



Commentary:

Revisiting the Definition of Distance Education*

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage, there is a growing realisation about the importance of distance education to improve access and equity, and to support teaching and learning at all levels. At the same time, we see the emergence of new terms which can cause confusion about the differences and similarities of terms such as ‘emergency remote teaching’, ‘online learning’, ‘blended learning’, ‘hybrid learning’, ‘hyflex learning’, which are often used interchangeably and indiscriminately. My advice is– “let’s not get carried away by old wine in new bottles!”

So, let us revisit the history of the definition of distance education. For many readers of the COL blog or for distance education professionals, this may be repetitive. In distance education, repetition is considered a virtue as the learner needs to be constantly reminded about learning through definitions, explanations, analogies, illustrations, recapitulations, and summaries. Experts indicate that references to the earliest practice of distance education appeared in an advertisement for short-hand training in the *Boston Gazette* published way back in 1728. In the beginning, distance education was referred to by different names such as correspondence education and independent learning. In fact, the International Council for Open and Distance Education founded in 1938 was known as the International Council for Correspondence Education. Its current name was adopted at the World Conference held in Vancouver in 1982. Writing in the 1980’s, Desmond gave an

analytic definition of distance education, which includes five key characteristics:

- Quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner in the learning process (this distinguishes it from traditional face-to-face education).
- Influence of an educational organisation in planning, designing, and delivering of learning resources and opportunities (this distinguishes it from private self-study).
- Predominant use of technical media for delivery of learning content.
- Provision of two-way communication between student and teacher, and student and student.
- Quasi-permanent absence of learning groups (making it possible for arranging face-to-face meet-up for didactic and socialisation purposes).

Later Jim Taylor classified distance teaching and learning into five generations¹: correspondence (primarily dependent on text delivered by post), multimedia (use of print, audio, video, computer-based training), tele-learning (use of televised courses, radio and interactive video conferences), flexible learning (interactive multimedia online, web-based courses), and intelligent flexible learning (web-based, multimedia and automated response system). Today, with the use of chatbots, artificial intelligence and intelligent tutoring systems along with traditional technologies such as print, these classifications may not be useful. However, they help us have clarity – that distance education means different things to different people. In 2001, I identified online learning as the new generation of distance education² in the evolutionary growth of open, flexible and distance learning!

According to Michael Moore, the distance in distance education is transactional, a function of ‘structure’ and ‘dialogue’ that a course offers. So, the media used can influence the structure and dialogue in a

¹ <https://eprints.usq.edu.au/136/1/Taylor.pdf>

² http://oasis.col.org/bitstream/handle/11599/47/2001_Mishra_Designing-Online-Learning.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y

course, and if it is truly a distance education course, the course design should consider the characteristics identified by Keegan. Also, historically, we know that distance education has a strong theory and practice background, particularly its focus on designing instructionally sound learning materials, and systematic planning and management required for the effective delivery of quality courses. In fact, Otto Peters called distance education as ‘industrialisation of teaching and learning’. When Taylor’s fifth generation of distance education became popular as online learning, it was due to the flexible affordances offered by technology that helped learners to access teaching and learning asynchronously. It also increased the two-way communication and created opportunities for strong teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence fostering the community of inquiry³ model in course design and delivery. As such, what is common for distance education and online learning is that both require substantial planning, design and preparation before delivery.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the educational community to embark on emergency remote teaching, which is “a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances”⁴. This also means some remote teaching solutions are used to deliver the courses (whether it was initially face-to-face or blended or hybrid). As such, these courses used synchronous technologies and replicated classroom pedagogies and were not expected to be like robust online or distance education courses – planned, designed and deliberate. Most of these offerings can satisfy Keegan’s five characteristics of distance education. But, in principle as they did not follow the theory and practice of the design and would not necessarily qualify as distance education. One such principle is that course design in distance education follows the deliberate practice to understand learner access to technology and accordingly use a mix of media to deliver teaching and learning. During the pandemic, there was no opportunity for analysis and instead of increasing access, online learning exacerbated the inequities already present in the system.

³ <https://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/890/1826>

⁴ <https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/>

Today, online learning is offered by many organisations other than the traditional educational providers. The emergence of massive open online courses (MOOC) taken up by many in the last one year has shown that online learning is a great lifelong learning opportunity that can help achieve sustainable development goal 4⁵. Can these courses qualify as distance education courses? Yes and no. Yes, because most meet the five characteristics, but no, as the definition of distance education has an inherent assumption that the qualifications offered by the supporting organisation are recognised. So, when the MOOCs receive credits for qualifications, I consider these as distance education. Thus, online learning offered in general under the aegis of a private provider supported by an educational institution, while following the principles, may still not be considered legitimate for calculating the gross enrolment ratio in a country. This calls for the need for a qualification framework that recognises online micro-credentials (such as MOOCs and other forms of online learning). In India, the MOOCs are mostly offered as graduate level courses, where up to 40% of credits earned can be used for earning a degree at an educational institution.

What about blended learning? As it is often defined, blended learning is thoughtful use of face-to-face and online learning⁶. This means, blended learning can be considered as a form of distance education having all the five characteristics of distance education.

When open is used along with distance education, it is focusing on 'opening up' educational opportunities by reducing barriers. Distance education enhances access to quality educational opportunities, but it is not necessary for all distance education courses to follow the principles of open education⁷. At the Commonwealth of Learning, our focus is on open and distance learning to increase access to and improve the quality of education and training. While many other organisations are now offering online courses, they are not necessarily practicing distance education. Some of these are for private self-study for professional development and lifelong learning. COL's role is

⁵ <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>

⁶ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/>

⁷ <https://www.col.org/news/understanding-open-education/>

unique, and we focus on working with governments and educational institutions to use the best practices of open and distance learning to bring quality education and training to the last person in the queue.

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