Module 2
Defining Distance Education

This article represents an analysis of the definition of distance education. I will begin by presenting my personal definition of distance education, along with several other definitions obtained from the text and other resources. Then I will compare and contrast my definition with other sources, and finally conclude with whether or not my definition will stand the test of time.

"What is distance education?" My personal definition of distance education is:

> Distance Education is a type of non-traditional education which occurs where there is a spatial, geographical, and time separation between learners and the instructor, and communication occurs either asynchronously and/or synchronously via email, video conferencing, web-based learning management systems (such as Blackboard), electronic forums, and other forms of telecommunications and computer based technology.

Several definitions of varying degrees have been presented for Distance Education, both in the text and on the resource pages assigned for this module. *Distance Education* has been defined as:

1. "a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means - the printed and written word, the telephone, computer conferencing or teleconferencing, for example - are used to bridge the physical gap." (Mugridge, 1991)
2. Providing "access to learning when the source of information and the learners are separated by time and distance, or both." (Honeyman & Miller, 1993)
3. "…distance education should provide whatever educational opportunities are needed by anyone, anywhere, at any time." (Spodick, 1995)
4. "…institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors." (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009)

The most fundamental similarity or characteristic between the definitions cited above and my personal definition of distance education is the separation of the learner and the instructor. The separation is both a time separation and geographical separation. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek (2011) note that distance education makes it possible to bring "learners and the content of instruction together no matter where each is located." (p. 27).   Therefore, the underlying theme for distance education is that it provides wide access to educational opportunities that would not otherwise be possible. Another key characteristic that is intrinsic to the definition of distance education is the importance of advanced technologies. Both my personal definition and the ones cited (most notably Mugridge, and Scholosser & Simonson) specifically include the use of telecommunications technologies to bridge the gap between learners and the instructor.

In contrast, my personal definition includes the mode of communication (i.e. asynchronously and/or synchronously), whereas the cited definitions do not include the mode of communication. This fact seems to be most often overlooked. Synchronous, or real-time, communication takes place similar to a face-to-face conversation. On the other hand, asynchronous communication

takes place outside of real time. Although distance education is conducted via both modes, the majority of it is done asynchronously. I think this an important concept to take into account because it not only speaks to the time factor, but also lends itself to the flexibility of distance education.

I believe that my definition will stand the test of time because it includes the main elements that comprise distance education which are: separation (spatial, geographical, and time), telecommunications technology, and non-traditional education. Ultimately, regardless of how we define distance education, "media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in nutrition…only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement." (Clark, 1983, p.445)

References

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