DISTANCE EDUCATION - The School of Tomorrow

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ABSTRACT:

This paper reviews the importance and demerits of distance education and provides a short history of it - from its beginnings to the current day and how it can affect the future of students.

INTRODUCTION:

In 2017, around 19.8 million students enrolled in courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Of these, 6.6 million (~33%) enrolled in some form of distance education or online learning courses (educationdata.org).

While it is at the pinnacle of its popularity today, distance education has been providing people access to learning resources for centuries. Read on to learn how distance education is defined and how it has evolved over time.

Distance education is the practice of using correspondence, either written or virtual, to learn. With this practice, a teacher in Kolkata could provide instruction to students in India and the world over. Geographical restrictions have been eliminated by distance education. So, students living too far away to attend classes can now get access to the same with the click of a button. It also assists those who cannot take classes during usual hours because of work or other engagements.

During its inception, distance courses were pre-prepared materials that would be mailed through the postal service to learners who could not attend universities either because of geography or due to the high cost of tuition and boarding. These early courses were called correspondence courses. The earliest known correspondence education course is said to have begun in England in 1844. Isaac Pitman delivered his short-hand course via correspondence, making use of the newly established postal system. This postal system in turn was aided by the railway system that was making travel across long distances in England more convenient and faster than ever before.

(Shrestha, 1997).

In the early days, there was no scope for direct teacher-student interaction, such as face-to- face meetings or instruction. Pitman's course allowed students to get their work corrected and mailed back to them. The student would mail an order form and in return would receive a set of printed course materials. The student would review materials and return assignments in the mail, which Pitman would grade. This provided minimal opportunities for students to clear doubts regarding assignments or have a direct discussion with their teacher as it would take days or weeks to correspond. Crucially, however, this provided students with feedback from their teacher which must have been encouraging for them.

William Rainey Harper, a Ph.D. scholar from the University of Chicago wanted to take classes in Hebrew, Sanskrit, and Chaldees. He arranged for his own summer school on the school premises drawing 88 students in the first 2 years. His course became very popular and to supplement this course he started a correspondence school for those who could not attend in person. He also opened a publishing office that printed lesson outlines and manuals. His ideas were so revolutionary that John D Rockefeller supported his plans for an undergraduate college of Hebrew and other languages.

GROWTH OF CORRESPONDENCE COURSES:

By the late 1800s, colleges and universities began offering correspondence courses, including other reputed schools such as Baylor University. With distance education growing in popularity, the number of schools offering the courses also grew. During the 1950s, schools all around the world depended heavily on correspondence courses to support their on-campus student bodies. With the rapid growth of technology and the courses becoming more and more convenient, the mode of distance education shifted towards the internet. The first fully online credit course delivered entirely via the internet was the brainchild of Dr. Linda Harasim of the University of Toronto. The graduate school offered a course on the topic "Women and Computers in Education", dealing with gender issues in the field of educational computing.

EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION FROM THE 1900s TO THE PRESENT DAY:

The mid-to-late 1900s brought many technological advances, such as television and radio to widespread audiences. No longer just for the wealthy, most families were able to own these items. Dan Q Posin, a physics professor at DePaul University became one of the stars of the era starring in several educational television series including Out of This World, The Universe Around Us and Dr. Posin Giants, long before Carl Sagan, Brian Cox and Neil deGrasse Tyson made television a popular tool of learning.

Colleges also began delivering instruction through both mediums. This was a significant juncture in distance education after which faculty- to-student communication became viable for the first time. Students were now able to supplement their learning from courses by watching an educational television program or listening to a corresponding lecture on the radio. Improvements in communication technology have increased the popularity of distance education worldwide.

BENEFITS:

Distance education has been successful in broadening the scope of education and training for students coming from all walks of life since its flexible scheduling alleviates the time constraints of regular courses, leaving people more time to take care of their commitments and responsibilities.

Moreover, distance education has been proven to help in the improvement of communication skills among students.

1. 24×7 Access:

The best thing about distance education is that one can learn it from anywhere and at any time. It does not matter in which part of the country the student resides, they can join the course and start learning. Even if the course is offered by an international school one can easily get access to course material even if they are a citizen of a different country. Moreover, students have accessibility to the course materials throughout the day.

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2. The flexibility of Time:

Normally, distance education offers the flexibility of time. It gives complete freedom to choose one's own time for taking up the course. If they do not have time in the day then you can learn at night or at some other convenient time because the only thing that they need is a device with an internet connection. One does not need to go in person and submit anything. Time is the most precious commodity and one can save it by taking up distance learning.

3. No Commuting:

Distance education takes away the hassle of daily commuting. Students can save valuable hours of the day and also cut down on the cost of conveyance by distance education. The entire college is in one's bedroom and they do not have to go out.

4. Lower Costs:

This is another great advantage of distance education. The total cost incurred for joining Distance College is comparatively less than that of a full-time college course. This is especially beneficial for students who hail from economically disadvantaged communities and do not have the financial security to afford a regular college course. With the advent of cheap internet facilities, students can learn with minimal equipment and cost. In India, where the cost of the internet is very low, students can invest minimal resources to start learning online.

5. Promotes Equality:

An important benefit of using web-based communication tools is to reinforce in the students the virtue of equality. Each student has the same opportunity and this takes away problems such as the number of students in a class, teacher favouritism, racial and gender biases. Introverted students are more willing to take part in a measure of anonymity. This helps the students feel more empowered to express their ideas.

6. Provides Quicker Methods to Access and Evaluate Student Progress:

Before the advent of online education, teachers would have to physically correct the course materials of the students. With improved technology and the popularity of software such as Google Classroom and Google Forms, teachers can evaluate the progress of students by simply running their work through a

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computer. In the case of MCQs, the answers and results are given instantly on submission and teachers can get the data directly through Spreadsheets. This reduces the burden of checking countless assignments and worksheets.

7. Reduces Time spent on Administrivia:

With the benefit of online course materials at the disposal of students and teachers alike, the requirement for needless paperwork has been eliminated. This serves the additional benefit of saving paper made by cutting down trees. Furthermore, students save valuable time and money that they would have to spend on printing and collating learning materials.

8. No Minimum Cut-off Marks:

There are many cases where we see that a student can't pursue a specific course or get into the desired college due to high cut-off marks. This is because top colleges have a fixed number of seats for offline traditional class mode and they always want the cream of the students for their college leading to neck-to-neck competition. Students sometimes feel their career has been destroyed as they can't get into their desired college. This can be avoided by online courses as there are no seat limits and all students can take up desired courses from their dream college with just a press of a button.

9. No Age Limit:

As the famous saying goes "there is no age limit for learning and the person who has stopped learning is as good as dead", online courses help us in learning be it for children or the elderly. We see some children who have an interest in a specific subject but can't pursue it as it is not available for them in their schools. On the other hand, we sometimes see elderly people who have not been able to pursue the desired course in their college- age due to marriage. In some cases, the elderly people want to learn a subject to improve communications with their grandchildren or teach them or to alleviate other hindrances and are too shy to attend the course now with younger students. For them, online correspondence course can have a huge impact in enabling them to continue learning.

This helps both in the process of learning and enables the elderly to spend quality time with their grandchildren by learning and discussing the current meta.

10. Eliminates the Requirement for Teaching the Same Topic every Year:

With the benefit of recording technology at their disposal, teachers can record their lectures and upload them on data-bases and drives for students to use as per their convenience. Students can play them multiple times at their preferred speed for crystal clear understanding. An added benefit of this is that teachers do not have to repeat the same lecture every term. They can simply refer to their previously recorded materials.

DEMERITS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:

1. Inaccessible to the Poor:

In many poor, developing countries, internet access, and access to mobile phones are still restricted to those who can afford them. For countries like Zimbabwe, which is the most expensive country for data where a gigabyte averages \$75.20, it is financially viable for only the wealthy. This goes against the ethos of distance education which has historically provided people from disadvantaged communities with education opportunities.

2. Not Convenient for People Unaccustomed to Technology:

Many people, especially the elderly, are unaccustomed to using computers and phones. For them, learning new things at an old age seems like a nightmare, and most struggle to cope with the present technology.

3. Absence of Stable Internet Connection:

A stable internet connection is necessary for uninterrupted communication. Places around the world have various degrees of internet speed. It is not uniform and without access to a stable internet, attending live classes is impossible.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND WOMEN:

From its very start, distance education has been intrinsically linked with women's education. Anna Eliot Ticknor (1823-1896) founded the first correspondence school in the United States. Her home saw the initiation of an educational revolution in Boston in 1873. Ticknor's learning society gave women the opportunities to learn regardless of their social background, financial situation, and geographical location. Through the collective effort of numerous brave women, she was able to lead a "Silent University". The enduring legacy of her beloved society still precedes the importance of her activism. Her school, The Society to Encourage Studies at Home, has never been credited by the field of adult education but her legacy is that she provided numerous women the ability to study via distance education.

Ticknor may have been a pioneer in the field of women's education but the contributions of women to this field are in no way restricted to her only. As mentioned above, the University of Toronto's Dr. Linda Harasim succeeded in dealing with gender issues and educational computing in the very first fully online internet course ever. The notion of using a conference via the internet in which students learn by collective effort was a foreign idea at the time. Dr. Harasim and her co- professor Dr. Dorothy Smith developed an online collaborative learning system that is in use even today. The course was so popular that students would fill in applications to attend classes even after the college had stopped taking admissions.

Dr. Harasim's course is important in a wider context as well. Roxanne Hiltz at the New Jersey Institute of Technology had run blended courses since the early 1970s and another woman, Dr. Marlene Scardemalia, developed CSILE (Computer Supported Intentional Learning Systems) in 1986.

Even today, the educational opportunities of women in many developing countries are limited. For them, distance education is a boon and it will continue to provide them with opportunities to learn. Social discrimination and sexism have held women back for centuries. Distance education serves to quell such evils today. Therefore, the efforts of women like Dr. Harasim and Dr. Ticknor has finally paid off towards the progress of women's equality in every aspect of society.

RELEVANCE IN THE PRESENT DAY:

With COVID-19 forcing most educational institutes to take a step towards online education, distance learning has perhaps never been more important.

THE FUTURE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION:

With the advancement of various teaching systems, learning has evolved along with the technological affordances available. In the early days of the internet, study models were born out of one-to-one and one-to-many models. A more constructed and systematic education system took flight in a Web 1.0 environment. Web 2.0 models led to an increase in many-to-many models and progress has not stagnated since. Experts have predicted a Web 3.0 environment in which semantic models will flourish. Hendler (2009) speculates that in the future augmented reality and increased capability of location awareness will completely revolutionize the field. This has already started to manifest itself in AI-powered robots that have made distance education a feasible method for students with disabilities. As its history suggests, advances in distance education are not likely to reach a point of saturation. As systems become more and more sophisticated, we are likely to see concerns about privacy arising. But with time, such fears shall be quelled by stricter and more efficient security laws. It is already apparent that in an increasingly globalized world, connectivism is the approach that will reap the most benefits. It is to be seen whether distance education can make the step up towards becoming the primary mode of learning among individuals.

CONCLUSION:

Although distance education is not a new trend but has got a huge increase due to developing technology with the increased use of desktop, phone and TV simultaneously in the future, distance education will emerge as the primary means of learning and become even more viable. In its inception, distance education faced stiff resistance from traditional quarters which were not accepting towards change. That has significantly changed. People often misuse money and spend on unimportant goods and commodities. Saving merely a fraction of such expenses would allow people to allocate their money for distance learning. And technology is being properly utilized in audio, video texts, graphics, animation, and simulation. Distance education is constantly evolving and it is yet to reach a point of stasis as the meta is constantly changing over time with simultaneous improvement of technology. Progressive institutions are inventing the latest in technology and collating data in massive databases using supercomputers to provide distance education to an ever-growing population that endorses higher education out of traditional classroom settings.

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