

OMDE 602: Assignment #1
Distance Education Systems
Word Count: 820

Distance education: How is it defined?

Distance education (DE) is any course of instruction where instructor and participants are in separate physical locations and where there exists interaction between instructor and participants. Some examples include correspondence courses, synchronous and asynchronous computer-based training, instructional videos, television broadcast, and telephone or video conferences.

“Course of instruction” implies that there is a formal structure. Structure is a key element of distance education. Distance education requires planning and incorporating special design and instructional techniques. It also requires individual methods of communication and unique organizational and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley, 1996).

What is a distance education system?

A system consists of components which interface in order to facilitate the flow of information or communication. A system accepts an input, processes it and presents an output.

A distance education system is comprised of a set of components which interact to create a backdrop for a holistic view of teaching and learning. Free-flowing movements between the various components are essential for effective outcomes.

What are the components of a distance education system? Banathy (1995) begins to develop a framework of guiding principles, and in doing so, helps to define the major conceptual components of a distance education system: **System and Subsystem Boundaries** – The scholastic platform, environment and rules governing effective distance education; **Inputs** – Participant and facilitator exchanges and contributions; and **Outputs** – Self-directed learning, “generative learning” and “reflective practice” (Betts, 1992).

Banathy's (1993) systems level hierarchy also brings to light four elements: **Learning** – “Arrangements and resources by which the learner can master learning tasks”; **Instructional** – “Defines the content and method of instruction”; **Administration** – “Sets the goals of instruction, defines the instructional content and method, and provides directives for the use of resources”; and **Governance** – “Define policies and regulations, and mandate uniform curriculum and instruction” (p. 33).

Miller and Hussman's exploratory study (1996) takes these ideas in tandem when they discuss “a holistic model with five primary factors that affect the overall ecology of a distance learning experience. Included in the model are considerations for course delivery, instruction quality, student participation and involvement, course and program administration, and the culture of teaching and learning.” These five in combination make up the components for an effective distance education system.

Course delivery component

Effective distance education delivery involves presenting material, which addresses the needs of all learning types: kinesthetic, audio and visual; taking initiative to plan and distribute information prior to class modules; addressing participants by name to establish a certain immediacy and comfort level; encouraging interaction through the use of various questioning techniques; and being available for advising participants.

Instructional component

Instruction and delivery are entwined when looking at the responsibilities of the facilitator. In their study, Miller and Hussman (1996) point out that “diversity of teaching styles, innovation in presenting materials, and taking the time to deal with learners on an individual basis were all considered important to improve instruction.” The facilitator should be mindful of his role in providing immediate feedback for assignments and comments, as a lack of this will lead to learner frustration (Holmberg, 2003, pp. 57-60). Managing the interactions between learners and between learners and instructors with strong leadership and direction is considered essential to a successful learning experience.

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Learner involvement component

Moore & Kearsley (1996) discuss learner autonomy, where each individual learner can take charge of his or her own independent learning (pp. 204-205). The level of learner autonomy depends upon the individual learner's sense of personal responsibility and self-directedness. Successful learners in a DE setting have a greater sense of self-discipline and self-direction, consistency in staying caught-up in class, greater reliance on study guides and handed out material, and participation in courses discussion.

Administrative component

To guarantee a successful DE experience, administrators need to make the quality of learning content a high priority, endorse the participation of quality distance education instructional designers, and ensure ongoing updating of course content.

Cultural component

What can be done to ensure the continual improvement of distance education's culture? Miller and Hussman's study (1996) identified three areas in need of attention to improve the cultural aspect of distance learning: **organizational actions** – such as “supporting greater recognition of distance education theory, and offering continuously improved quality programs”; **program planning concerns** – such as “accounting for better responsiveness to student needs, and encouraging faculty involvement in the entire program planning process”; and **technology and delivery-related measures** – such as “offering timely feedback about the quality of participant work, training for participants in technology use, and better use of different technologies, as well as fostering an attitude about students that accepts and includes non-traditional learners”.

A call for change

Banathy (1991) calls for change when he discusses how there is a new awareness emerging for the information society (p. 33). He states: "You cannot restructure a horse and buggy into a space craft." He describes an atmosphere that has been resistant to change, an environment that has been unwilling to morph, and create a new backdrop that will better support a holistic view. He calls for the practice of a new “comprehensive systems design”. He states that the current educational system will worsen “unless people realize that education has to be re-conceptualized based on new assumptions, and that it has to be redesigned by learning to use the new technology of systems design.” How can this change be accomplished?

Distance education is situated to redefine the traditional paradigm of learning, specifically education at the college or university level and training at the business level. Technology is ever changing. As shifts occur, one can expect distance education to take advantage of those changes. In the future, education will progress away from the traditional classroom “instruction-focused” model of teaching toward more creative “learner-focused” models using technology as it develops (Banathy, 1991, pp. 34-35).

From this, a revolution in thought and practice will unfold. In order to make ready the generations of tomorrow, our society will need to better prepare for the challenges of the future. How? Provide a learning environment that will promote cooperation, innovation, imagination, and creativity. Create a new educational system that “seeks to find new purposes, carves out new niches in the environment, and develops increased capacity for self-reference, self-correction, self-direction, self-organization, and self-renewal.” (Betts, 1992)

In conclusion

A distance education system is essential to the facilitation and management of distance education as it provides a standardized foundation and framework where a participant can interact with his fellow participants and instructor, while learning autonomously, and a facilitator can provide the appropriate amount of support and encouragement, while teaching effectively.

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