

Problems and Potential for Open and Distance Learning

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Abstract : This paper discusses the potential expansion and use of online classrooms for distance educational purposes. Part of a growing digital education revolution, the use of on-line classrooms especially in a distance learning mode is still controversial to some educators. While this paper puts a strong emphasis on Asian content, the discussion put forward could be indicative of any distance education program. Online classrooms can know no boundaries regarding location, time and cultural attitudes. All of these features need to be taken into consideration. “The conventional notions about teaching - learning are being replaced very rapidly by new ideas and strategies, thanks to the revolutionary changes continuously taking place in the media and communication” (Ramanujam, 2001, p.4). University institutions are at the forefront of this drive. Conversely, physical classroom modes of instruction may not transfer over sufficiently to the cyber world of an online teaching space. Since the Internet’s conception literati have discoursed over such an imbalance in scholastic settings. Education has gone from a group of students in a given physical classroom to a group of students that are part of the global learning community in an online biosphere.

Key words : Asia, Distance Education, On-line learning, Open University, Web-based instruction

1. Introduction

DE (Distance Education) as well as ODL (Open and Distance Learning) are attempts to negate the vastness of the world along with the differences in physical time. “Open and distance learning is thriving in Asia” (Zhang & Perris, 2010,

p. 247). “New learning technologies that currently enjoy no foothold at all in North America and Europe are developing rapidly in remote and financially disadvantaged Asian institutions, and software techniques are being pioneered there which promise cost savings for DE institutions internationally” (Baggaley & Hoon, 2005, p. 12).

This author, who is a firm believer in Distance Education, sees DE on a very expanding course toward the future. It is his vision that DE will involve an even more global acceptance as more and more individuals complete their online courses and degrees. The doubters who may question an online degree’s authenticity will take time to be swayed over to DE. As more and more individuals prove the worthiness of DE, learners will have access to technologies not yet envisioned or invented. Universities that are truly progressive will flourish.

“The world has been undergoing drastic changes owing to technological innovations and globalization at an unprecedented speed. In addition, demographic changes in many countries and states, such as explosive population growth in many developing countries and the aging population in advanced industrial societies, have been fundamental sources of change shaping a new reality of the world” (AAOU 2012, p. 1).

It is quite evident that regardless of problems the potential for DE will transform learning from days of ‘chalk and talk’ to ‘compute and chat’. It is not a clear path to full implementation of DE. The unevenness that has existed in traditional brick and mortar type institutions around the globe will still be a hindrance in a digital age.

While little is presently known about the effectiveness of virtual classrooms, there is also a scarcity of research on the cultural aspects of online learning (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003 ; Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998) including

the cultural appropriateness of web-based course-support sites (Collis, 1999). Further, very little evidence-based research exists on intercultural communications within technologically-mediated environments (Hawisher & Selfe, 2000 ; Herring, 1996). Thus, the *effectiveness* and *impact* of web-based education is problematic specifically in an international context (Milly, 2010). Globalization is bringing change to society and distance education practices (Moore, 2007). According to Evans & Nation (2003) “distance education is not only affected by globalization, but it also operates as a globalizingentity in itself, and in so doing adds its own particular influences” (p. 783).

2. Connectivity

Unfortunately, access to DE is not created equally. A study involving 12 Asian counties and their ‘load time’ or the amount of time it takes for a Web page to download onto a computer was conducted by researchers Baggaley, Batpurev, and Klaas, (2007). This is an important factor for DE if it is to truly revolutionize education. Their research showed dismal results in many countries for the loading of web pages and in many instances the failure of pages to load at all. It is a complex issue with no easy solution.

The data were generated by network members in Bhutan, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Additional data for the follow-up study were collected in China. Using a ‘trace-route’ routine, the study indicates that webpage loading time is linked to the complexity of the Internet routes between Web users and the host server. “It is indicated that distance educators can apply such information in the design of improved online delivery and mirror sites,

notably in areas of the developing world which currently lack an effective infrastructure for online education” (Baggaley, Batpurev, and Klaas, 2007, p. 1)

Connectivity or lack thereof can be frustrating if not an obstruction to the full implementation of DE on a global scale. In addition to internet access and download times there are issues with DE that concern not only the learners but also the educators, funding, facility pay and further research. Admittedly there are difficulties with DE but there are also immense advantages and a future that only shows the ever expanding potential of DE.

3. Developed vs. Underdeveloped Countries

The attitudes toward the implementation of distance education can differ greatly between those of developed countries and those of underdeveloped countries. Developed countries tend to view distance education as an expansion of current educational modes. Underdeveloped countries on the other hand tend to view distance education as a quick fix or opportunity to catch up with developed countries with regards to education levels. “Distance Education has been viewed by many as a viable strategy to achieve the national educational goals quickly and at low costs” (Ramanujam, 2001, p. 1). Contrarily though ; “Students will not be willing to register for first world DE if, for lack of innovative techniques, it continues to use online methods that are inaccessible to them” (Baggaley & Hoon, 2005, p. 1).

This view of ‘catch-up’ offers real opportunity to narrow the gap in education between developed and underdeveloped countries. It is only to the advantage of learning instructions in developed countries to assist those in underdeveloped countries. This is important, not only in terms of student numbers and future

revenue for the universities but in the quest for global educational equality among nations continuing to dissolve borders through global trade and now DE.

4. Asian Perspective

Asia is a huge area including 19 nations and a variety of languages, culture, political system, economic standards and long history. It is difficult to generalize the characteristic of Asian students. However, most of these countries are pre-industrial societies with a long history of being colonized or occupied by Western superpowers. In particular, many of these countries (especially in East Asia) have been influenced by Confucian philosophy and values. Asian students do share some similar features in their learning styles, such as reticent learning, deferring to instructors, preferring to learn collectively, valuing education and high achievements (Kember, 1999 ; Pratt, 1992, Watkins & Biggs, 1999) These characteristics of learning reflect the cultural values derived from the hierarchical and collectivist Eastern societies (Wang, 2005).

But despite disproportional educational and technological diversity Asia is becoming a front runner in DE. The authors Jung and Latchem (2007) corroborate this by stating that :

Asia now has more open and distance universities and more distance learners than any other region in the world. And the ever-expanding demand and increasing availability, sophistication and affordability of information and communications technology is encouraging governments to urge more institutions to adopt distance, online and blended learning to serve more students more economically, capture new markets and provide postgraduate as well as undergraduate programmes. Turkey's Anadolu University and the

Korea National Open University are but two institutions now offering graduate e-learning programmes, and 17 cyber universities have been established in Korea alone. Now distance and e-learning are slowly finding their way into the countries of Central Asia—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—and Bhutan, Nepal and Mongolia (p. 238)

Asia, while not entirely unique does have differing styles when it comes to education, compared to Western countries. These differing styles can also become conflicting in DE environments. “Distance education has been regarded as an industrial teaching model developed in the West, which emphasizes individual development, learner autonomy, active learning and mutual communications” (Wang, 2005, p. 645). “While many studies on online education focus on technological platforms and instructional design, few concerns have been given to online learners from different cultural backgrounds, especially the Asian students and their online experience” (Ku & Lohr, 2003, p. 94). “When Asian students who are accustomed to teacher-led, passive and reticent way of learning study online courses in the West they confront a series of disorientations and difficulties” (Wang, 2005, p. 645). Furthermore, Wang, (2005) adds that; Instructors who teach Asian students are highly recommended to consider the different cultural values and accommodate these students with a cultural sensitive learning environment. Adult educators have acknowledged that students from different cultural backgrounds have different concepts of learning and education and that they learn differently (Hvitfeldt, 1986, Pratt, 1991, 1992; Merriam & Muhammad, 2002). The background educational learning style has a significant role to play in future DE especially when learners may enter DE from extremely differing areas of the globe; teacher sensitivity is the key.

5. Culture and DE

Regarding culture and its differences ; which may or may not be transferable ; DE has the tendency to view all students as the same. This is a major drawback to full worldwide implementation of DE by some globally minded institutions. Western values and educational practices can create difficulties and ineffective learning situations for a large portion of the world's population (Milly, 2010). Culture influences our cognitive development (Matsumoto, 1996 ; Pincas, 2001 ; Vygotsky, 1978), our reasoning, perceptions and forms of expression (Chen & Starosta, 1998), even our use of metaphors to convey meaning (Kaplan, 1966). What is explicitly or implicitly observable, recognized, valued, understood and communicated varies enormously cross-culturally (Milly, 2010).

In online learning environments, cultural factors greatly influence interpretation, understanding and communication. Hall (1966, 1976, 1998) differentiates between cultures in terms of the extent to which they explicitly or implicitly use information to convey meaning, as well as in terms of the level of context needed for individuals in various cultures to develop understanding. According to Hall, low-context cultures as found in North America, focus on explicit communication and are able to derive meaning from information with little context. High context cultures such as Japanese or Indigenous peoples on the other hand, rely extensively on implicit and contextual knowledge to interpret, understand and communicate information.

Gunawardena et al. (2003) use Hall's intercultural communications theory to explain why cultural differences often lead to confusion, misunderstandings, and orientation problems, particularly in online learning environments where "the non-verbal clues of face-to-face communication" are not available (p. 759). Shearer (2007) reminds us "[i]n the development of distance education courses there is no one best technology and it is the usually a combination of technologies that produces

the best course in terms of meeting the learners' educational objectives" (p. 230).

6. Future Distance Learning

Possibly the greatest challenge of DE for future learners is that of mobility. No longer will distance education simply mean one instructor in front of a computer communicating with far away learners sitting in front of their monitors. DE will have the opportunity to become accessible anytime, anywhere. This has actually been brought into existence through the availability of smartphones. Smartphones allow internet access contact wherever the internet is connectable. Learners can browse their courses while commuting on a train, sitting in a coffee shop or enjoying the serenity of sitting on ones couch at home.

Unfortunately, only a few Asian countries have reached this pinnacle of technology. "Other Asian nations, including Bhutan, are currently at a relatively early stage of DE development. Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, for example, have only recently emerged from periods of political turmoil that have delayed the development of basic ICT infrastructures" (Baggaley & Hoon, 2005, p. 8). Regarding the use of ICT's which are an integral part of DE the authors Hedberg and Lim (2004) comment that ;

Of course, these approaches are more common for countries around the region that have reached reasonable stages of establishing infrastructure, especially Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, India, Brunei, Thailand and Hong Kong. It is less true for those that are still striving to obtain more computers (or even electricity) to schools (e. g., Vietnam, Laos, Indonesia, and Cambodia) (p. 201).

The struggle is continuing though, and underdeveloped countries have been driven to find unique answers to their own problems. One such solution is the rise and expansion of open source software. This type of software is free and totally downloadable to whoever wishes. Some major software companies have disputes with this type of computing. They may feel that it could infringe on their copyrights and ultimately their profits; another example where greed may stand in the way of good. “Asian universities and colleges, with tighter purse-strings, are naturally inclined to pursue the advantages of open-source software tools (Baggaley & Hoon, 2005, p. 8).”

Expansion for ODL and DE lies in the number of countries that are experiencing large aging populations. Lifelong learning is not new to Asian citizens. It is not unheard of for retired citizens to begin study of a new interest or initiate a fresh career choice while they postpone retirement. Their lifelong experiences can actually make them better students as older adults have many attributes on their side. As the academic Mohd Nor (2011) states from research he has conducted ;

The main reasons cited for older adult learners ‘participation were related to career advancement (for the still employed adult learners) and for the sake of knowledge. The study found that the older adult learners have the following characteristics: They are highly motivated, eager to learn health conscious, have effective time management, have good social skills, no financial difficulties, and have strong family support (p. 238).

The pool of older learners is ever expanding; the learning institutions that take full notice of this fact through integration of older students into their courses will be the ones that succeed. DE offers opportunities for older students who cannot make

it to a physical campus on a regular basis. Additionally, the free and openness of DE to study anytime can fit in to retired individuals lifestyle.

7. Faculty Compensation/Support/Course Assessment

An often forgotten and undecided matter regards the individuals that instruct the courses. While course titles and student requirements may be similar in distance and local education formats, the amount of technical knowledge and commit to students who operate on a global clock are not. The time commitment for DE instructors and their remuneration polices can vary greatly from those instructors teaching within the solid confines of a purely brick and mortar learning environment. “Especially for senior faculty members, the time for faculty to invest in technological training, new curriculum development, and maintain high levels of interaction with all students are challenges in all distance educational systems” (Yang, Lin, & Lin, 2004, p. 3). The authors Yang, Lin & Lin, (2004) continue with their remarks about the level of time and effort that is needed with DE and compensation by stating that ;

In Asian teacher-centred learning environments, it is unreasonable for society to expect all faculty to participate in distance learning course without significant in-service education and a reasonable remuneration. Faculty who invest more time to increase program quality should deserve more rewards. It is possible to consider issue faculty remuneration levels based on the level of program quality and interaction with students. (p. 3)

Additionally ;

If an institution uses mainstream faculty to teach its online courses, the faculty will most likely want to be paid and rewarded as if they are teaching a mainstream class. But some institutions, to mainstream faculty's dismay, apply different compensation and incentive policies to DE classes (Gaide, 2004, p. 1).

The topic of faculty compensation can have huge ramifications for those faculty involved in DE. If they are not compensated with a reasonable fee then resentment can develop between DE and non-DE instructors. A mentality may develop that DE or non-DE courses may be of higher value over the other. This is a problem that many institutions are already at odds with.

Regarding instructional methods, faculty that may be tasked with unaccustomed DE course outlines and requirements may be astounded that their typical face-to-face teaching techniques do not match a DE format.

Faculty training resources often differ between mainstream and online programs, too. Anyone who has taught in both the real classroom and the "virtual" one is aware that the two learning environments are not created equal. Many instructors who have instructed in the face-to-face classroom only are ill-prepared to instruct online from both pedagogical and technical standpoints and are apprehensive about doing so. Moreover, they often do not fully understand the complexities of online education (Gaide, 2004, p. 1).

For the administration, the addition of DE courses may sound like an easy way to enrich the institutions coffers. As the writer Tomei (2006) portrays DE ;

It is not uncommon for higher education administrators in particular to view online, distance learning-based courses as the “mother lode” for sizeable tuition revenue increases. After all, to the uninitiated, the argument can be made that if a traditional classroom teacher can accommodate a class of 25 students with the demands of face-to-face instruction, scheduled office hours, and individualized assessment, why shouldn't an online instructor be capable of handling 50 students? Why not a 100? After all, goes the contention, online learning is assisted by computer, office hours are diffused 24×7 thanks to electronic mail, and instruction is available on-demand thanks to its digital format.

If generating additional funds is the sole reason for the implementation of DE then it may surly fail. The time involved by faculty for key times in DE such as student project evaluation or advisement is not comparable to traditional teaching methods.

Another factor in DE which will be briefly touched upon since it is such an extensive topic in and of itself; is that of course quality and assessment. As Swenson and Curtis (2005) point out with regards to DE assessment there are many options not always affordable to traditional courses ;

Online courses can use a range of imbedded assessment components, in addition to or instead of more traditional tests and papers. These may include :

- Professor created rubrics for students to assess their own work, participation, projects
- Institution created rubrics to help the instructor assess their own efficacy within the course

- Student created or enhanced rubrics that develop common understandings
- Project journals
- Peer reviews
- Project plans and charts or timelines
- Portfolios with reflections
- Posts, multi-media presentations, graphic organizers based on established criteria
- Group work with assigned roles and expectations
- Content based instructor created self-tests (pp. 1-2)

Assessing individuals is often marginally issue free ; the difficulty lies in assessing group projects. Evaluating the percentage of collaboration in online courses presents unique new challenges for instructors. While instructors value the use of collaborative learning, most find the issue of evaluating the contribution and participation of each student in group work to be one that is most perplexing (Pai & Leong, 2009). This is often difficult in traditional learning modes but can become much more blurred in DE environments. While collaborative learning project offers numerous advantages for the learning process, it also presents challenges in the evaluation of each student's contribution to the development of the final group product (Bruns & Humphreys, 2005). Many instructional strategies that have been effectively used in traditional face-to-face classrooms have been proposed for use in the online learning environment. One such learning strategy is the use of group collaborative learning (Pai & Leong, 2009).

For all the possibilities for DE, what are the limits and measures used for adjusting the subject matter to meet the needs and requirements of the students, instructors, and host learning institution ? This is a question that is not unique to DE

since brick and mortar type schooling grapples with the same obstacles. What is exclusive to DE is how the solution is implemented and sustained. This question has yet to be resolved.

8. Inclusive Difficulties

“In many ways, creating a technical infrastructure and human capacity for DE is more challenging than establishing a supervised learning centre or campus-based media laboratory” (Baggaley & Hoon, 2005, p. 5). The available access and reliability of DE unfortunately depends on the level of economic development for that particular country for which the learner resides in. While those in the higher levels may have ease of connect ability leading to faster response to any difficulties, those at the opposite end may only experience frustration and problems that are beyond their individual control. “They can look westward and south, testing the web-based delivery methods on which DE is based in North America, Europe, and Australia ; or they can look to their own streets and create new delivery methods, using – for example – the ubiquitous cell phone” (Baggaley, 2007, p. 125). Instructor sensitivity to various modes of internet connection and basic IT knowledge is a recurring theme that can never be emphasized enough.

Reluctance on the part of educators or elected officials that may control major monetary funds can be frustrating to those who may wish to surge ahead with DE development. The authors Baggaley and Hoon, (2005) comment that ;

The idea that an impersonal style of education can ever replace the benefits of face-to-face education is considered implausible in countries that are new to the DE concept. Given the current undeveloped nature of DE skills in these countries, this attitude is hardly surprising—it is, after all, commonplace in the

‘developed’ world also ! But DE has one advantage that cannot be denied : the fact that it may be the only educational option for students who, for geographical, financial, physical or other reasons, have no access to a traditional education (p. 8).

9. Wide Ranging Benefits

There are many advantages to online learning with similarities to DE. The authors Zhang and Perris state that ;

In terms of advantages of online learning, students most valued the flexible nature of the medium. Other areas were regarding sharing and interactivity. Such features are influenced by instructional design and student–educator and student–student communication. It is important for educators to realize the benefits of online learning and of course, what their student’s desire. Interaction or collaboration is an innate human characteristic and should be encouraged. Designing courses around online interactivity situates the learner with others to challenge understanding, defend ideas and access information (p. 262).

“Distance learning is an effective method of learning which opens doors and gives many potential students a chance to succeed and gain an education which they may not have received otherwise” (Wolverson, 2009). Additionally, the author Sir Daniel, (2010) attends that ; “Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is an important vehicle for the education that can underpin this process by expanding the freedoms that people can enjoy.” “Open and distance learning offers a number of advantages to both learners and to providers of opportunities for learning. “Problems such as

distance and time, which are barriers to conventional learning, are overcome in open and distance learning” (The Commonwealth of Learning and Asian Development Bank, 1999, p. 1-7). Additionally as the Commonwealth of Learning and Asian Development Bank (1999) goes on to express the numerous benefits of DE can be attributed to ;

Accommodating low or dispersed enrolments

Open and distance learning can accommodate :

- low enrolments over a long period of time ; and
- low enrolments in one geographic region but additional enrolments elsewhere.

Dealing with cultural, religious, and political considerations

Open and distance learning can deal with differences, and consequently :

- widens women’s opportunities to learn ;
- meets the needs of populations affected by violence, war, or displacement ; and
- makes learning possible even when group assemblies are proscribed.

Expanding the limited number of places available

Open and distance learning can expand the limited number of places available for :

- campus-based institutions few in number ; and
- stringent entrance requirements.

Making best use of the limited number of teachers available

Open and distance learning can make the best use of the few teachers

available when :

- there is a lack of trained teaching personnel relative to demand ;
- teachers are geographically concentrated ; and
- teachers with certain expertise are in short supply.

(pp. 1-8–1-10)

“Because of its many advantages, distance learning has been identified by educators, scholars, academicians, and researchers as one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of learning” (Al-Fadhli, 2009, p. 1).

10. Conclusion

The growth of DE continues to spread throughout the globe. Areas that were lacking in physical computers, classrooms, instructors, and technology can now become connected through DE Those countries that are less developed and that have not developed the infrastructure for traditional learning methods can now adhere to more modern methods by way of DE Countries that have already installed proficient learning tools by way of the internet can expand their traditional educational services through the use of DE. Age limits and accessibility are no longer a hindrance with the development of Smart-phones and other instant on-line tools. As the authors Bright, Chen, & Chui, (2004) attest ;

The overwhelming demand for distance education in Asia is exemplified by exponentially-increasing Open University enrolments and student tolerance for taking correspondence courses in a passive learning approach. This phenomenon suggest that major social policy changes will have to be made to support further development of higher-learning through an interactive learning

environment (p. 3).

The only drawback is the reluctance on some learning institutions to expand beyond their traditional learning environments. Cost may be a factor but with DE existing institutional computers and those of the learners can be combined to form a flexible on-line community. Academics Hellriegel and Slocum (2004) state that ;

Distance education leaders need to foster synergy among people and resources to bring about optimum benefits of this innovation to serve the full range of the population of the world. Synergy may occur when people together create new alternatives and solutions that are better than their individual efforts (p. 6).

The distinctions that separate us by country and culture can be used to forge new ideas and behaviour in DE environments. Cultural collaboration on a global scale can lead to a fuller education and enriching experience of thought. Hellriegel and Slocum say that ;

With the diversity of traditions and methods and visions between East and West, the greatest chance for achieving synergy may be among these peoples who do not always see things the same way and who see differences as opportunities (p. 6)

As this paper has pointed out there are many issues to consider with the adaptation from a close physical classroom to one of an unseen classroom that only exists in the world of the internet through distance education. At present many of these issues such as inequality amongst nations with regards to cyberspace speeds and connectivity have yet to be resolved and with all honesty may never be. There

has always been an imbalance throughout world history, whether this is natural resources, medical services, or in this case distance educational resources.

Additional complications not covered in this article but worth further research are that of learner isolationism in a cyber classroom ; the feeling of being unattached to those used to physical classrooms and large class size. There is also a fundamental necessity to ensure quality control over course curriculum. Likewise, QA (Quality Assurance) and accreditation have always been striking points for those taking a dim view of DE. In countries such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Bhutan and Mongolia, where higher education itself is relatively new, there are no governmental or institutional QA systems in operation (Jung & Latchem, 2007).

The debate continues though on the value of DE, as the author Zorn (2010) exclaims ;

There is no single research paper conclusion on distance learning which gives a final answer to the ongoing debate on the effectiveness of distance learning versus the traditional mode of teaching. While some people agree that distance learning has come a long way and opened new vistas in the field of education, some researchers are still questioning the value of learning through non traditional means. Whatever is the case, there are various opinions to consider and they are all significant in their own regard. (p. 2).

Whichever the opinion there is no denying that DE has flourished and expanded especially throughout the Asian region at the tertiary level. Open and distance learning is enjoying phenomenal growth in Asian higher education, new forms of provision are being developed, new institutions are being established and there is a surge in online export and import (Jung & Latchem, 2007). Despite difficulties

there is always a solution to the most complex of problems ; as with anything else it may take a little time, some ingenuity and a lot of patience for DE to fully equal the traditional classroom learning experience. Meanwhile, the revolution in digital education continues to gain momentum for future generations of learners in all subject areas.

The author can attest to the benefits of DE through this writer's own personal experience of earning a BA degree from a traditional learning environment while many years later a MA and currently a second MA through DE. As stated by scholars and numerous articles the flexibility of scheduling, balance of lifestyle and affordability are but a few of the advantages of DE. As technology progresses the opportunity for people not normally allowed even a basic education is growing through the use of mobile teaching devices and the expansion of wireless methods still in development. Obviously changes are occurring in the field of education that cannot be reversed. The future of proper and appropriate instructional methods seems to be part of an ever evolving progression.

As a result of previous revolutions whether it is change in government, industrial, or religion, they have had a profound effect on ordinary people's lives. So it is with DE, the revolution that has already started in small pockets of the world (Australia, New Zealand, for example) but has still not reached other geographical areas (The U. S.). The revolution that is DE will affect the way future teachers will teach and students learn regardless of problems, the potential for a more open type of education that allows learners to learn in their own space at their own time cannot be denied. It is how revolutions begin.

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