Distance Education
As A Challenging Concept In Sociology

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary period is often characterised by unpredictable changes realised in all dimensions of sphere of human social life. Besides individuals, also societies with its all-institutional structures are compelled to change in order to survive within the process of globalisation and post-modern trends. Thus globalisation and post-modernism as the key terms that underlie the dynamics of societal change and technology another of the accelerative force of change agent have defined the process of change as a whole. Education as also societal institution has been in this process of change. Strategies which aim to cope with accelerative change have became much important not only important for individuals but also institutions.

Common demands of both institutions and individuals to meet the needs of change necessitate the search of new educational environment that solves the problem in access, equity, excellence and funding. And distance education with the means of new information and communicative educational technology has emerged as a leading strategy for meeting needs of change drived by concept of globalisation and postmodernism.

In this article, it is critically aimed to examine sociological meaning of distance education as a challenging advantageous of new information and educational technology within the framework of societal implications of three main traditions- Postmodern, Marxian, Functionalist.

INTRODUCTION

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DISTANCE EDUCATION WITHIN THE CONCEPT
OF GLOBALIZATION IN POSTMODERN APPROACH

The current period in which distance education exist have difficult question of interpretation. And in order to understand postmodern implications of distance education in the globalized conjecture, it's inevitable to outline some of the key socio-economic and cultural changes which are held to constitute the condition of postmodernity in the present period. According to Giddens, the economic technological and cultural changes that constitute a condition of late modernity represent already existing trends. For others (e.g., Harvey, 1991; Lyotard; 1984) these trends signify the inability to fulfil its aspiration promise, and represent what has come to be termed a condition of postmodernity. In effect, the only things that appear certain are the lack of certainty about how to characterise the increasing complexity of contemporary times and unprecedented uncertainty faced by all sectors of education. (Edwards and Usher, 1997, p. 1)

Today's world conjuncture has been characterised mostly in economic terms as a period of revitalised capital accumulation based on globalisation- the integration of economies of nation states through market mechanisms, accompanied by the transnational flexibility of capital and labour markets and, much more importantly, the new forms of information technology- all of which have helped bring about new forms of production, distribution and consumption. With the globalisation economic competitiveness necessitate a flexibility that has resulted in a shift toward post-fordist form of organisations in fragmented and volatile markets for goods and services (Murray, 1989). The greater integration of the global market, therefore, produces homoge-neity and heterogeneity simultaneously. Globalisation has meant to spread of the market economy, Western institutions and culture. (Giddens, 1990) Within the globalized economy, the paradox, which is between process of homogeneity and heterogeneity, is a manifest between regions for investments and the jobs with each emphasising its uniqueness and differences as a place that will offer the most advantageous condition for free-floating capital. Coca-Cola for example now refers to itself as "multi-local" rather than multi-national. (Featherstone, 1990) And so indigenous values are ,articulated with global identities within the dynamics of market mechanisms.

It's also argued that same paradox between process of homogeneity and heterogeneity is emerging from globalisation in cultural sphere. At one level, urban and suburban landscape became more identical with familiar icons such as golden arches of McDonald's and with certain media images instantly recogni-sable in every corner of globe. We are witnessing a process of global culture con-vergence, the production of universal cultural products and global market consumers. (Kenway, Bigum, and Fitzclarence, 1993, p. 118) An apparent common defiation and marketisation of culture come to the scene. The indigenous values of local have begun to gain "universal" values by stimulating globalisation either in market or cultural sphere of human life. However, after this process ends, emerging value is neither indigenous local value or nor a global value.

Changes in economical structures go changes in cultural forms. Firs, in the realms of culture narrowly defined (film, music entertainment, fashion, architecture and art) modernist seriousness and the search for deep, often hidden meaning is contested by postmodern "playfulness", depthlessness, eclecticism, and self-referentiality as the possibility of providing secure and deep meaning is overwhelmed by the profleration of signs of images. Second, we find it, in the significance of culture to economy social formations as a whole, where tight boundary between the realm of culture and realm of socio-economic. (Edwards and Usher, 1997, p. 4)

With the increased significance of culture, such as entertainment, the media and increasingly education itself became more significant in contemporary social formations and development of consumer society. (Field, 1994) The influence of fashion image taste pervades increasingly all-embracing consumer culture. Choices about the cloth we wear, the food we eat, how to decorate our homes the places we travel to, became the realisation of

taste and taste is educated through media and advertising as well as through conventional modes of education and training. Learning through life and lifelong learning became neither simply aspect of economic instrumentalisim nor an assertion of enlightened humanism but a means to constitute a meaningful life through consumption. (Edwards and Usher, 1997, p. 4)

In fact in this perspective people consumes not for needs alone but to under-lie their differences in their identity. And Consuming became a instrumental tool for constituting an identity or emphasising socio-cultural distinction they have. And thus either cultural identity of people or of even society is integrated into economical changes within the postmodern trends. The uncertainty, decentralisation, fragmentation and complexity as the key terms that underlie the postmodern understanding have been became central to people life style. Personal identities are permanently reconstructed with those terms that are mentioned above. And differences became criteria in expressing the self-identity that accelerated the boundlessness, openness and pluralism.

It has been argued that educational discourse, form and practices play signifi-cant and powerful role in maintenance and legitimisation of modernity. They have been in many senses remain the means of transmitting, through certain kind of curricula modernity's message of "progress", of mastering the world in the cause of betterment through objective knowledge and scientific rationality. One of the consequences of this is a suppression and exclusion of the "other", the radically different and implicit acceptance of a western white male middle class norm as a as a universal foundation. (Edwards and Usher, 1997, p. 9) Therefore educational crises through "others"come to the scene as a critical issue. In that point, the distance education emerges as a strategic challenge that enable those who are excluded because of their radical identities or of incompetence to white Angola-Saxon middle class standards such as colour people, homosexuals or marginals to utilise from opportunity of education much more effectively. And thus, distance education has emerged as one of the new instrumental way that aims to reconceptualise the concept of education. In this reconceptualisation process, boundlessness and its plural socio-cultural contextuality signify its meaning. And so, openness, equity in access disregarding of ethnic, racial, religious and socio-cultural differences makes distance education a challenge to already existing traditional educational environments.

Of course these features can only live in a postmodern world in which multi cultural and articulated identities of local and global are accepted without taking care of their origins. By so, distance education on the one hand has become a critical instrument to provide effective opportunity of education with its challenging nature, on the other hand as a part of process of globalisation forms multi-cultural and multinational mass of people who are free from imposition of modernity

Marxian Point of Wiev

On the other hand, from the point of Marxists, a new perspective emerges that capitalist system has a dynamic system needs to be continuously renewed and reproduced itself. Internalisation of conflict and struggles is the main concept that underlies the dynamics of reproduction process of capitalism. Every barrier and each conflict that hamper, retard or constitute a threat against either existence or mechanisims of system are made them unaffected by internalisation process re-alised within the system. Conflict or struggle became apart of system. Their threating aspects of discourse disappear in the discourse of system. And, thus, system is reproduced through ideology of internalisation. Today, opportunity of education as one of the central problems of developed industrial countries constitutes a serious conflicting issue for harmonious whole of system. Distance education, from the perspective Marxist ideology, is defined as a leading strategy that aims to internalise the conflict in the opportunity of education. In fact, educational system is already thought as an integral element in the reproduction of class structure of society (Bowles and Gints, 1976, p. 57). It does this in two ways; it justifies legitimates the class structure and inequality by fostering the belief that economic success depend on the possession of ability and appropriate skills or education.

Secondly it prepares young people for their place in the world of class- dominated and alienated work by creating those capacities qualifications, ideas, beliefs which appropriate to a capitalist economy. In other words the function of education is reproduction and this takes place by means of legitimisation and socialisation. Within this framework, distance education is criticised by Marxists as a strategic counter discourse of system for providing spread of education to masses. For them, by distance education, on the one hand, effective training education of people, belonging to different strata of society, is realised in order to increase efficiency of production process on the other hand, the conflict in opportunity of education is eliminated by facility of distance education-equity in access Another argument, also claimed by Marxist, is that distance education, in fact, as a new form of lifelong adult education emerged as ideological tool for dominators of the system. According to this view, distance education as a new invention of dynamic of capitalism provides necessary identities to manipulate the changing faces of consumer culture. An apparent intervention of dominators of the system to the "preference" of people of capitalist society can not be legitimised in society: Lifelong learning that's one of the logic behind the concept of distance education is defined, according to Marxist paradigm, as a value-loaded political apparatus to direct the choice of free-will of people by using main facilities distance education such as pervasivenes, low cost accessibility.

Functionalist Point of Wiev

Education is the influence exercised by adult generations on those not yet ready for social life. For functionalist, in order to understand the major function of education, what people must do is look at society and see how education fits into it. When we do this we'll see that education is social nature and this social nature is defined by society not by individual. And the prime function of education is not to develop the individual abilities and potentialities for their own sake. Rather it's to develop those abilities and capacities that society needs. In fact, in this point of view, the major concern is the harmonious integration of society as a whole. And all of the thoughts originated from the fact that society is something different from just collection of individuals. It's an organic, organised whole, which has harmonious integrated parts. And the maintenance of this organic whole depends on the existence of solidarity among various parts of society. And the major function of education, in this sense, is to contribute the creation of this solidarity in the society.

The two main questions underlie educational approach of functionalist perspective. First, what sort of society do we want to create or maintain? Second what's the role of education in creating or maintaining such a society?

The basic answer to the first question asserts that a society in which there is a great concern for and feeling of community 'and' social solidarity is wanted to create. In fact, for them, societies are classified into two evolving stages-mecha-nical societies through organic societies. Organic societies as a high socially integrated harmonious wholes were the societies in which ambiguous division of labour, primary social relations, and highly valued community norms were essential.

On the other hand, mechanical societies as today's complexly specialised and relatively less integrated wholes are the societies in which high division of labour, secondary social relations, and openness to anomie are essential as a necessitates of advanced industrialisation. The answer of the second question basically is given by referring the main features of organic societies that education is the only institution in which collective socialisation experiences can be created to prevent anomie and to form harmonious integrated whole.

Within this perspective, distance education with its one of the challenging strategies which aims to provide mass education can be seen as contributing tool for creating and enforcing a harmonious society. School, as a central element of this process, is a limited physical area.

On the other hand, distance education enables masses to experience intensive opportunity for collective socialisation. Thus, ultimate aim of education- transmission of societal values

to the generations for creating socialised society can be realised much effectively in the educational environment characterised by distance education. When functionalists explain the changes in current condition of education, they emphasise negative aspects of complex fragmentation of division of labour and high differentiation in society. People belonging to different fragment have to be continuously socialised within the process of education to preserve harmony in society. And education as an institution, with its classical form, is not capable of providing continuos and various educational options to masses, restricted by time and space impositions. That kind of education can only be realised in the concept of distance education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, distance education emerges as leading educational environment for the society's needs of change. In today's world, unpredictable changes direct our life completely. And everything is compelled to change in order to survive. Education as one of the engine of this process of change is a very critical institution of society. Whatever tradition people belongs to, all of them accept the fact that distance education is the outstanding way to manage the change in education and in society. Opportunity of education, existence differentiated identities, the dilemma caused by globalisation and indigenisation of culture and maintenance of harmony in society through socialisation realised in education are the some of the issues that are challenged by solutions of distance education.

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