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28-September-2013**

How the tradition of Distance Education has informed online teaching and learning

The heritage of distance education influences online learning. The discussion starts with the profound influence technology has on distance education culture. The impact of media in decreasing the distance between the teacher and learner continues the discourse. The next topic relates to how communication facilitates interaction. Distance education’s student support and student retention continues the essay. The role of teacher and learner in distance education comprises the next topic. The first part of the analysis section discusses how these topics relate to early forms of distance. The topics are revisited in relation to online learning to complete the analysis. By exploring the many facets related to the unique tradition of distance education, we can see how this heritage influences online learning, and this is important because this culture can also influence future generations of teaching and learning at a distance.

**Analysis**

Technology comprises part of distance education tradition. “In the nineteenth century the railway system and the regular delivery of mail” brought the rise of correspondence courses (Peters, 2010, p. 94). Distance teaching organizations during the mid-20th century relied on the new technologies of television and radio (Peters, 2004).

Media usage encompasses another part of distance education heritage in bridging the gap between teachers and learners. Technology and media together replace the spoken word used in traditional classroom settings. The primary media of the correspondence course were “written or printed paper [that] was mechanically duplicated, mass-produced [and] dispatched by the Penny Post” (Peters, 2010, p. 45). Audiocassettes and video cassettes serve as intermediaries at distance teaching organizations in the latter half of the 20th century (Peters, 2004).

Communication constitutes another element of distance education culture. Teacher and learner communications include a pathway for instructions, assignments and questions in correspondence courses via the exchange of letters (Holmberg, 2005). Starting in the 1960s, distance teaching organizations supplement print with TV and radio broadcasts (Bates, 2011). In addition, some distance teaching organizations provide face-to-face communication between tutors and students at regional support centers (Peters, 2010).

Student support comprises another facet in the heritage of distance education. Correspondence courses provide student support via letter (Holmberg, 2005). In the 20th century distance teaching organizations improve the student support model with the addition of more responsive methods that include email, fax, and telephone calls (Peters, 2010).

The role of the teacher and learner in distance education differs from traditional education counterparts. “The role of the traditional professor is reduced mainly to the function of a subject matter specialist” at distance education programs in the 19th and 20th centuries (Peters, 2010, p. 37). Learners are “compelled to develop strategies of self-instruction” and “accept responsibility for their own learning” in order to succeed (Peters, 2010, p. 51).

Online learning continues the custom of technology use. Computers are the primary technology tool (Peters, 2010). The technologies of the internet and the World Wide Web open up new possibilities for learning. (Harasim, 2011).

Online learning expands on media use. Email use continues in online learning environments (Peters, 2010). New media includes computer conferencing that provides not only additional information to learners but also provides opportunities for group discussion among the entire class (Harasim, 2011). Digital multimedia ranges from simple animations for concept illustration to immersive experiences within virtual worlds (Peters, 2010).

Communication in online learning expands on distance education heritage. In previous distance education paradigms, the learner interacts with the content and the instructor (Peters, 2010). Online learning introduces a new communication pathway, one that allows learner-to-learner communication (Ally, 2008).

Online student support continues and expands on distance education tradition. Student support offerings still include email, fax, telephone calls or visits to tutoring centers (Peters, 2010). New options available at some institutions include online student orientation, online readiness assessments, 24/7 technical support, and the ability to chat online with student advisors (Britto & Rush, 2013). An early alert system can send an email to both students and instructors when the student had not logged into the LMS for a pre-determined length of time (Britto & Rush, 2013). “It is hoped the combination of initiatives would have an overall positive impact” on student retention (Britto & Rush, 2013, p. 39).

Online learning brings new changes to teacher and learner roles. The online teacher acts as a facilitator, a representative of the shared knowledge community who inducts new members and helps the group assimilate the knowledge of the discipline under study (Harasim, 2011). Learners glean information from the “chaotic kaleidoscopic world of information” of the World Wide Web as well as “acquire strategies and skills for observing and evaluating their own learning” (Peters, 2010, pp. 51 - 52). Harasim (2011) sees online learners as active “participants in 21st-century online knowledge communities, whether in formal, nonformal or informal educational settings” (p. 13).

**Conclusion**

Distance education learners must take responsibility for learning including self-evaluation (Peters, 2010) and function as active participants in online knowledge communities (Harasim, 2011). The role of the distance education teacher has evolved from subject matter expert (Peters, 2010) to that of a facilitator who guides fellow knowledge community members (Harasim, 2011). Student support originates with exchanges of written letters in the 19th century (Holmberg, 2005). Telecommunication improves student support in the 20th century (Peters, 2010). In the 21st century, student can access support every hour of the day and can alert stakeholders of LMS inactivity (Britto & Rush, 2013). Distance education has matured from learner-teacher and learner-content to include learner-to-learner communications (Ally, 2008; Holmberg, 2005). Media usage in distance education begins with written paper to audio/video cassettes to immersive virtual worlds (Peters, 2010). Technology enables media and ultimately, the learning experience. The topics related to distance education heritage endure, improve and change over time in response to larger changes outside of distance education.

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