Global Learning by Distance: Principles and Practicalities for Learner Support

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge economy demands a highly skilled and well-rounded workforce. However, because traditional institutions cannot meet the demand for post-secondary education, technological innovations, particularly distance learning, are becoming the solution for increased access. As distance programs are developed for global delivery, cultural and linguistic issues must be considered. Pedagogical methods, modes of learning, communication styles, English proficiency, and delivery logistics potentially interfere with the success of such endeavors. This article addresses the opportunities and obstacles of creating distance courses for international learners. It reviews the need for international educational access, provides an overview of the issues, and shares a learner-centered framework to demonstrate principles and practicalities for mitigating potential obstacles to distance learning as a global venture. The framework is illustrated with examples from distance English language learning courses.

Keywords: Distance Learners, Distance Learning, English Language Learning, Global Learning, Instructional Design

INTRODUCTION

“People around the world are demanding more education as a human right and as a pathway out of poverty” (Kamenetz, 2010, p. vii). Higher education is almost universally recognized as the means to a better quality of life. Its primary benefit is economic stability. In the United States, individuals with a bachelor’s degree or higher earn $1,272 per week on average compared to $626 for those with a high school education (United States Department of Labor, 2010). Unemployment rates based on these educational levels are 5.4% and 10.3% respectively. Other demonstrated benefits include healthy lifestyles, civic involvement, openness to other perspectives (American Human Development Project, 2009; Baum & Ma, 2007), increased life expectancy (Meara, Richards, & Cutler, 2008), psychosocial development, self-understanding, stable relationships, and enhanced moral reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Consequently, higher education is sought not only by individuals but encouraged and supported by governments and organizations who recognize that it is “a foundation for development, and the key to good health, self-determination, security, economic sustain-
ability and macroeconomic stability” (International Council for Open and Distance Education [ICDE] & European Association of Distance Teaching Universities [EADU], 2009b, p. 1). It no longer serves only the elite but is a mass market product (Kamenetz, 2010). In the United States, the Morrill Act of 1862 provided federal funding to expand higher education, thus establishing the foundation for a mass education system (Trow, 2005). Countries that have traditionally reserved post-secondary education for a select few have begun widening access. The United Kingdom has evolved from an elite system admitting 13% in the 1970s (Trow, 2005) to a mass system currently admitting 45% of 17-30 year-olds (Office for National Statistics, 2010). Participation of 18-19 year olds from disadvantaged neighborhoods (due to parental education, occupation, and income) has increased over 30% since the mid-2000s (Corver, 2010).

The demand for higher education, due to its demonstrated benefits coupled with movements to expand access, cannot be met through traditional institutions. Innovative solutions involving technology-based delivery and distance learning are gaining momentum and enabling the development of a global educational enterprise. Distance learning or education, defined as a situation in which the learner and teacher are separated by time and space (White, 2003), can provide a quality learning experience on a broad scale. It is a means to realize the concept of open learning, aimed at improving social equity and extending opportunity to those previously under-represented (White, 2003). “The open and distance university movement is removing barriers of geography, time and cost while maintaining quality of education” (ICDE & EADTU, 2009a, p. 2). It is inclusive, reaching individuals previously marginalized to change lives and improve communities and economies.

This article examines opportunities and obstacles to the delivery of higher education on an international basis through distance learning, and explores principles and practicalities for addressing diverse learner needs and contexts. As conceptualized in this article, distance learning differs from traditional models, which involve independent learning through print, audio/video, and broadcast media, group learning based on satellite transmission and audio/video conferencing (White, 2003), and industrial models that emphasize self-instruction and independence (Garrison, 2009). It supports the philosophical principles of open learning with its focus on individual learner needs and autonomy (White, 2003), and reflects a more current iteration of distance learning centered on “communication, interaction, and collaboration among participants” (White, 2003, p. 25).

Opportunities

The possibilities for delivering post-secondary education through distance learning are nearly limitless. Learning anywhere and anytime appeals to both traditional and non-traditional learners. Distance learning has the potential to not only help individuals meet their educational goals, but for nations to close the gap between their citizens’ existing levels of education and those required for the knowledge economy. Lifelong learning aims to utilize technology and education for economic and social gain (White, 2003). In Brazil, for example, an open courseware consortium has enabled the rapid expansion of a higher education infrastructure through access to low cost online courses with the result that individuals are able to train in vocational areas, upgrade their skills, and obtain certificates (Xanthopoylos, 2009).

Strategic planning and international collaborations for the purpose of developing educational opportunities are also characteristic of current educational movements. Examples include the Bologna Process, which aims to increase the mobility and employability of citizens; the Lisbon Agenda, focused on lifelong learning to boost economic growth, increase competitiveness, and provide better jobs; and the Integrated Lifelong Learning Programme, designed to integrate lifelong learning programs under a single structure and address issues of motivation, innovation, sustainability, efficiency, and dissemination (Carneiro & Steffens, 2006).
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