., 2008; Simonson et al., 2008).

This chapter’s critical examination of the history and trends of distance learning develops a foundation that considers issues, recommendations and future pathways that may not otherwise be recognized. Studying the historical trail of technology users’ (learners’) adoption, choices, and innovations offers a grounded longitudinal framework. This chapter’s premise is that such a foundation provides fertile soil for growing distance learning developments.

BACKGROUND

Historical Background

The history of distance learning spans hundreds of years, and far predates technology-assisted efforts. Nations and cultures such as Greece and Africa, for instance, delivered critical educational information with human couriers on foot. In the 19th century, mail correspondence courses appeared and spread in formal educational efforts. By the mid 20th century, the scope of educational delivery options continued to expand as learning. At this time radio was being utilized for educational purposes, although primarily informally and by educational and religious groups across Asia and Africa (King, 2009; Simonson et al., 2008).

Television, in the 1960s, introduced technology into education in new dimensions. Today television continues to be used extensively for formal and informal learning (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Anyone who has watched such classics as *Sesame Street*®, *This Old House*®, or *GED on TV*® can attest to this broad practice. Consider the millions of people around the world who tuned in to watch “Joy of Painting” with Bob Ross® originally from 1983 until 1995. Moreover, think of the millions more who learn from reruns of the series on PBS and DVD distributions today (<http://www.bobross.com/>). Such examples illustrate the joint capacity of television and the general public’s acceptance for television to deliver a capable instruction to learners.

The extensive historical foundation of distance learning programs and efforts bridge a myriad of contexts, content areas and age groups. It is therefore surprising that it has taken 40 years for online learning to mature significantly for formal educational efforts (King & Griggs, 2006). Consider, for instance, that traditional educational organizations are not swift to adapt to societal trends, nor adopt change. Traditions run deep in academia, therefore the adoption of videoconference, teleconferencing, and then e-

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