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The Pervasive Characteristics of Distance Education

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

This essay will discuss four characteristics which are inherent to Distance Education (DE). Holmberg (2003, p. 13) and Moore and Kearsley (1996, p. 206) discuss Desmond Keegan's thoughts on the characteristics of DE. The traits represented here-in are clearly borrowed from Keegan's comprehensive definition.

Trait 1: The tutor and learner are geographically remote from each other

One characteristic intrinsic to DE is the concept of separation. The separation of tutor and learner has been a constant even since DE's roots. The first correspondence courses offered an interactive element for the student, who was motivated to learn, but who was not able to be in the same place, at the same time, as the teacher. According to Moore & Kearsley (1996), because of the creation of a cheap, reliable mail system in the 1800s, students now had the ability to interact with teachers from afar (pp. 20-23).

The separation that is seen today is different than that of earlier years. Although it is true that distance learners are, under most circumstances, not in the same place at the same time, the gap is bridged through the use of technological advances that were not possible more than a century ago. These technological advances make tutor and learner seem closer than ever.

Trait 2: The use of educational media including written communication, television, radio, CDs, or Internet technologies to link tutor and learner

Because of the lack of physical presence between learner and tutor, certain communication methods are required to facilitate learning. At the beginning of this century, the earliest examples of media used in DE were print, written communication, and, occasionally, phonograph recordings (Holmberg, 2003, p. 51).

Today, the methods of print, satellite, television, telephone, radio, mail, and computer are used singularly, or in combination, to carry learning content across miles.

From correspondence courses, to open universities, to broadcast and teleconferencing, to the networks and multimedia of today, media has always held an important presence in DE (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 20).

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Trait 3: The provision of one-way and two-way communication between tutor and learners

Exchange of communication within a DE program involves not only interaction between tutor and learner, but also among the learners themselves.

Devices of communication include:

- Email
- Instant Messaging
- Voice conferencing
- Posting Dialogue-Threaded dialogue on a bulletin board
- Telephone - Individual or conferencing
- Fax
- Video-including video streaming

The ability to question, to be questioned, and to exchange ideas, is important to the success of the DE program.

Trait 4: A structured program of learning content based in educational foundations

Any learning program must consist of certain basic principles and methods of instruction. A planned course of content must be developed, learning objectives must be clearly stated, and a process of evaluation must be taken into consideration (Moore & Kearsley 1996, p. 203).

Moore & Kearsley (1996) discuss how “Open Universities, in the early 1970s, applied a total systems model approach to the design and implementation of distance learning.” (p. 19).

Today, the most widely used methodology for developing new learning programs is called Instructional Systems Design (ISD). This approach provides a step-by-step system for the evaluation of learners' needs, the design and development of course materials, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 102).

Conclusion

Holmberg, Keegan, and Moore & Kearsley offer comprehensive thoughts on the prevalent traits of a Distance Education program. Each of the four characteristics discussed is inherent to a successful Distance Education program.

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References

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Moore, M.G., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance e ducation: A systems view*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.