Chapter 14

A Futurist Approach for Open and Distance 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Learners

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ABSTRACT

The future of education is being shaped today. The learners of 21\textsuperscript{st} Century have many options to reach information. Accessing information is not that difficult as that of the past. Today’s individuals can readily access meaningful information even from their wearable technologies like smart watches or glasses. A redefinition for education is inevitable in this age of technology and at this point open and distance education is one spearhead compared to face-to-face education. Open and distance learning gives the learners of 21\textsuperscript{st} Century the chance to make use of the technologies of today as well. This chapter aims to draw an outline about the learners of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, their innate skills, the learning environment they are in and how to benefit from open and distance education in 21\textsuperscript{st} Century.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual community…e-governance…online social networking…digital citizenship. Such terms were once the lexicon of science fiction writers, but are a significant part of the lives of a growing segment of the population (O’Brien, 2008). The people of the new century are more prone to improve themselves about any topic in more flexible learning environments like the ones open and distance education offers, especially for the last 5 years with the onset of MOOCs. The reason of this is that the learners of the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century are born into a world surrounded by technology and they are able to adapt themselves better in any situations about this new life with technology. People who were born in the digital age are defined differently in different sources. The most frequently used term ‘digital natives’ or the ‘net generation’, which was created by Prensky (2001) explains digital learners as “these young people are said to have

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been immersed in technology all their lives, imbuing them with sophisticated technical skills and learning preferences for which traditional education is unprepared. Thanks to ubiquitous environment and the total volume of their interaction with it, today’s learners think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors” (Palfrey, & Gasser 2013).

As there is some urgency in providing flexible learning opportunities to the learners of the new age who are adorned with new skills, open and distance learning environments should be revised accordingly. This chapter will try to give insights about the learners of distance education in the 21st century, the innate skills of these learners with their ubiquitous learning environments and the importance of open and distance education in the 21st century.

21st Century Learners

Learners of the past and learners of today and their ways to learn and reach information have changed a lot. In the mid-1970’s, there emerged a number of pieces of evidence that children in schools at that time were functioning at a higher level creatively than their counterparts of a decade or so ago (Torrance, 2001). What about the change that we have with our counterparts of a decade ago? Do we still use the libraries that much? Or is searching for the information on the internet a more common and easier way for the learners of today? The answers for these questions are really meaningful while comparing the learners of today and their ancestors.

Do you know a teenager? If so, are you amazed with the seemingly lack of focus they radiate? Many children with this apparent lack of focus are being treated for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). The reality is that you are witness to a new learning style, a 21st Century Skill commonly known as multitasking. Teenagers are masters of this skill. They do their homework by reading a textbook, listening to an MP3 music player, receiving and sending e-mail, navigating a Web browser, and conversing with classmates via instant messaging or text (SMS) messaging (Annetta, Folta & Klesath, 2010). One can easily see that the rapid advances in ICT have reshaped the learning styles of the learners of the new era.

Both the learners and the education atmosphere of the 21st century is transforming themselves from a teacher centered approach to a more learner centered one. It is now clear that, as a result of this ubiquitous environment and the sheer volume of their interaction with it, today’s students think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors (Prensky, 2001). This difference between the people who grow up with technology and the people who struggle to keep up with technology created a gap in the way the people think, learn and live as the one is used to information really fast when the other one is trying to get used to this speed in reaching information.

Eaton (2013) lists the characteristics of 21st century learners as follows:

1. Want to have a say in their education.
2. Often have higher levels of digital literacy than their parents or teachers.
3. Expect transparency in their parents, teachers and mentors.
4. Want you to tell them when you have messed up, apologize for it, and move on.
5. Don’t care as much about having a job as they do about making a difference.
6. Demand the freedom to show their wild creativity. 21st century learners balk at rote learning and memorizing.
7. Want to connect with others in real time on their own terms.