Chapter 2
Researching Distance Education: A Possibility to Humanize It

Kwong Nui Sim
Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has grown enormously in the last decade with computers and smart devices becoming indispensable in tertiary students’ study practices, especially in distance education. There is, however, limited documented research on humanizing distance education in terms of studying the ways educators and students use ICT in the process of teaching and learning within this context. This chapter thus provides a background context of the existing studies on distance education as well as the distance education in relation to ICT use. It then examines the degree to which connections between social and technological elements are interrelated in distance education by highlighting the challenges of humanizing distance education. The chapter then outlines a possibility for addressing this challenge, by introducing the socio-technical framework formulated by Bostrom and Heinen (1977a) in researching distance education. The chapter concludes with future research suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

Research has indicated that information and communication technology (ICT) is a necessary part of academic practice in higher education (Aspden & Thorpe, 2009), especially in distance education. ICT refers to information technology in the context of the integration of telecommunications, computers, software and the data systems that support, store and transmit unified communication technologies for users for accessing and manipulating information (Murray, 2011). It is typically understood that ICT is used throughout the context of distance education, yet there is little attention in the existing literature given to how distance education is humanized through studying the ways distance educators and/or students use ICT to support their academic practice in general. In this chapter, the terms “humanize”
and “humanizing” refer to the notion of incorporating human beings, as social agents, into a particular context, particularly into distance education.

The aim of the chapter is to investigate the possibility of humanizing distance education. The discussion on this possibility is framed around the following questions:

1. To what extent do educators and students use ICT to support the process of teaching and learning in distance education?
2. How do the assumptions and expectations of ICT held by educators and students influence their ICT practice in distance education?
3. How do educators’ and students’ ICT practices inform their perspectives on ICT use in distance education?
4. What is the relationship between the ICT assumptions, expectations, actual practice in distance education and related claims concerning the role of ICT documented in the research literature?
5. How is the humanization of distance education beneficial for different communities, including the institution, disciplines, the distance lecturers, and the distance students?

The answers to these questions require knowledge of the way in which distance educators and students use, experience, and integrate ICT throughout their academic practices. These questions are considered in this chapter in the context of the assumptions and expectations of the role of ICT from various perspectives, including those from research literature, institutions, disciplines, distance lecturers/supervisors, and distance students.

It is hoped that the discussion in this chapter will be the catalyst for further applied research in this emerging field. This is because it offers new understandings and insights into the notion of humanizing distance education through the use of ICT to support the process of teaching and learning. At the same time, the chapter adds another voice to the growing interest in the role and impact that social agents are playing in distance education through the use of ICT as in the existing literature (Anderson, 2008). This particularly concerns the introduction of the socio-technical framework (Bostrom & Heinen, 1977a) presented in this chapter. This framework is useful for shaping the idea of humanizing distance education and, more broadly, for investigating the connections between humans and ICT. Further, the mentioned socio-technical framework has not been used in an educational field in this way previously, and it has enabled an exploration of a set of phenomena in a different way from that in other documented research.

As a result, the use of the framework assists the ability to draw out new understandings and insights. It is hoped, therefore, that this chapter will promote a deeper conversation concerning distance education, including the role of ICT at a tertiary level, and the use educators and students currently make of ICT devices, and the applications that support their academic practices.

BACKGROUND

The use of ICT has grown enormously in the last ten to twenty years, with computers and smart devices becoming more and more indispensable to daily life. ICT is seen as vital for those wishing to engage in higher education (Aspden & Thorpe, 2009). This is particularly true for those who are engaging with distance education, which includes undergraduate and postgraduate courses. To a certain extent, distance education is linked closely with the notion of ICT use, whether the courses are coursework or research