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Title of essay – Distance Education: You’ve Come a Long Way Baby!

Defining the term “distance education” should not be difficult; obviously it involves education and there is some element of distance between those doing the teaching and those doing the learning. One current definition of distance education (DE) that seems to capture all the elements of DE is provided by Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 2): **“Distance education is teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization.”**

Distance education got its humble beginnings during the era of Industrialization in England and other countries (Peters, 2010, pp. 44-45). Moving from an agricultural society to an industrialized one resulted in a need for education of the masses. Early efforts in DE consisted of correspondence education, largely facilitated by the development of the postal system (Peters, 2010, pp. 44-45; Moore & Kearsley, 2012, pp. 22-23). Subsequently, “generations” of DE have evolved, reflecting advances in technology. Starting with print (correspondence education), DE transitioned to radio/television, to the development of entire open universities dedicated to DE, to teleconferencing, culminating in the current generation that primarily uses the internet for the delivery of educational content (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 24). However, the internet is not the exclusive mode of delivery; there can be considerable overlapping of the generations even today.

The definition provided by Moore and Kearsley (2012, p. 2) does not stipulate the “timing” of communications through technologies. This can occur in a synchronous fashion (at the same time),

asynchronously (at different times), or combining elements of both which is referred to as blended learning (Stewart, Harlow & DeBacco, 2011, p. 359). Asynchronous learning gives the student significantly greater flexibility in terms of when he or she learns, adjusting schedules around work and family responsibilities (Pullen & Snow, 2007, pp. 142-143). Students must show a greater degree of self-discipline to remain on schedule, and communication with peers and the teacher are limited (Pullen & Snow, 2007, pp. 142-143). Stewart and colleagues provide a comprehensive review of how synchronous learning results in “more efficient and effective communication” (p. 359). The use of technologies such as video, audio or web-based conferencing can allow for synchronous learning, while still the learners and teacher(s) to be a distance apart (Stewart et al, 2011, p. 360).

Another critically important part of Moore and Kearsley’s definition of DE (2012, p. 2) is “special institutional organization.” They discuss the practicalities of DE by describing the “components of a working distance education system” (p. 12) which describes not only the need for faculty, subject matter experts, instructional systems designers, instructional technologists, and viable technology, but also a management system to pull all this together. Distance education is not just an add-on frill to traditional education, but it warrants its own sophisticated infrastructure, “almost certainly more than in any other educational field” (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 18). Like any complicated system, DE requires careful attention to detail in planning the design of the program; delivery, implementation and administration of the program; and monitoring, assessment and quality improvement of the program.

Distance education is an innovation that is indisputably here to stay. Millions of learners have been able to acquire learning, improve their skills and their lives as a whole thanks to distance education (including this learner!).

References

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