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[OMDE 601]

[What traits characterize Distance Education not only now, but throughout its history?]

Distance education is a field of education in which a student does not meet face to face with an instructor in order to learn (Holmberg, 2005, p.9). Typically, persons participating in distance education are those that can't, or would rather not due to convenience reasons, participate in a typical face-to-face classroom. Historically in the late 19th and early 20th century in the United States, the first distance learners were students who lived in rural areas and could not realistically travel to a school, or women who were not accepted to traditional schools (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The next major group of distance learners in the United States was mostly members of the armed forces (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.27). In more recent times, and particularly with the advent of the Internet and on-line learning, most distance learners are those that work fulltime or have families or other obligations that make traveling to a physical classroom on a pre-determined schedule impractical.

The prevailing media and technology of the time facilitate task of teaching and learning in distance education. Starting in the second half of the 19th century until the widespread use of broadcasting in the 50s, text that was mailed to students and letters and exams that were mailed back to the instructor were the primary modes of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.25-30). Later broadcasting, cable television, satellite television, two-way video conferencing, computer networks, and the Internet would push forward the evolution of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). However, it is important to acknowledge the earlier stages of distance education and the role that print and the mail system played.

Holmberg (2005) explains that typically an instruction sheet was mailed each week to guide the student's study in a way that an oral teacher would have guided a student. An examination paper would later be sent to the student, which spelled out how the student would be assessed. Lastly, the student would return the completed examination paper along with any questions that may require clarification; this paper would be graded and feedback promptly returned to the student (p.17).

In this transaction the teacher is physically removed from the student, the educational organization plans and prepares learning materials so that the student is not on their own, technical media (in this case print and mail) are used to provide content and unite the teacher and student, content is provided one-way but the student can ask the teacher questions in a dialog (although delayed by limits of the mail system), and a large group of students are not studying together and the teacher and learner relationship is one-on-one (Holmberg, 2005, p.9). Even before the advent of broadcasting and on-line learning, all traits of distance education are represented.

Progressive technical media allow for distance education to mature and move forward. Television, added to existing print media, allows for subject specialists to reach a higher number of students at once with better content (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.32-33). Distance education continues to advance with introduction of the course design team formed by instructional designers, technology specialists, and content experts (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). This resulted in more sophisticated and larger distance education programs, and global spread of affordable distance education universities based on economies of scale. Widespread use of satellite technology that allowed interactive video, and video conferencing brought the distance educator and learner closer to one another.

This trend continues with the use of computer systems and the Internet that allow online learning. Although the basic elements of distance education have remained similar, advancing technologies have allowed distance education to mature, with almost all universities now having distance education programs along with their traditional programs of study (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.43).

Holmberg, B. (2005). *The evolution, principles and practices of distance education*. Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssystem der Universität Oldenburg.

Moore, M. G., & Kearsley, G. (2005). *Distance education: A systems view*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.