DISTANCE EDUCATION: A Second Best in Learning?

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INTRODUCTION

Why people want to learn?

Behind demand for learning, utilitarians should search for the need that learning satisfies. This need is highly complicated, including the prospect of social and economic success, personal ambitions and self-respect, enthusiasm or simply obligation.

No matter which motive is the strongest, no one denies that education and lifelong training are gaining grounds in the rapidly accelerating world of today. Spectacular changes in technology, economy and work structures increase the need for a high rate of specialization and competitiveness of human forces. At the same time, due to these changes, knowledge acquired in early years of age becomes obsolete several times in the course of a lifetime. For those who want to remain competitive there is an almost permanent, urgent need for more education, for better education and for a longer lasting education. However it is not always realistic to acquire the required knowledge in a conventional way. Distance education (DE) provides a promising solution to this problem.

DISTANCE EDUCATION (Definition and Characteristics)

DE is a general term. It covers a wide range of knowledge acquiring approaches and techniques with one basic characteristic in common: the distance between learner and teacher. Attempting a more strict definition it is a system and a process, which connects learners to distributed sources of knowledge.

DE has emerged to satisfy the will for learning in those cases in which conventional education cannot be approached, either because of time and distance limitations or because of the existence of specific needs.

DE in our days has various new appearances. The enormous potential of information technology helps in developing highly diversified forms of DE, which are friendly, flexible, interactive and easily accessible. With such properties, it is not at all surprising why, in a relatively short time, DE has adapted to a great variety of different needs and has risen to an unpredictable level of usage.

For DE implementation it is necessary to have a "medium" or a mix of media which allow the flow of knowledge from teacher at distance to learner. Such media are the following:

- Post (printed mater, magnetic and optical storage)
- Radio
- Telephone
- Television (standard, cable, satellite)
- Internet (On line Communication facilities -Synchronous methods,
- Educational material and communications stored -Asynchronous methods)

Amongst them, Internet promises to lead to a revolution in DE being highly powerful, widely expanding, cheap medium of almost unlimited capabilities. In the following discussion DE using Internet will be considered.

Apart from the variations attributed to the media and technologies applied, within the field of DE programs there are wide differences in the contents of DE subjects, in the level of studies offered, in the qualification to which they lead, in the level of working practices, in the terms and conditions of employment of staff, in production standards, in the range of student support services offered and in the range of sophistication of institutions involved.

There is a lot of discussion on the results of DE programs. One can find various studies with attempts to evaluate knowledge gained through DE, leading to promising conclusions: it seems that the natural human capacity for self- learning is high.

Yet, despite the enormous evolution of DE, only a few consider it as a real threat for traditional education. In the minds of policy makers, DE is an educational approach that complements traditional education. It is a useful tool only in those cases in which traditional education cannot be implemented. It is useful in the case of non- compulsory educational levels. This is why DE gains grounds in fields like life-long training. However, it seems that if compared with traditional education, DE is still a second rate method.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION (TE)

Traditional education uses conventional techniques, among which the predominant role is played by face -to- face teaching provided to class - organized learners.

Despite criticism, TE is the universally accepted approach for knowledge acquisition. It is difficult for anyone to deny its success which is the main reason why TE has survived over the centuries, without facing any urgent need to incorporate revolutionary innovations in its techniques.

Of course TE is not static. There is a constant evolution in its field, produced by various educational reforms. However its basic principles, _the elementary unit of teaching practice_ remain the same -_the traditional classroom_. This leads to the opinion that education is changing very slowly. That the classroom of the Victorian era is very similar if not identical to todays'. That in an era of technology very little of it has being used in the class up to now.

Yet, there is the opinion that TE is non- substitutable.

Accordingly, any non-traditional education is allowed to act on a complementary – somehow subordinate- basis.

DISTANCE EDUCATION VERSUS TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Distance Education, in its present forms, is gaining grounds in the field of learning. The main innovation is that it introduces not only new methods but also a new philosophy in education. DE techniques have an influence upon TE.

The student who uses Internet to get references for his project, applies DE techniques in a conventional education program. It is not an exaggeration to argue that traditional education will never be the same any more after the emergence of distance education while the two approaches (distance and traditional) show a noticeable convergence.

Does this mean that DE is an approach that promises a competitive alternative to TE? In other words could DE be contrasted with traditional education on a substitution basis? Let's make a list of the advantages/ disadvantages of the two approaches. Traditional education is considered superior for the following reasons:

> It introduces the learner to a new environment -the school or academic environment- which offers opportunities for socialization, something that can be even more important than knowledge acquisition in itself.
> It offers face-to-face interaction that seems to be non-substitutable.
> It allows the teacher to use his personal style in teaching.
> It offers to the learner the opportunity to participate in an organization that simulates hierarchical order of the society.

On the other hand, in its present forms, DE has a series of advantages which justify widening of its applications:

> It uses application of both, synchronous and asynchronous techniques
> It allows synchronous facilities to become asynchronous.
> It allows the potential learner to attend a made - to- measure course.
> It uses educational material which has been well prepared, hence it is of high quality
> It increases acquaintance with technology, hence it gives to the learners a know-how which might be useful for them in the future
> It is less expensive under certain circumstances.

SUBSTITUTION or COMPLEMENTARILY?

Face to Face Interaction
It seems that among the advantages of TE the socialization and face-to-face interaction possibility are the strongest. The socialization point seems an indisputable issue at present. A lot is said about the magic channel of personal live teaching. Most of us –I hope- have experienced the complete satisfaction from an enlightened (as well as enlightening) inspired (as well as inspiring) teacher. However most of us –I believe_ have also the experience of a sharp and disappointing fall of the face-to-face charm because the teacher was badly prepared, or inexperienced or simply in a bad mood. Most of us, to my opinion, have met the case in which face-to face teaching was useless to some students because either they were physically absent or they were _only physically_ present.

But even under normal circumstances (of good and experienced teachers and of students that pay attention), it is questioned whether face – to – face teaching on its own is adequate to guarantee knowledge acquisition. Most educational systems consider that knowledge is gained if, in addition to teaching at school, work is done at home on an individual basis, using educational material which is prepared beforehand (books, notes, electronic material etc). In other words, no matter how important the part of synchronous learning is, it is necessary to be complemented by asynchronous learning.

In cases like the above, the traditional educational system's comparative advantage proves to be of minor or even of no importance at all.

Socialization
Of course proponents of TE could argue that even if face-to-face teaching can be substituted by distance techniques, DE does not allow for any "socialization". Socialization is a strong argument in favour of TE. It is one of the main reasons why DE is concentrated in satisfying learning needs mainly of professionals and adults and less of young learners. For the latter the school environment has a lot to offer. Schools provide a

simulation of the pattern of "normal" society and this gives students non substitutable experiences that will help them to live a normal life in the future world.

But for what kind of future world are we talking about?

If we talk about a world in which the basic social structures are those of today, then it is true that school life provides a good preparation. But in the future world, structures could change radically. In such a case it is not sure if TE prepares better than DE for a society in which one should adapt to distance work, distance shopping, distance production and all the new needs of an information world.

Moreover, there is a strong skepticism about school's social role.

The structure of schooling embodies a hidden curriculum that provides a metaphor for human behaviors and relations. Schooling gives strong messages about power, authority, obedience, hierarchy, and related behaviors with the teacher cast in the role of priest, counsellor, judge and parent. School leads to the reproduction of this model in perpetuity. If this model is not perfect, then TE could be blamed for conservatism.

In such a case DE (blamed in general for not promoting socialization) could be considered if not a preferable approach at least a less evil one.

Distribution of Ideas
Nevertheless, no matter how strict is the curriculum in a school , in our democratic world, teachers at schools have to some extent the "freedom" to apply their own teaching style and to express their perspective of beliefs and views. From this point of view, learners taught by a relatively large number of TE teachers have the opportunity to get influences from different sources.

On the other hand, DE is less teacher intensive i.e. a teacher can teach a much greater number of people and teaching material is distributed to a much greater number of students. Hence there is an alleged danger that a small number of instructors "pass" their views to a large number of learners with the possibility of biasing public opinion.

This drawback of DE could be overcome if DE' s aim becomes not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the encouragement of creativity, the development of critical thought and the strengthening of resistance against passivity among the members of technologically developed societies.

Technology
Finally there is the issue of technology.
Many believe that one should learn using technology without necessarily learning about technology. The processes and contents of a subject is our main goal in a learning process. Technology is but a tool. It is adequate to use the tool without knowing necessarily the basic principles of how it operates.

However technology is "boiling" around us and there is no way to ignore it. A certain level of technical knowledge is required almost everywhere. It is necessary to have information on the technological potentials that we have in our hands. They help not only in complementing the learning process, which is in progress. We may apply them in our next activity. In many situations involving DE, the effectiveness of the scheme is in direct correlation with the end users technical skills.

Technology carries a mystery and certain magic. Channelling people's admiration and awe for technology as motivation for learning is an admissible, even if temporary trick.

CONCLUSIONS

We have entered a new era.
We have advances in technology and we expect more to come
We have new ideas about teaching and we expect them to be more widespread.
We have changes in social standards, some for better some for worse.

As already stated, reforms in education are rare and not global. DE – by introducing an entirely new philosophy – could be considered as promising such a reform. Could we afford to relax and continue considering it as a subordinate educational complement of minor importance?

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