

ELIMINATING ACCESS DIFFICULTIES TO CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION: THE RELEVANCE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION (A REVIEW)

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Abstract

Education involves all the experience an individual is exposed to, which brings about positive improvement on his skills, attitudes and knowledge and which leads to the improvement of the environment in which he lives. Crisis in education therefore includes self-centered politics affecting national interest, fraud, misplacement of priorities, socio-economic inequalities, severe budgetary constraints, rapidly increasing enrollment demands, non-implementation of developmental and viable resolutions and policies affecting educational development; spiraling educational costs, lack of incentive and inadequate educational facilities. The crisis also include, drastic reduction in foreign aid and contributions from donor agencies, political instability, the marginalization of the majority who are non-literate, unserved or underserved by mainstream education system and inadequate funding of educational system. Distance education and training (formal and non-formal) result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to a fixed time, to meet a fixed person in order to be trained. Distance education has been reviewed as a problem solving procedure. Distance education can serve as an important way to address serious and multiple challenges facing sustainable human development. Distance education also fulfills some of the educational needs which conventional or campus based educational system cannot address.

Introduction

Education involves all the experience that an individual is exposed to which brings about positive improvement on his skills, altitudes and knowledge and which leads to the improvement of the environment in which he lives (Salawu et al, 1994). Education is seen as the process of helping each individual to lead the fullest life he or she is capable of living (Osokoya, 1994). Sociologists define education as the process of cultural transmission and renewal; a definition that neatly embraces all that obtains in all types of societies literate or non-literate; industrialized or agrarian (Osokoya, 1994), Education, according to Hornby (2000), *is* a process of teaching, training and learning especially in Schools or colleges; to improve knowledge and develop skills. Taiwo (1980) also defines education as, "the training of the young with a view to their growing up and developing into adults who can fend for themselves, live in a society and be of service to that society"

According to Emunemu (1999) the determinants of educational development include race, language, politics, economy and religion. In human history; education, in one form or another, has served as the main instrument for disseminating various accomplishments of human civilization. Basic education contributes to economic growth, the reduction of poverty, and the growth of general awareness in various developing societies. In fact, education is considered essential for civic order and citizenship and for sustained economic growth and the reduction of poverty (World Bank,1995: Xi).

Crisis in Education

Education as the foundation of development, growth and civic society seems to be shaking and slipping away for many developing world. Education in general is at difficult crossroads in many developing Countries, particularly the least developed and low-income countries. Their educational institutions are facing a litany of problems such as self-centered politics affecting national interest, fraud, misplacement of priorities, socio-economic inequality, facilities affecting manpower development, severe budgetary constraints, rapidly increasing enrolment demands, non implementation of developmental and viable resolutions and politics affecting educational development. The problems also include: spiraling educational costs, lack of incentive and adequate

educational facilities, drastic reduction in foreign aid and contributions from donor agencies, political instability, the marginalization of the majority who are non-literate, unserved or underserved by the mainstream educational system and inadequate funding of the educational system (Coombs, 1965 and 1985).

Many authors, writers and researchers have expressed grave concern about the appalling lack of

attention to educational issues. Many believe that lack of educational and learning opportunities can have disastrous consequences. Botkin et al (1979) warn:

Learning processes are lagging appallingly behind and are leaving both individuals and societies unprepared to meet the challenge posed by global issues. This failure of learning means that human preparedness remains underdeveloped on a global scale. Learning is in this sense far more than just another global problem: its failure represents, in a fundamental way, the issue of issues in that it limits our capacity to deal with every other issue in the global problematique.

Despite such warning, no significant advances or gains have been achieved in the Education For All (EFA) area. The full potential of education has not yet been realized in almost all countries, and in the developing nations, the right to basic education still remains a dream for 1.3 billion adults and children (UNESCO, 1993).

Distance Education

Distance education is described as "external or "off-campus study", "correspondence education", "independent study", "home study", and "distance/open learning or education. In Germany, it is described as "Fernstudium", or "Femunterricht", in Spanish-speaking, countries, it is known as education distancia", in New Zealand "extramural" and in France, it is called "telle-enseignement". Regardless of the terms given to distance education, the central characteristic, for example, the separation of the learner from the teacher or instructor, runs as a common thread in all of them.

"Distance Education" can be described as "an educational process in which someone removed in space and/ or time from the learner conducts a significant proportion of teaching".

Perraton (1992) and Keegan (1986) define distance education as characterized by five elements:

- (a) The separation of teacher from learner.
- (b) The planning and preparation of materials under the influence of an educational organization.
- (c) The use of technical media to unite teacher and learner.
- (d) The provision of two-way communication.
- (e) The absence of the learning group.

Greenberg (1998) defines contemporary distance learning as "a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning".

Teaser and Blieszner (1999) state that "the term distance learning has been applied to many instructional methods: however; its primary distinction is that the teacher and the learner are separated in space and possibly time". Keegan (1995) gives the most thorough definition. He stated that distance education and training result from the technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to " a fixed time, to meet a fixed person, in order to be trained".

Despite the variations in the way we describe or define distance education, the need to accept distance education and open learning as a recognized effective delivery system for improving current education and training is growing.

Non-Formal Distance Education

Non-formal distance education is broad and at times a vague area it includes a variety of programs and activities. Emergence of talking drum (Kabwasa and Kaunda, 1973) was cited as an example of ancient distance education in Africa. The use of distance education for non-formal education is widespread in all continents including Africa, Asia and Latin America. The main objective behind such efforts is to narrow the information and knowledge gaps between the information haves and information have-nots. In spite of the knowledge explosion and the emergence of information, societies, existing knowledge according to Beal, et al (1986) is often not applied appropriately to help solve societal problems. They further note that inequalities in the access to and distribution of knowledge and the weakness in systems for accessing and applying knowledge are startling. Non-formal distance education has been found useful in addressing these concerns in Africa, as elsewhere, distance education method is extensively adopted for non-formal education in areas like health, agriculture, family planning, rural development and environment. Institutionalized program that uses distance-teaching methods to teach rural farmers better agricultural practices and methods is an example of non-formal education adopted by distance education.

Formal Education

Formal education covers (a) primary and secondary education (b) in-service (including teachers) education, (c) tertiary education and (d) educational administration and management. Based on some developments and available studies in distance education area, Perraton (1992) draws three models:

- i. To provide education outside school, usually by means of correspondence courses, for individual students working at home,
- ii. To use similar materials for groups of students in study centers offering something like a school but at reduced costs,
- iii. Using distance-teaching methods within conventional schools in order to raise their quality.

The first model distance teaching system is based on the long established correspondence -system in which learners are completely separated from instructors or teachers, and instruction is provided purely by means of correspondence courses. Many distance education institutions in various parts of the world are still using this model though it is not effective. Curran and Murphy (1989) in their study in African countries found that less than 5per cent of the enrolled students had sat for the examinations after five years of study, and up to three quarters of the students had stopped studying completely. The problem of this model include lack of predisposition toward learning, lack of access to libraries and absence of motivation.

According to Perraton (1993), the disadvantages of the first model distance teaching system led to the development of the second model which provided study centres for groups of students, and the burden of instruction was carried out by correspondence courses with some radio support in some places.

The third model, distance teaching system is used to enhance the quality of conventional education. Broadcasting was extensively used to achieve this in-some countries while some other countries used television as an important component of conventional or traditional education. Reinforcing the quality and capacity of formal education has been an area of concern. Distance teaching system is quite often used to enhance conventional curricula and instruction (Perraton, 1993),

In many developing countries, distance education has been used to pursue entirely conventional educational ends. The use of non-formal education seems limited. This practice, according to Dodda, et al (1972:10), has three obvious advantages (a) economy (school buildings and other facilities are not required) (b) flexibility (one can study at his/her own pace) (c) Its operability over long distances (and it can cater for a widely scattered student population).

Distance Education As A Problem Solving Procedure

Many developing societies have undergone major changes throughout the last few decades. These changes initiated by internal as well as external factors, have greatly affected the political, social and economic structures of these societies. Various problems such as poverty; ill health, unrestricted population growth, and unemployment have still continued and the situation has turned more complex with the addition of new concerns and challenges. Distance education can serve as an important way to address serious and multiple challenges facing sustainable human development.

The significance of distance education has been reported by World Bank (1988) in the African education context. Recently concern has been expressed over the situation in which a large number of students completing primary school fail to get into secondary schools each year in sub-Saharan Africa. Obviously, the high demand for secondary education in this region cannot be met through conventional methods because of severe economic problems facing the region. Also, at this level of education, the unit costs are between four to five times those of primary education. World Bank (1988) suggests that governments adopt radical changes in educational practices in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly by reducing substantially the dependence of students on face-to-face contact with the teacher.

Gundani (1992) notes that distance education is the right alternative since it increases access and also decreases the need for face-to-face contact with teachers. While the burden of ever-increasing public expenditure on education is a fact of life in many developing countries, traditional education (usually considered an agent of change and progress) has failed to meet the social and economic needs of the society (Coombs, 1968, and 1985). The traditional educational method has, in fact, served to perpetuate the interests of an elite class at the cost of the educational needs of the majority. This is further complicated by the emergence of a new information elitism both among and within countries (d' Orville, 1996).

Developing countries are threatened by domination, marginalization and even exclusion. Efforts must be made to check this trend by all possible means. The emergence of distance education provides an important way to address these concerns confronting the majority of mankind. One of the major objectives of distance education is to help widen access to education, to raise the quality of education by training and making resources available to the classrooms, and to bring new methods and approaches into the schools

(Perraton, 1992).

According to Valentine (2002), many of the promises of distance learning are financial in nature. Universities hope to save money by delivering education to students that are unable to attend classes because of time or distance. The theory is that class size increases while the overhead remains the same (Valentine, 2002). Bollag and Overland (2001) have stated that developing countries are turning to state run distance education programmes to take the place of ever increasing enrollments and a lack of physical building space. Some places have begun to use distance learning techniques to reach those that would by any other means be unreachable.

Bollag and Overland (2001) give the example of a country like China moving from "elite to mass education" and that "traditional universities cannot meet the demand". China uses a radio and television delivery system to serve 1.5 million students, two thirds of which are in degree programmes.

Another example given by Keegan (1995), include Australia, where Curtin University uses compressed video conferencing to reach students in Western Australia, and enhance classes in business studies by connecting with students in Singapore. Other examples can be found in the UK and Norway where several sites have been linked together. It is now clear by these examples and by the definition of distance learning that it can meet the promise to deliver classes to a geographically broad and diverse population, Not only that, but the need seems to be strong for such programs. According to the American Council on Education, the number of students in distance learning doubled from 1995 to 1998 totaling 1.6 million (Devarics, 2001). Many universities are feeling the pressure to control their costs, improve quality of instruction, focus on customer needs, and respond to the competitive pressures (Morgan, 1998). Distance learning technologies have the potential to assist in solving these problems. Basom and Sherritt (1994) surveyed higher education administrators and state politicians to find out what they thought would be the major problem facing American higher education in the next millennium. The answers they most often received were: "meeting increased demands at a time of decreased resources; increasing or maintaining access, using technology more efficiently and sharing resources across state lines so that colleges won't have to be all things to all people".

Distance learning seems to address all of these issues. Administrators hope that distance learning methods will help make higher education more cost effective (Dibiase, 2000).

Conclusion

Despite the fact that distance education is catching up in all the countries in the world, it is still little known and less studied. Educational literature shows that distance systems are usually ignored (Reddy, 1993), and it is surprising that distance education does not even merit a paragraph in most volumes of educational philosophy; in guides to administrative practice or in analyses of didactic strategy (Keegan, 1986:4).

A number of empirical research studies (Granholm, 1971; Childs, 1965) testify to the effectiveness of distance education in the cognitive domain generally and in the psychomotor domain as far as certain skills are concerned. There is evidence that distance education can be highly effective in the affective domain (Rogers, 1986).

Curran and Murphy (1992) noted that one of the problems many African nations inherited at independence was a large pool of able people who did not have access to second-level education. There is also a recent surge in the demand for tertiary education which the available conventional educational facilities will not be able to meet. The way out in this situation is "Distance Education" for positive consequence on the socio-economic status of a country and the welfare of the inhabitants, Despite the cost coordination, and training that must be put into a programme, it has a great potential to deliver and receive educational programmes to and from remote sites (Weber, 1996).

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