

An Appraisal Look Over Distance Learning Through a New Medium: A Panacea

Morteza Teimourtash¹, Nima Shakouri² and Mojtaba Teimourtash³

Abstract

Changing people's lifestyle in the modern era does need paving the path in the new realm. Distance learning isn't dying — it's being assimilated into our institutions in something approaching a metamorphosis. The distinguishing point to be considered in the paper is that the term *distance* in distance learning is the main concern and the materials and the approach of providing learners with them is also concerned. In this regard, the paper is in an attempt to appraise and outline, besides the advantages of distant learning, the out-striking disadvantages that draw everybody's attention to it.

Keywords: distance learning, drop out, technology

1. Introduction

Distance learning or distance education, as the word 'distance' implies, takes place when the students are geographically remote from the educational institution at which they are registered. "The distance factor inherent in distance education has been identified as one of the major problems for students studying in such mode" (Suen & Parkes, 1996, cited in Lee & Chan, 2007, p. 86).

This geographical isolation significantly detracts from the need for social interactions and socio-cultural factors that are usually afforded by face-to-face situations and engagements (Lee & Chan, 2007).

¹ Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran, E-mail: teimourtash@irib.ir

² Roudbar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Iran. E-mail: shakouri.ni@gmail.com

³ Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Tehran, Iran.
E-mail: m.teimourtash@srbiau.ac.ir

It has been clear that one of the key elements to the effectiveness of learning is that learners should take full advantage of the interactive nature of the technology being used in modern era. In fact, distance learning is an undeniable source of gaining knowledge, and it is crucial for being engaged in the activation mode of that knowledge. Bringing learners frequently into action by asking questions, encouraging student presentations, getting students to talk to each other, reducing students' frustration and in other ways involving them fully in the teaching-learning process are not that much simple words that can be passed inadvertently. As to Berge (1992), the technology will not improve learning any more than a new schoolhouse will improve learning in our brick-and-mortar classrooms today. Can we teach old dogs new tricks? Perhaps the tricks are not new, just altered, updated, or revamped to suit another environment. We do not have to re-invent the wheel to train the teacher to teach at a distance; just re-structure the wheel, to travel into cyberspace. Changing people's lifestyle in the modern era needs paving the path in the new realm, but the rule of thumb is dominant (i.e. print-orientation). Henceforth, it is incumbent for policy makers, researchers, teachers, etc. to consider these factors in order to increase the efficiency of distance learning. Henceforth, the present paper through an appraisal look is going to outline the merits and demerits of distance learning in order to pave the way towards consolidating the stance of distance learning in education.

2. Review of Related Literature

Distance learning can be presented, both on-line and off-line, which yet not distinguished or differentiated precisely. On-line distance learning is presenting the required educational materials in an on-line mode, at a specific time and sometimes there is no playback or something, whereas off-line distance learning can be defined as any source of recorded materials, or in most cases the role of computerizing the learning materials is highlighted, or even the digitalizing role has a higher level of dynamicity.

It is worth mentioning that the source of knowledge may exist so far from where reference data bases are located. The issue of distance is of the least importance in a learning system. In Islamic religion, the prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has advised Muslim followers to go for the sources of knowledge, even if it is located in the farthest locations. So the issue of distance is not a hindrance. Even in some cases, the issue would enhance the importance level of the knowledge.

Of course even fifty years ago, the technological advancements were not that much improved, so the people living at ancient time would be recommended to travel so far in search of resources of knowledge.

In addition to the practical problems of contacting academic and administrative staff, obtaining study materials and gaining immediate access to resources such as laboratory equipment and library books, distance learners endure the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students, which can put a significant damper on their motivation and enthusiasm, (Hutton, 1998) or even ignore the crucial aspect of social interaction. However, distance learning often requires of the student a degree of initiative and mental resilience not always associated with learning in a classroom with a peer group and a teacher in attendance (Philpot 1997, cited in Talbot, 2007). More specifically, distance learning is any learning system where teaching behaviors are separated from learning behaviors:

The learner works alone or in a group, guided by study material arranged by the instructor in a location apart from students. Students have the opportunity to communicate with an instructor with the aid of a range of media (such as text, telephone, audio, video, computing and Internet technology, etc). (AACSB, 2007, p. 4)

Distance learning can occur in many configurations. It can be synchronous (i.e., instruction delivered and received simultaneously), or it may be asynchronous (i.e., instruction delivered and received at different times). Students may receive distance learning privately, or they may gather in groups/classes to receive it. (AACSB, 2007). Accordingly, Nipper (1989 cited in Davis, 2011) subdivides distance learning into three generations: first, the traditional correspondence model in which print is the sole medium for student/teacher communication; the second generation integrates print and other modern media such as audio/video cassettes and broadcast media into the distance study package; and the third generation of distance education, also known as interactive, multimedia distance education, places an emphasis on communication and learning as a social process typically through the addition of interactive media such as computer mediated communications.

It is worth mentioning that the features of gaining socio-cognitive language learning agendas are tried to be provided and mastered in the third generation of the classification above.

2.1 Characteristics of Distance Learning

Because distance learning places additional responsibilities on students, they need to be highly motivated and disciplined. The school should communicate student responsibilities and the nature of the commitment students must make to succeed in a distance learning program. (AACSB, 2007). Furthermore, to be successful, distance learning requires considerable organizational commitment. The school should establish policies and infrastructure including processes for continuous improvement for distance learning initiatives to achieve and maintain high-quality (AACSB, 2007, p.4). In fact, schools introducing distance learning should recognize that this could shift the focus of school educational efforts from traditional concern for teaching to a broader conception of effective instructional methods.

Due to the nature of the distance learning process, students need to take considerable responsibility in managing their own learning process, so they should be, initially, familiar with their own language learning behaviors; they are required to be trained in such respect. It is essential to explicitly communicate program expectations about student responsibilities in program announcements. In this regard, compared to conventional approaches, distance learners must assume greater responsibility for their learning, take more initiative in asking questions and obtaining help, be flexible, and be prepared to deal with technical difficulties. (AACSB, 2007)

Distance learning is fraught with the concept of power. Shneiderman (1993) stresses that computing and communication technologies have opened up new possibilities in the educational environment by empowering students in remarkable ways. Rumble (1995, cited in Sumner, 2000, p.278) brings up the power question when he contends that 'technology is the excuse for the distribution of power between managers and workers.

2.2. Shortcomings of Distance Learning

Formal institutions differ from the possibilities in distance learning, with regard to student pacing. In traditional activities, the learning time span is usually fixed for a particular learning segment. Distance learning, in some forms, allows the pacing to depend on each student. Each student takes a different time span to complete each segment, depending on the background and needs of the student. Time management can become a problem.

Time management can play a significant role for both learners and teachers in order to adapt themselves to the pace and objectives of the course being held in distance learning mode. This can lead to considerable frustration with the distance education experience, and/or result in feelings of inadequacy, as well as a lack of self-confidence (Wood, 1995). Wood further argues that students are at a considerable risk of withdrawing or failing unless they develop academic survival skills. Furthermore, distance learning has no control on attention-getting or attention-raising phase considered as crucial in the climax of teaching process.

"A plethora of recent language teaching innovations lend themselves to distance learning" (Linn, Linn, 1996). In effect, innovations and technologies are identified as the growth motivators for distance learning. In other words, distance learning is always linked to the concept of technology. Technology allows students to become much more engaged in constructing their own knowledge, and cognitive studies show that ability is the key to learning success. Consequently, the socio-cognitive features are being neglected somehow. Sumner (2000) holds " by creating a dependency on technology and by incessantly repeating the necessity of acquiring the skills needed for the so-called knowledge-based economy, such an education becomes education to serve economic purposes, not social purposes" (p. 277).

While opportunities exist for educators to benefit from technology, technology has its own limitations. Such limitations may cause deviations, demotivations, deconstruction for the students in paving the path of learning, and also isolate them from unpredictable or undesired learning behaviors. Learners are captured by a sense of frustration. Reber (1985, cited in Dzakoiria, 2004) claims frustration interferes with pursuing goals. According to Dzakoiria (2004), frustration demotivated learners and detracted them from learning. Eventually frustration can deter learners from using technology for learning.

There are many factors that could lead to frustrations in using technology. For example, when students fall behind or face lack of non-verbal cues, they will certainly get frustrated, in simple words, as communication has two sides, verbal and non-verbal; in distance learning, at least, verbal communication is covered, but the other side is not touched upon at all. Also the lack of sensitivity to the needs of learners might not be taken into account in the rush to embrace the new technology (Dzakoiria, 2004), and this will lead to frustration.

Within this knowledge-based economy, McMurtry (1998) argues that "no questions are asked, or encouraged, about the difference between knowledge and non-knowledge, not even by the academic world" (p. 277). Thus, investigating the potential pitfalls of distance learning, scholars (e.g. Kember, 1995. Peters 1992. David, 2011. etc.) several phenomena attributed to the nature of distance learning. In the following, the present writers briefly elaborate on them.

2.2.1 Drop Out

One eye-catching phenomenon of distance education is its high drop-out rate in comparison to full-time courses presented in a face-to-face mode (Kember, 1995). Peters (1992) defines drop-out "in terms of a student who ends studies prematurely and thus does not sit examination" (p.235). According to Peters (1992), distance learners have the highest risk of dropping out of their programs of study. This phenomenon – drop-out— can be attributed in large part to the isolation experienced by these students (Lee & Chan, 2007). Students of all kinds want to have a sense of belonging to a larger university community, rather than simply being an enrollee. Henceforth, distance learners endure the disadvantage of being unable to interact with other students, which can put a significant damper on their motivation and enthusiasm. As such, they are often denied the perception that they belong to a scholarly community (Galusha, 1997).

2.2.2 Lack of Contact

Another related concern for the distance student is the perceived lack of contact with, and timely feedback from, the lecturer.

Even more so than other students, distance learners are more likely to have insecurities about learning (Knapper, 1988) because there is no regular, classroom-based instructor contact, students may face difficulty in self-evaluating their progress and their understanding of the subject material (Lee & Chan, 2007). This notion is not confined to the teacher-student interactions only, most learners involved in the distance learning programs would also face the peer interactions which are prevalent in ordinary classrooms. This problem is somehow solved through the proper use of technologies such as telephone-conferencing and emailing, but to some scholars, this could not be called the remedy for that by stating that: "there was still no affordable way for them to participate in synchronous interactions which were flexible as to time, fluency and the number and composition of participating groups." (Kötter, Shield, & Rodine, 1999 cited in Hauck & Haezewindt, 1999, p. 47)

2.2.3. Lack of Experience

Another resounding issue in the distance education literature is the criticality of factoring into account the significant proportion of students who enroll with little or no experience in studying in this mode. This could in turn act as a hindrance. This problem is compounded by the fact that many of these students may have had little or no experience with tertiary study in general, and/or have had prolonged absences from study (Lee & Chan, 2007).

2.2.4. Lack of Flexibility on the Part of Policy Makers

Some distance students choose to study via distance education due to the need for autonomy, independence and flexibility. However, for many, there is no choice (David, 2011). Flexibility may be considered as a tricky concept, mostly used on the learners' part, but teachers, instructors and policy makers are also needed to show sufficient flexibility in order for learners to be involved in the process of learning/teaching interactions. Higher level of flexibility is best manifested through learning behaviors. To better appreciate the concept of flexibility, an example seems to remove the uncertainty. That is, most students cannot study on weekdays between nine to five.

If we consider students' tendency or preference in language learning, this might be quite contradictory. In fact, most students prefer to be able to access assistance when required. Reality is far from ideality. It is not that much accessible.

2.2.5. Lack of Knowledge on Technology

For distance education to be successful, faculty needed to be trained in the technology as well as the pedagogy of distance learning. Teaching online/offline is a new experience, different from teaching in the classroom. It requires a different set of skills and a different pedagogy. Maintaining a common streamline language through this new medium should not be and is not considered easy. Thus, lack of students' familiarity with the fundamental technology leads to frustration on the part of the learners and in turn, debilitates the process of learning, or even teaching.

Modern information technologies, including both synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools, have tremendous potential to help mitigate many of the aforementioned barriers, particularly those that fall into the categories relating to teacher contact and student support. Yet at the same time, used inappropriately and in the absence of appropriate strategies, they run the risk of further isolating and alienating distance learners, in addition to introducing technical overhead that acts as a further impediment to learning. This paper reports on an effort at the authors' institution, a regional university and Australia's largest provider of distance education, to explore the potential of using carefully designed podcasts containing audio supplementary material to help alleviate the feelings of isolation experienced by distance learners, and to promote inclusivity for them within a mixed-mod

Nevertheless, Morgan and O'Reilly (1999) urge educators to view distance education from an "opportunity" model rather than a "deficit" model (p. 23), reminding them that distance learners bring a wealth of experience, abilities, enterprise and resources to learning encounters that can and should be leveraged.

2.2.6. Lack of an Operational Approach in Teaching/Learning Process

Teaching/learning process needs an effective, in simple words an operational, approach in order to be able to activate the prior knowledge, hence to flourish the new one in the minds of language learners. Due to the dynamic features of learning a language, scholars are not able to construct a unitary framework on teaching/learning realm, however whatever has been done by now is not on the firm ground. Operational approach may consist of an opportunity for learners of a language to make an evaluation on what they have covered or learned so far in a dynamic situation. Dynamic situation means an unpredictable, friendly, human-human, cooperative, reflective, and constructing environment which all are present in normal classroom settings. Doing a list of drills, even communicative ones, is not meant experiencing a dynamic situation in language learning realm. In distance learning, providing a dynamic learning situation, in order to fulfill at least one of the main features of human language, is ignored, not fair to say rejected, in either of online and offline DL.

2.2.7 Lack of Socio-Cognitive Feature

A language is the best manifestation of how a group of people think and interact. The -cognitive feature of a language is focusing on the logic aspect of understanding, and the socio- feature of a language is the side of the interaction which learners of a language should focus on it precisely as the main objective in their learning process. DL has, definitely, stressed out the cognitive feature in learning a language, but, definitely, diminishes the significant role of socio- feature of learning a language. No room, in DL, has been left for learners to experience a dynamic and tangible environment of having production phase in comparison to the ordinary language classroom settings.

2.2. 8 Lack of faceposure

Language is a medium in order to provide a chance for the practitioners to communicate their thoughts, however, communication is not just verbally; non-verbal communication is highlighted by scholars in order to fulfill the act of communication.

The fundamental aspect of non-verbal communication is to have an opportunity in which communicators could have a face-to-face exposure to facilitate the transferring thoughts. In DL, the language medium is not going to be fulfilled. It seems DL is an effective method in different subject matters which need a one-way communication, a limited communication in which instructors teach and students may ask some questions in immediate or next session, but needless to say that in language teaching/learning process having a live sense of communication—face exposure—, is necessarily needed to make the instructors sure that they are in the right track in their path.

2.2. 9 Lack of immediate error correction

In the realm of language teaching/learning, the medium of language should be frequently spotted and corrected in order to assure the learners and the teacher that the medium is kept in the right track of development in an acceptable pace. In DL, this required aspect of the process of language learning/teaching is provided, but not in an unpredictable mode, whereas in normal traditional classrooms, this is not the case.

There exist several effective strategies in error correction in language teaching, recast for example, but the point here is that the type of providing error correction modules in DL approaches are really limited to the level one and two of the following table:

1	linguistically	X	functionally	X
2	linguistically	X	functionally	√
3	linguistically	√	functionally	X

Types of errors

How does DL language teaching/learning react to and deal with the third row? This type of error is exemplified in transferring level of errors.

2.2.10 Lack of Production Skills

DL can focus on the linguistic competence and provide learners with a wide range of materials to make sure that the input phase is thoroughly fulfilled, and regarding the receptive skills, i.e. listening and reading, so many effective steps are taken and the desired objectives are achieved, but no guarantee is delivered over the productive skills, i.e. speaking and writing. Due to previous shortcomings, all features of productive skills are not covered. Productive skills, in nature, are achieved through direct exposures, at least, in a small society. As far as performance is concerned, in productive skills, rather than sticking to competence in receptive skills, having no dynamic feature of learning a language make the condition hard enough for a learner to pave the way through such complicated medium.

3. Conclusion

Clearly, distance learning isn't dying — it's being assimilated into our institutions in something approaching a metamorphosis. This isn't merely semantics. The change is more complex than adopting a new term such as distributed learning and discarding the old term distance learning. We believe that in a few years we won't talk about distance or distributed learning. Instead, technologies will contribute to the mix of tools and methods we use to support learning, on campus and off. The authors believe that we've entered that period where we stop talking about distance and start using the knowledge the distance learning movement has provided to serve all our students.

The recent reports critical of distance learning are indicators of change in the academy. The assimilation of distance learning will change our institutions in ways that will make us all uncomfortable. Nonetheless, in many cases these changes provide challenges that will reinvigorate our teaching, research, and service roles.

The problems mentioned in this paper are not those of the impeding factors, but the other way round. None of these problems are impossible to solve. Careful planning, innovative strategies and the appropriate use of technology can solve many of these problems and make distance education a rewarding experience for both students and teachers.

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