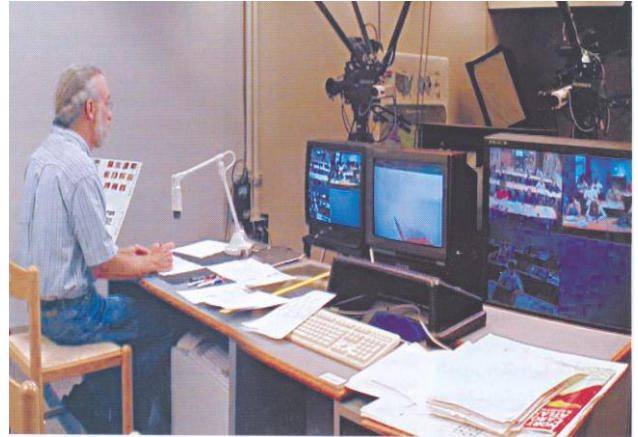


Distance Learning

By: Hashil Al-Sadi

Introduction

With the noticeable advances in the field of telecommunications, especially in the global networks and the rich e- learning resources, it has become possible for learners to enrol in short courses and even earn degrees without having to leave the geographical area where they reside or bear the usual expenses of such degrees. Thus, the concept of educational technology has very much linked itself to another well known concept: Information Technology (IT.) Information Technology refers to the advanced methods of and equipment for collecting, storing, securing, and distributing data via computer networks, satellites, compact disks, electronic archives and other means of communications.



Defining Distance Learning

Distance Learning is defined as an educational programme or course delivered via the internet utilizing its advanced features such as the ability to transfer large audio and video files to remote places and save extensive databases. Its flexibility makes it ideal for working individuals who find it difficult to attend scheduled classes and/or lectures because of their job commitments. Classes are delivered alive over the internet and learners can, in most cases, communicate with their tutor and other colleagues in real time “virtual classrooms.” Instructional materials and videos are sent to learners by mail and projects and homework assignments are submitted by E-mail. Learners are tested at the end of the course or programme over the internet in specialized and certified centres in the learner’s home country or at the cultural attaché of the country to which the organization belongs.

However, there are a number of important issues which need to be taken into consideration by those who plan to enrol on a course or a degree online. First of all, there must be a physical location of the institution or university which offers these types of programmes. Secondly, the university website has to be listed in the major searching engines such as Google or Yahoo as these universal websites usually investigate the reality and the existence of the organizations before listing them on their directories. Thirdly, the university or college’s web address has to end with the extension (.edu) because this extension is only given to the certified and trustworthy educational institutions around the world.

The Historical Development of Distance Learning

The rapid developments which the field of Information Technology and Communication (ITC) has witnessed in the last a few years have, in turn, made rapid acceleration and development in the field of educational technology. Such developments have been manifested in the increase in quality and effectiveness of the programmes which are delivered over the internet. These web-based programmes



have taken over the traditional methods of distance learning which depended on **ordinary mail** for communication between the tutor and his/her learners - a method was popular in the mid-nineteenth century.

Following this stage, the cultural and industrial revolutions together with the emergence of the elite groups have given rise to **home schooling** which became more popular and desirable than before.

After that in the twenties of the last century the **educational radio** appeared in the United States, followed by the **educational television** in 1950. The wide spread of the educational television at that time has enabled learners to access materials supported by not only sound but also pictures for the first time. This method has helped learners to develop more effective comprehension and recall abilities. In fact, educational television still maintains a world-wide reputation as a learning tool because it is relatively cheap and does not require a sophisticated infrastructure. However, there is not immediate contact between the learners and their instructor(s.)

The teaching/learning process was further enhanced by the introduction of the **educational video**, which has enabled learners to record lectures and lab demonstrations on tapes and revise them later.

All these forms of educational broadcast have been further enhanced by the appearance of **satellites** which made it possible for learners to receive educational channels from international stations besides the local ones.

Finally, **computers, local intranet** and the **internet** have brought about a revolution in the practice of distance learning as these means have enabled learners to enjoy and make use of all the facilities that have fostered both learning and teaching. For example, computers have unlimited storage capacity and learners can retrieve information faster than before. In addition, the multi-media devices have made it possible for material writers and instructors

to incorporate texts, sounds, pictures, and even video clips into the teaching materials. Real time “synchronized” communication between learners and their instructors has become the most effective ever.

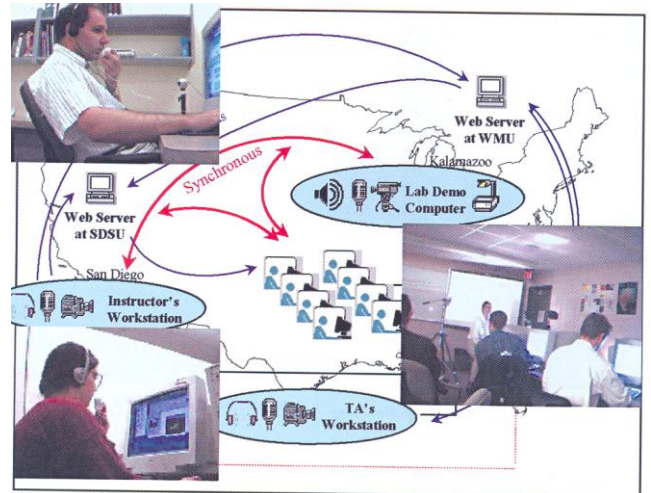
Distance Learning Media

Data: Data refers to all types of written data which is communicated electronically between the learners and their instructor(s) or between learners themselves.

Sound: Sound refers to interactive audio materials communicated over the net between participants which include interactive phone calls, conference or group calls, short wave radio, and audio cassettes.

Video: Video refers to picture and sound media.

Printed matters: Printed matters refer to all types of hard copies which include books, homework booklets, summaries, case studies, etc.



Types of Distance Learning

Generally speaking, two types of distance learning can be identified:

- A. **Tuition:** Tuition is formal and academic instruction which is directed to students who are willing to gain certificates from certified institutions and universities.
- B. **Training:** Training is directed to company employees, job seekers, etc., who are willing to get specific vocational training in their fields of specialization.

Distance learning classes are conducted in two main ways. These are:

- A. **Virtual classroom:** A virtual classroom is a pre-scheduled on-line lecture in which a lecturer speaks and the learners follow up with him/her in real time from their places. This is known as “audio lectures.” If the learners can see and communicate with the lecturer, then it is known as “visual lectures or classes.” Here the instructor uses a whiteboard to write on with a camera installed right over it so the learners can see what is written or drawn on the board.
- B. **Independent Learning:** In this type of learning, the learner retrieves the content of lectures or seminars from the university’ website at his/her convenient time. At the

same time, he/she can also take part in forums and discussion boards and exchange e-mail messages with other learners.

Components of Distance Learning

Any distance learning programme comprises the following parts:

A. **Learners:** The primary task of a learner is to learn. However, learning itself is a hardship, even in ideal situations and in conventional classrooms as it requires motivation, planning, and the ability to comprehend and apply the learned content. They also have to rely on the available means of communication to bridge the gap created by being away from the instructor and other learners.



B. **Teaching Staff:** Success in any distance learning programme depends exclusively on the teaching staff. That is, a distance learning teacher has to have practical knowledge of the communication technology with equivalent focus on his/her role as educator, facilitator and advisor to his/her distant students.

C. **Mediators:** They function between the learners and their teacher(s). They provide academic as well as advisory assistance to the learners. They also prepare equipment and supervise examinations to the local learners. In other words, they function as the ears and eyes of the instructor. However, having such trained and highly qualified personnel requires budgets and advanced equipment.

D. **Technical Support Team:** Distance learning programme requires an army of technicians who work behind scenes and provide technical support to different parties in the system. Basically they register students and subjects, provide textbooks, protect students' rights, write progress reports, manage technical resources, etc.

E. **Administrators:** They supervise the entire system and make decisions about various administrative matters. They have to be close to the technical support team to ensure the ultimate use of the resources within the institution.

Independent Learning Skills

To ensure the ultimate benefit of any distance learning programme, students enrolled in such a programme need to have most, if not all, of the following self-study skills and strategies:

- A. **Selection Strategies:** Learners should have, or develop, the ability to specify what needs reading. Different texts should not be read at the same time for better concentration and thus more effective recall of information. Learners are also advised not to store whatever they read as this would result in huge quantities of information which may not necessarily be relevant.
- B. **Reading Strategies:** Since learners who are involved in distance learning programmes are either working or cannot attend regular classes for one reason or another compared to ordinary students, they have to develop some basic reading skills and strategies which will help them save time and make the most of their readings. For instance, they should first analyze the content to its basic components or sub-ideas. After that, they have to decide on the main idea(s). These could then be summarized and rephrased in simpler and easy to remember phrases. Diagrams may be used to show the relationships between related concepts.
- C. **Comprehension and Self-Evaluation Strategies:** This takes place during reading. Learners should stop occasionally and check their understanding. A very practical way to do this is by writing questions while reading and trying to answer them at the end.
- D. **Writing Strategies:** This entails deciding on a number of things such as the writing topics, reasons for and themes of the writing tasks, the number of pages or words required, references to be used, title and subtitles, organization of information, etc.
- E. **Dealing with Challenging Subjects:** This requires proper understanding of the title, reading the chapters' abstracts, understanding how the content of each chapter is arranged, making use of any pictures, tables and/or diagrams available.
- F. **Revision and Test-Taking Skills:** Finally, learners have to revise what they have studied occasionally and adopt a self-evaluation approach. They also have to familiarize themselves with the types of test that they are going to take by looking at some old test scripts. Keeping a company of some outstanding students to resort to when necessary is also helpful.

G. Time and Self-Management Skills: A distance learner should also learn how to manage his/her time and keep a schedule of study and examinations.

H. Relaxation Techniques: After all, it is essential that learners take rest after each subject to give themselves time to digest what has been studied. Relaxation techniques, stress management, and positive attitude towards learning are of importance to all learners, especially those who are involved in distance learning programmes.

Distance Learning Requirements

Requirements on the learners' side can be categorized as basic and additional. There are two basic requirements: a high speed and storage capacity computer and high speed internet access. Additional devices such as a video server and digital camera are required whenever there is video conferencing or a medical surgery to be aired alive to all students over the internet.

Factors of Success

1. Learners have to adapt themselves to the nature of distance learning education and the technology involved.
2. Interaction between learners and their instructors has to be in its best to ensure the maximum benefit, support, and feedback on homework and project assignments.
3. Material developers have to ensure that the subjects they are offering their learners are up-to-date and as interesting and practical to the learners as possible.
4. Instructors have to be computer and internet literate.
5. Any distance learning programme should gain accreditation from a well-known academic institution or university.

The Open University Initiatives

Britain and the British universities are leading in the field of distance learning and open universities. Some of the leading universities in this field are The British Open University, The Commonwealth Open University, South Bank University (www.ubs.ca.ku) and the University of London. The British Open University is the largest in the U.K. It was established in 1969. It offers various on-line degrees through its website (<http://www.open.ac.uk>). These include Education, Humanities, Languages, computer sciences, Mathematics, etc.

In the United States, there are a number of universities which offer distance learning programmes. For instance, the American Open University is leading in this field. It was established in May 1995. It is an independent educational, Islamic and non-profit

institution supervised by a group of professionals specialized in Education and Islamic Law (Shari'a.) Other leading universities are University of Phoenix (www.uopx.edu/online) and City University.

In the Arab World, however, there are a number of initiatives in the field of distance learning and open universities. These initiatives, nevertheless, remain insufficient compared to the ever increasing demands for this kind of education. The Arab Open University, based in Kuwait, is one of few universities which offer distance learning programmes. Courses are delivered to learners over the internet, utilizing a two-way communication technique which involves sending pictures, sounds, and using e-mails in addition to its many teaching centres that spread across the Arab countries. The university website is (www.arabou.org). Other initiatives in this area are Dubai Internet City University, which was opened in 2000, the Syrian Virtual University, opened in 2002, The Jerusalem Open University, and the E-learning initiative at Sultan Qaboos University (www.squ.edu.om)

Conclusion

The big challenge which faces all countries in the world, in general, and the Arab world, in particular, is the large number of illiterate people who have no, or very limited, access to formal education. For various reasons, including financial, geographical, and perhaps social, many people in many countries can not enroll in regular classes but have the desire to pursue their education. Distance learning and in many places around the world has introduced itself as a practical alternative to the traditional and regular schooling. It has proven to fit these groups of people for one basic reason: they are able to study and at the same time maintain their roles as parents, employees, etc.

The increasing demand for distance learning and the many successful initiatives in the field call upon both governments and the private sector companies to share the responsibility and expand the range and scope of this service by opening more distance learning centres and train professional teachers and technicians to run these centres.

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