

LOOKING BEYOND THE RESIDENTIAL EDUCATION AND DISTANCE EDUCATION DEBATE, WHAT MATTERS IN EDUCATION IS . . .

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ABSTRACT

The value of education is widely acknowledged. Evidence from literature indicates that some perceptions or rather misconceptions are expressed about distance education vis-à-vis traditional, residential education particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs). In this article, the author offers some reflections on traditional education and undertakes a review of distance education. Based on analysis of scholarly literature, the author highlights an important element that must steer any debate on education. This article underscores not only the benefits distance education offers but also the critical measures that must be pursued to reap the benefits. Arguments about distance-residential schooling have narrowly focused on mode of delivery. I argue that what must concern people in general and authorities of HEIs in particular is how to achieve quality education by equipping learners with relevant knowledge and skills to become functional citizens who contribute to the social and economic development of society. Suggestions offered included the need for certificates awarded by HEIs to have the same value and appearance despite the mode of education adopted. Designating some certificates as online or sandwich, for example, is misplaced. That graduates of online or distance education programs must assert themselves by demonstrating beyond doubt that they are not second-class students is also emphasized.

Keywords: Authorities, distance, online, education, government(s), teacher education, traditional, residential.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are schools that offer education beyond secondary or high school level. They are also referred to as post-secondary institutions. Referring to the Carnegie Basic Classification, Wojtkiewicz (2011) reported that college types include doctoral level/research institutions, master's colleges/universities, and baccalaureate colleges. Also, there are community colleges that award graduates certificates, associate's degrees, and bachelor's degrees (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2013). Some authors have mentioned that higher education is broadly offered as either for profit (private) or non-profit (public) institutions. Another model, based on how programs are delivered, considers HEIs as ground, residential, or traditional campuses on the one hand and online, distance, virtual modes on the other (AACC, 2013; McFarlane, 2011; Sav, 2010; Shannon, 2009; Wojtkiewicz, 2011).

These authors added that there is also the hybrid type where universities offer the same program they deliver in a face-to-face mode via online or in combination. Thus it can be said that HEIs offer different programs through different models including online colleges, land grant universities, and other colleges. They may be public or private schools that award certificates or appropriate degrees to respective, deserving graduates. The understanding reflected in this paper considers HEIs in broad terms as either conventionally four-walled institutions or distance education institutions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions guided the paper:

- How should education be considered?
- What issues are raised in the debate about distance education and residential education?
- What must matter to education authorities in the face of ever-expanding distance education modalities?

METHODOLOGY

This paper is a qualitative analysis of literature on distance education in its different forms. Data needed for this article were obtained from scholarly articles, books, and other sources. The literature search and analysis helped to provide answers to the research questions posed. The sections below present analysis of what the literature search reveals about education, traditional education, and distance education.

MEANING OF EDUCATION?

Education, according to Harðarson (2012), is a purposive activity the aim of which is to bring about improvement in the life and activity of those who receive it. The aim of education in this context has imminent dimension that must steer the education process. This is because the ultimate definer of what education is and or what it should mean is the individual who receives it. Tyler (1949) therefore argued that a very basic question that must guide educational planners and curriculum developers must relate to what the purposes of education are for those who would receive such education (Tyler, 1949, cited in Harðarson, 2012). Tyler thus added that the entire education process must be directed at behavioral change of learners so that they can do what they want to do which they could not do before receiving that education. Anything short of this would be a misplaced education.

Harðarson (2012) pointed out that in the event that that there are diverse means to educating learners, educational authorities have unfortunately been swayed by interests that minimally support what education must aim at. Harðarson mentioned an example that authorities or a government might simply pursue an education type over another or others simply because of politics or that it is perceived to be conducive to economic growth. This is sad. On the basis of Harðarson's submission, it is not surprising that education quality is still elusive to education authorities and governments around the globe. Frivolous rather than fruitful issues that translate education process to quality products seem to guide people charged with education delivery.

Could the brouhaha about brick and mortar education on the one hand and distance education on the other be one such misplaced debate instead of focusing on issues about quality education delivery, despite the mode pursued?

This article extends the debate on the need to provide all the material, human, and other needed resources to support distance education delivery arguing further that there is a distance education dimension in any form or mode of education. For instance, in traditional education system where learning was chiefly through observation and imitation, apprentices put what they observed from their instructors or teachers into practice in the presence of the teacher and more often on their own when the teacher was not around-either at home with their parents or with peers. Non-formal education requires learners who, by whatever reason, could not receive formal education to practice what they have been taught or introduced to on their own. For example, in adult literacy programs, learners work on assigned activities out of the venue for the interaction between the instructor and the adult learners. The ubiquitous nature of learning makes it possible for learners to continue learning outside of the lesson session.

What about formal schooling? The face-to-face element of brick-and-mortar schools does not happen in one hundred percent of the time. Do people realize that apart from physically being present before a teacher almost everything about education via the brick and mortar mode -in the true sense of education- is distance education? This implies that some elements of students' learning occur out of the presence of teachers. For example, accidental learning may occur when learners are not in the classroom or with a teacher. A visit to the library, private studies, home work or assignments, etc are almost done outside of the walls of the class or school and usually when the teacher is not present. Thus one may wonder why the qualms about distance education? At any rate, which education is tagged brick and mortar or traditional? What education is referred to as distance education? What are the perceived strengths and weaknesses of these modes of educating learners? What matters arise from answers to these questions? These concerns underlie the rest of the article.

BRICK AND MORTAR EDUCATION

Traditional formal education is seen as the structured, residential mode of education. Variously called face-to-face, brick-and-mortar, conventional, walled, on-campus, or residential institutions (McFarlane, 2011; Shannon, 2009), this mode of education has been the traditional HEIs that have physical location for interaction between teachers and students as well as other resources to facilitate teaching and learning. Such interactions promote socialization and friendship that are vital for human development and social living (Greenleaf, 2009; Virtual Learning Academy Charter School, 2008; cited by McFarlane, 2011). It is perceived that academic integrity is maintained because students are physically present at school and their progress and inputs can be identified and isolated. Debatably, individual learners' needs are thought to be attended to as clues from various communication modes including body language help instructors to make changes to suit students' needs (McFarlane, 2011). Arguably too, residential universities have been described as expensive as compared to virtual ones regarding accommodation, transportation, and material costs students have to incur (McFarlane, 2011) and in building the physical structures for teaching and learning. In on-campus institutions, there is limited access to university education as access depends on competition due to limited space and other resources.

WHAT DISTANCE EDUCATION ENTAILS

Distance education describes the processes of education undertaken when teacher(s) and students are separated by physical distance, with teaching and learning frequently mediated by technology or assigned learning material (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013; Higgins & Harreveld, 2013 citing Harting & Erthal, 2005).

These authors indicated that as place becomes less significant, and with the enabling technology permitting axioms such as *anywhere and anytime* connections, distance education also embraces a separation by time. But there is also a form of distance education that employs infrequent or seldom face-to-face meeting schedules to bring instructors and learners together for teaching and learning purposes. Mostly, it can be argued that teachers and learners are separated by space in distance education programs.

Distance education is differently named based on the delivery mode. Online institutions, e-learning, virtual, cyber, internet-based, non-traditional, or impersonal education are some commonly used descriptors (McFarlane, 2011). These terms are interchangeably used throughout this article with the dominant being distance education. Distance education schools break down program contents into teachable units facilitated by either electronic communication between teachers and students for the teaching and learning process via the internet or textbook or other open educational resources such as on compact discs (Ibid.).

However, because of the more often than not impersonal interaction between teachers and students, some people perceive that the teaching and learning engagement in distance education schools is not as rigorous as face-to-face schools. Greenleaf (2009, cited in McFarlane, 2011) indicated that students may develop isolation syndrome; slow internet connectivity can be frustrating and time consuming; and group work can be daunting with learners located in different places and time zones. Also, students may be distracted or may relax by engaging in their usual activities such as sleeping, eating, playing games, etc, which are not the norm with ground campuses (Ibid). Some researchers, according to Gunes and Altintas (2012), argue that the absence of physical distance between instructors and learners resulting in impersonal communication may make it impossible to avoid teaching and learning problems. Genuinely, all of these behaviors may impact on the quality of education dispensed.

Individual differences may not be better catered for in distance programs as clues may not possibly be obtained from students' body language, unless otherwise expressed in written language. Too, academic integrity may be compromised as it can be difficult for instructors to determine cases of impersonation apart from the text or document presented (Gunes & Altintas, 2012; McFarlane, 2011). Too, other limitations of distance education include the fact that students may not be able to ask questions or receive direct feedback; and both teachers and students tend to interact less (Bernard et al., 2004, cited in Geisinger et al., 2012). Also, providing effective distance education can be extremely difficult if not impossible for the disciplines in science, technology, and engineering, while the achievement rates expressed in terms of graduation or completion of program of study is higher in the traditional, residential system of education than in distance education programs.

On merits of e-learning as a particular distance education mode, Mihhailova (2006, cited in McFarlane, 2011) indicated that e-learning is a flexible, 24-hour, anti-discrimination schooling that affords people of different countries and different walks of life opportunity to access quality education that they may not have obtained because of location or limited vacancies in on-campus universities. It also appeals to the working class who may find it impossible to leave their jobs and responsibilities to attend ground campuses (McFarlane, 2011). Again, McFarlane wrote that virtual schools have economic advantage regarding cost savings that would otherwise be incurred in brick-and-mortar schools through such things as transportation costs, increased opportunity costs, overcrowding, and sometimes *negative sharing* where high and low achievers are put in the same physical environment. This though is debatable as it costs students much money to invest in, for example, computers, printers, software programs, and pay for internet connectivity, which may incur more costs than would have been incurred on a ground campus.

Citing Demiray (1999), Halac and Cabuk (2013) noted that distance education is preferred by the working class; by people who started working at early ages and thus did not have the opportunity to attend residential schooling; by those who have financial difficulties or may not have completed their post-secondary education; as well as by those who are of the opinion that traditional education is restrictive. Also, it is shown that advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT) tend to reduce the cost of distance education while providing for almost unlimited use of visual materials and simultaneous or different time applications. That distance education is capable of establishing and maintaining academic fields and linkages, despite geographic dispersal of faculty and students is well documented (Geisinger, Raman, Haen, Kemis, & Pate, 2012).

Additionally, in view of factors such as the cost of residential college education, renewed interest in non-traditional education by a more versatile population, and people's quest to doing things in the *comfort* of their homes, the buoyancy of distance education in its varied forms cannot be underestimated (Gunes & Altintas, 2012; Halac & Cabuk, 2013). For example, Gunes and Altintas (2012) referred to Diane (2011), Ashby (2002), and Jeffries (2009) as mentioning that the wide range of approaches employed including computer aided learning programs offer independent study courses aimed at meeting the challenge of constantly changing learning theories and evolving technologies.

An exploration of the history of distance education in its many diverse forms is appropriate at this point. Contrary to the assumption that distance education is of recent origin, Halac and Cabuk (2013) have traced it to the distant past. They reported that distance education extends more than two centuries now. These authors cited an advertisement in 1728 in a Boston, MA newspaper that showed that stenography lessons were given by letters. These authors added that the 1890s saw an open education program conducted outside of the campus at Queensland University, in Australia. Halac and Cabuk mentioned also that some form of distance education program was undertaken by Columbia University in the first-quarter of the twentieth century. Citing particular examples, Halac and Cabuk (2013) wrote about the use of radio to teach lessons in the 1930s, while the 1950s saw paper-based communication for military education in the US. Again, these authors mentioned the impetus given to distance education in the 1970s when the Open University of the United Kingdom was opened.

These ideas are corroborated by Gunes and Altintas (2012) who related that distance education dates as far as back as the 1700s. Gunes and Altintas cited correspondence education as early known distance education delivery mode. Referring to Jeffreies (2009), Gunes and Altintas added that technology-based distance education probably emerged from the era when audio-visual materials made their way to schools in the early 1900s. It is worth noting that distance education programs have always sought to make use of the best technology in vogue to help people who desire to receive the education they yearn for. Gunes and Altintas (2012) pointed out that institutions' employment of correspondence; radio and TV programs; books, videos, e-mail, and computer technology to convey educational content attest to this.

A critical analysis of distance education over the years reveals a trend in how it has evolved. McKee (2010) and Taylor (2001), cited in Gunes and Altintas (2012) identified five distinct distance education models that have enabled educational providers to deliver educational contents.

Tagged as first to fifth generational use of technologies, the five models include the following: Correspondence Model (1st generation), which employed printed materials; Multimedia Model (2nd generation) that made use of printed materials, audiotape, videotape, and interactive video; and Telelearning Model (3rd generation), which is based on audio-teleconferencing, video-conferencing and broadcast radio/TV. The other two models include

Flexible Learning Model (4th generation) is transmitted via online interactive multimedia, internet-based access to resources on the world-wide web (www) and computer mediated communication; while the fifth model, Intelligent Flexible Learning Model (5th generation) uses online interactive multimedia, internet based access to WWW resources, computer mediated communication, automated response systems and campus portal access to institutional processes and resources.

DISCUSSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

It can be inferred from the views expressed thus far that the important role distance education plays in educating people the world over cannot be overstated. Indeed, the stage is already prepared for many institutions to use distance education to offer quality education to their target population. In a guide to quality online learning, Butcher and Wilson-Strydom (2013) offered important issues worth considering. They indicated that any online program must have institutional support articulated in vision, planning, and infrastructure; course development and structure; teaching and learning (instruction) components; student and faculty support; and appropriate technology, among others to succeed. Also relevant, learning objectives, assessment, instructional materials, interaction and engagement between teachers and learners, and technology employed must work together to ensure that learning outcomes meet set standards (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013). Again, the need for institutions offering distance education to ensure, maintain, and continue to assure quality is very important. This is because education quality rests on quality assurance. Satyanarayana and Meduri (2013) thus suggested that institutions must establish systems through which to demonstrate that conditions are rife for attaining the quality of education enshrined in the educational programs they offer.

Satyanarayana and Meduri added that any quality assurance system must be planned and systematic activities which engender confidence that the products meet the set standards for quality. The need to pursue quality assurance, according to Satyanarayana and Meduri, is not only to ensure that defined standards are achieved or degrees are credible but also to influence future decisions to continue to improve upon educational quality delivery. An important principle is that higher education institutions must take full responsibility for the quality of the qualifications that they award (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013).

Further, it is very necessary that instructors in distance education programs be well qualified and well groomed to teach distance education programs to promote education quality. As interest in distance education programs is expected to grow, it is suggested that distance education authorities take immediate and ongoing steps to assure continuous professional development of the teaching staff.

This will bring them up-to-speed with both content and technological advancements as well as meet any exigencies relating to relevant but also appropriate approaches to teaching (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013). This will sharpen the skills and know-how of these instructors to ensure that they remain current and relevant to meeting the diverse yet peculiar needs and circumstances of the students they teach.

Similarly, Higgins and Harreveld (2013) pointed to several researches (see Del Moral & Villalustre, 2012; Doherty, 2010; Guskey, 2000; Helleve, 2010; Hossain, 2010; McWilliam, 2002) that highlight the need for continuous professional development of faculty members to increase their knowledge and relevancy to deliver on promise. These authors indicated that continuous professional training and development must also familiarize faculty with the best teaching practices, student engagements, as well as the uses and functions of enabling technologies, which are vital to improving quality education standards.

Institutions engaged in distance education programs must remember that students seek not merely access, but access to success, which the institution should do everything to facilitate while maintaining standards (Daniel, 2012).

Therefore, organizational structures of colleges and universities must ensure that any bottlenecks associated with education delivery via the distance mode are removed. These structures may include social units with political linkages that are meant to impact leadership performance and attainment of set targets, thus achieving institutional effectiveness (Ashraf & bte Abd Kadir, 2012).

Ashraf and bte Abd Kadir (2013) noted that organizational effectiveness is multi-dimensional and requires institutions to consider their goals, the system they operate, process they adopt, and strategies they employ to achieve set targets. As systems, post-secondary institutions need structures that work to facilitate achievement of set goals.

College presidents, vice-chancellors, or principals – as they may be called – supported by academic and administrative officers must ensure that the business of the institution (i.e., delivering quality education) is carried out successfully.

Some post-secondary institutions choose to write *sandwich* or *distance education* on certificates awarded to graduates who obtained their degrees via such modes. To show that all certificates issued for the same program or degree despite the mode pursued or path adopted, colleges and universities need not indicate the mode or path adopted.

I have yet to see a certificate awarded indicating that the bearer pursued the program of study via brick and mortar residential mode. So why should institutions adopt a different way of presenting certificates to graduates who pursued distance education?

Graduates of distance education programs have a part to play. It behooves these graduates to be assertive – asserting themselves to show their competence by demonstrating through use and the application of the knowledge and skills they have learned that they are worth the certificates awarded. As Pattakos (2009) indicated, educational aims cannot be achieved without personal responsibility. If for nothing at all, the rigor and self-study habits that characterize alternative modes to brick and mortar education prepare the students to be self-initiative. This quality enables them to accomplish tasks in detail with minimal or no supervision. This should be a plus for online or distance education students. Graduates of online programs must remind themselves that their schooling need not interfere with their education (Twain, n.d., cited by Grego, 2011).

An undeniable fact about HEIs is that the dynamics of publicly funded universities are changing. Competition from virtual institutions and dwindling financial support are indicators for ground campuses and public universities to explore ways of benefitting from virtual platforms. Sav (2010) noted that restructuring is inevitable amidst competing forces as it affects the mix and level of products produced. So institutions must look for areas of advantage and work on them to better position them. There is evidence to say that the president of the University of Virginia nearly lost her position because the board of trustees were of the opinion that she was not moving into online provision rapidly enough (DeSantis, 2012).

As Daniel reported, some universities are converting their traditional degree programs into an online format, recruit qualified students and support enrolled students through graduation (Academic Partnerships, 2012b, cited in Daniel, 2012). The advice by Chiang and Lin (2013) is timely. They said that university governance must target institutional development and innovation to achieve quality education and graduate quality to survive competition.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

The discussion so far shows the promise that distance education can hold for teacher education. The central role teachers occupy in achieving quality education delivery is well documented (Asare & Adzrolo, 2013). Effects of teacher shortage, teacher attrition, and teacher distribution can be weighty.

However, distance education drives can be pursued to train more teachers for the classroom. In fact, if properly delivered and managed, distance education can help increase teacher numbers to the extent that a time may come when more teachers would be trained than needed.

Should this happen, the effect of teacher attrition, if any, would be minimal since finding replacement for teachers who leave the service would not be too difficult. Too, distance education drives can help keep teachers in the schools instead of they leaving the schools to brick-and-mortar, residential campuses elsewhere. This puts heavy responsibility on teacher education authorities.

Teaching universities, colleges of education, education faculty government agencies, and non-governmental organizations involved with teacher education must team up to devise mechanisms to support distance education efforts without compromising on contact hours and teaching quality in schools. Also, higher education leadership must be proactive in championing distance education efforts. Learning from the example that nearly cost the president of the University of Virginia to lose her job because the board of trustees did not find her taking advantage of opportunities inherent in distance education is imperative (DeSantis, 2012). When the center cannot hold, it is said that things fall apart (Achebe, 1994). Thus, a failure of universities to invest in and reap the benefits distance education programs offer as part of human resource development, it can be argued, implies a failure on the part of those entrusted with leadership responsibilities. May this not be the case. Governments must also not pay lip service to quality education delivery – especially teacher education efforts through distance education. Investment in technology to advance distance education drives is capital intensive. Efforts of national, state, and local governments in this direction are not only warranted but necessary. Colleges and universities must liaise with their national governments to galvanize support for this worthwhile course.

They may equally team up with commercial entities to support their initiatives (Butcher & Wilson-Strydom, 2013). Posterity would hold governments, as well as higher education and teacher education authorities responsible for failing to pursue distance education agenda to train teachers to promote quality education, which is critical for socio-cultural and economic development of nations.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus far, one can infer that differences between traditional, residential education and distance education modes lie in the physical interactions that go on in on-campus universities. Such differences result from factors as location, class size, program offerings, time, type of interaction, technology dependency, cost, mode of delivery, faculty approaches, convenience, and feedback.

Whatever it is, it is worth remembering that the “factors that differentiate virtual and brick-and-mortar schools will change overtime as each model develops and adapts to meet the needs of today’s [*sic*] learners and . . . environment” (McFarlane, 2011, p.21). Too, both models are consistent with the purpose of education, which is to equip students with knowledge and skills to enable them to function as useful citizens of the society (Harðarson, 2012). Education must be holistic. The focus or foci of either residential or distance education must be on how to achieve this laurel. Therefore, in an attempt to bring to the fore the essential place that distance education occupies in the human resource development agenda, caution must be exercised in such a way as not to discredit traditional, residential institutions of higher learning. Both must be seen as complementary modes for educating learners to form the needed manpower base to advance the course of modern society.

Any educational system should, according to Illich (1971, cited in Daniel, 2013), 'provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known' (p. 3).

Thus, debate about education quality must necessarily center on the richness of the content towards achieving the general aims of education, as well as the use to which graduate put the knowledge and skills acquired, but not on whether or not one pursued distance or brick-and-mortar schooling. What matters then is the quality of the education one receives.

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