
Distance Education and its Relation with Media *

Amera Seifu**

Introduction

This paper tries to give a general over view of distance education and its relation with media. **What is distance education?** It is a multi-media educational process in which the teacher and the student may or may not meet in a face-to-face situation (Rawson-Jones, 1973). For Heinich et al., (1996), distance education is a form of education characterized by physical separation of learners from the teacher, an organized instructional program, technological media and two way communication. According to Marew (2002:21), "Most experts in the field agree that distance education is a system of education offered by someone who is removed in space and time from the learner." Further, he explained that due to advancements in satellite communication technology and expansion in the financial sector, an effective two way communication was made possible in distance education. Another writer, Berg (1998) noted that distance education is a system of education which involves issues like strategic planning, access and technical support of technology for the trainer as well as for the trainee. It also considers centralization and decentralization of technology, financial support, and careful evaluation procedures. Berg also mentioned that distance education can be practiced on the continuum of models along a line from technologically mediated learning that supplements traditional classroom training to a model in which all teaching and learning are done with no face-to-face contact.

* I wanted to thank my instructor of the course, Ato Amare Asgedom (Associate Processor) who initiated me to enrich this paper which was presented for the course "communication and media studies" and publish it.

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Historical Background of Distance Education

According to Rawson-Jones (1973), it is claimed that the first recorded attempt of correspondence learning was the 20th March 1728 edition of the Boston Gazette notice from the teacher called Caleb Philips that stated any person in the country could learn through postal correspondence perfectly as those that live in Boston. Later, in the 1840s, Mr. Pitman was credited as the first to start regular courses through correspondence. By the second half of the 19th century, many improvements in distance education including the establishment of Hermonds Foundation were observed. Another writer, Reddy (1996) reported that until 1995, there were 835 institutions offering 35,511 courses through distance education in 995 countries. In line with the terminology, Heinich, et al. (1996) indicated that the earlier term correspondence education has changed to distance education when learning took place through electronic telecommunications (which include radio, telephone, television and computers that enabled to communicate at a distance).

Why has Distance Education Started?

Scattered communities, large geographical areas and difficulty of organizing a face-to-face teaching are not the only nor necessarily the reason to establish distance education (Rawson-Jones, 1973). As an evidence, in supporting this idea, he mentioned that there are countries which do not have these problems, but use distance education intensively. Therefore, for him distance education has emerged as an education form, because there was an educational need of society, that the traditional curriculum could not and cannot still satisfy. This curriculum which restricted education to training for entrance into the profession denied higher learning to all but a few. Moreover, Hopper (1971) remarked that the introduction of distance education has allowed the learner to make his/her personal choices about what they want to learn, where and when. Another writer, Berge (1998) revealed that in distance education, students learn more independently, using materials that meet their own individual

learning needs, abilities, preferences, and interests. Therefore, it seems an appropriate form of education to address the needs and interests of various learners. With this in mind, I also believe that distance education is a good instrument to teach adults at work. In addition to giving opportunity of learning to students, distance education can easily facilitate their abilities to relate abstract experiences to concrete experiences because they are learning while they are working.

Views Related to the Application of Distance Education

The place of distance education in the society varies from country to country (Rowson-Jones 1973). For Schrieber (1998:400) distance education program can be used to treat technical and clinical based trainings, change attitudes, increase knowledge and understanding. In relation to the contents which can be treated in distance education, he stated that no topic [content] is untouchable in it. However, some writers claimed that application of distance education varies from discipline to discipline. For example, Reddy (1996), reported that more courses from arts, humanities and social sciences are offered in distance education while course from medicine, architecture and surveying are offered in less percentages. Even though distance learners seem disadvantaged due to distance and other barriers, some studies indicated that they are competent enough. Goodman (1972) and Kinyanhui (1972) as cited in Rawson-Jones (1973) reported distance learners perform better than the school and private candidates who sat for the same examination. Another writer, Hopper (1971:152) indicated that "even though the recorded lecture will not have the power of the live occasion, its substance can be shared more widely." distance education can be applied at any level of education (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary) (Heinich, et al., 1996). Rawson-Jones (1973) warned that coordination of activities and evaluation procedures should be more systematic and controlled respectively. According to Berg (1998), in distance education program, there are different roles assigned to the teacher as well as to the student. According to him, the main roles of the teacher are:

- Integrating technology into course delivery
- Facilitating and coordinating; learning
- Focusing on access to learning resources;
- Using team approach in designing and developing instructional materials.

The main roles of the student are:

- Working autonomously;
- Directing self;
- Exercising cooperative relationship
- Participating in group work

Media and Distance Education

It is impossible to think distance education with out utilization of different media. From its very definition, distance education is a multi-media instruction. Therefore, to run distance education (to facilitate the two way communication at a distance), one should utilize various and fast instructional media. "The use of different media, other than printed materials, is one essential part of distance education" (Marew, 2002:21). The leading specialist in a given subject has long been able to distribute himself through time and space via books and articles. This distribution is given new potency by the addition of film, television, radio and gramophone (Hopper, 1971). The evolution of digital electronics, for todays' world, has paved the way for convergence of traditionally separate technologies and then to make fast and effective communication. In line with this idea, Schreiber (1998) stated that computers, cable televisions, video cassettes, satellites, and lasers have come together to produce a hybrid of new media configurations. He mentioned teleconferencing and the Internet as examples of such hybrid media configurations. He also warned that "Trainers and educational specialists ... should consider developments in communications technology to strengthen distance learning" (1998:11). For Hopper (1971), technology's greater promise is perhaps its ability to help break down the restriction of education to

particular social classes, to particular geographical areas within countries and to particular age groups. Further, he noted that technology has a democratizing influence in every aspect, including education. For instance, the president of the United States gets knowledge of his own election no quicker than the lowliest member of the population – they are both watching the same channel.

Therefore, the innovation of various and fast communication technologies in the world leads to disseminate distance education in a fast and accurate manner. Other writers, Heinich, et al, (1996:284), stated that "one of the greatest advantages offered by modern electronic technology is the ability to instruct without the presence of a teacher." Further, they explained that the introduction of newer electronic technologies now makes it possible to experience place-shifted and time-shifted instruction rapidly from a far distance between students and teachers or among students. Again these authors remarked that accurate and fast instructional technologies (satellite instruction) are able to make the knowledge up to date. Moreover, such instructional technologies are able to make a better university without a campus.

Since it demands a maximum independent task from the learner, distance education can be categorized as the highest form of student centered approach. For example, Amare (1999) stated that nowadays there is an idea that students can learn from instructional materials with limited help from teachers, for instance, programmed learning and computer learning in distance education. In distance education, the learner is often an individual who learns in his/her own place, effort and pace (Marew, 2002). Student centered approach should be initiated with the support of media. In line with this idea, Wakshum (2001) notes that the student centered instruction is primarily supported by the application of information technology, which is supposed to be one of the main components of the student centered instruction. Amare (1998) also stated that a student centered approach is unimaginable without the optimum use of instructional material. Here, I argue that one point seems natural.

That is, since distance education is the highest form of student centered approach, it needs maximum utilization of media.

In general, the writer found that distance education has expanded and flourished from the past to the present. Let alone other developed countries, these days, Ethiopia, for example, attempts to expand distance education at a fast rate. Almost all private and government higher institutions provide different trainings through distance education. Some issues which were considered as a limitation of distance education have been treated positively now. For example, Rawson-Jones (1973) considers that demanding intensive and independent works from learners as a limitation of distance education. But, for to days world, due to the shift of the teaching-learning approach from teacher to student centered, I feel that it would rather be considered as a strong side of distance education. Lastly, the writer concluded that the expansion of distance education seems to be realized due to the following reasons:

- Innovation of various, fast and accurate instructional technologies (media).
- Shifting of the teaching-learning approach from teacher to student-centered which invites active, independent and practical learning.

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