

CURRENT DIMENSIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

NEGRUT, V[asilica]; COSTACHE, M[irela] P[aula]; NEGRUT, A[lexandra]; MAFTEI, J[ana]; COMAN, V[arvara] L[icuta] & MATEI, D[orin]

Abstract: *The increase of the competition in the educational market, rendered by demand offer report, determines the higher education institutions to offer an alternative to the traditional education. Using content analysis, based on descriptive documentary research, the study aims at analyzing the path of distance learning, its advantages and disadvantages, its limits, its ultimate goal, that is if distance learning can help achieve broader goals of higher education, such as sustainable development, poverty alleviation, respect for human rights. We consider that distance learning uses new methods leading to increased flexibility of the educational process in terms of space, time, choice of content and teaching resources.*

Key words: *e-learning, computer, education, online*

1. INTRODUCTION

The education of the 21st century cannot be conceived without mobility because of the informatics technique and the technological progress registered in this century. Education through the Internet represents a new type of distance teaching and learning amplified every day because of the virtual space evolution. Today, the information is one of the most important resources of advanced economy, therefore the computer becomes an indispensable instrument to any citizen of the informational society in which we live. The existence of distance learning department is a subject that attracts many debates regarding not only the quality of education, but also the instruments used for accomplishing it. Questions such as: is there a favorable context to educational technology? How long will the request for an educational system based on distance covered by technology last?, these are constant concerns.

2. TOWARDS E-LEARNING

The new information and communication technologies have an obvious influence upon the global demarche of education and on the educational policies. They determine virtualization, delocalization of education actions. In other words, education can be moved from the actual towards the possible; it is exerted not only in a given singular space but it does not entail an arsenal of practical and identifiable material (human resources, direct material). There is no longer a focus of knowledge on libraries, universities and research institutes. The distance learning department is not a new phenomenon in the educational field, it actually represents teaching and learning ways known and practiced for at least one hundred years. Before the emergence and the mass use of new information and communication technologies, the educators used printed materials and mail services to perform what we call **education through mail**. (Istrate, 2000, p. 32)

Conceived as a new formula to accomplish the initial or continuous education, the distance learning department presupposes a concretization of education democratization in the conditions of distance technological progress. Distance

learning answers the exigencies of individualization and personalization of education courses.

If at its beginnings, distance learning meant studying through mail, the actual acceptance seemed to be closer to the methods of transmitting materials sustained by audio, video technologies and through Internet (more frequently used and opened to more possibilities). In general, we may call distance education when the professor and the student (students) are separated by physical distance; there are used for education combinations between technology (audio, video, computer networks and printed material) and face to face communication.

A common denominator of the definitions is this system's feature of increasing learning opportunities for the students, by eliminating the time and space obstacles or by imposing a certain learning rhythm. Thus the study possibilities are offered to a large number of people, without interrupting their professional activity. An excellent definition with operational value is given by the Distance Education and Training Council: *"Distance education presupposes the registration and study at an educational institution that ensures didactic materials edited in a sequential and logical order so that the students may study on their own. At the end of each sequence, the student sends, through e-mail or fax, to qualified instructors the result of their activity in order to be verified, categorized and tutorial oriented according to the studied subject. The corrected tasks are sent back and this trade ensures a personalized relation between the professor and the student"*.

Some authors underline the special significations of interaction between students, motivated by the fact that this is one of the directions to which the distance learning will surpass its limitations. Other authors focus on the mediator role of education professionals - connecting the students with the educational resources anywhere in the world, being considered one of the most important advantages of distance learning through Internet - in the actual context of a variety of informational sources and difficulties in orientation within the informational field.

We can define distance learning department as a planned teaching-learning experience, organized by an institution that offers mediated materials in a logical and sequential order, in order to be assimilated by students on their own, without constraining the activity of agents to co-presence or synchronization. The mediation is accomplished using diverse ways, from printed material (through mail), to audio, video technologies or new information and communication technologies.

3. THE BARRIERS AND LIMITATIONS OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Distance learning department having involved experts and specialists, represents a rapid answer to ceaseless changes in the countless knowledge fields. It is a training formula where the student is not under constant and immediate supervision of a

professor, but he benefits of the planning, orientation, guidance and control actions from specialists of educational institutions. (Simpson, 2010) The new formula for accomplishing education has the following features: participants' unlimited access, based on explicit options, to a set of information made available in a new and exciting formula; the flexibility of curricula; the possibility of having a mediated education without physically meeting the main participants (professors, tutors, students) the mediation is achieved using printed materials or using and information techniques and electronics (television, Internet etc.); the achievement of interactivity, immediate or postponed, according to the mediation qualities. (Beardsell, 2009, p. 16)

Conceived as a rapid formula of transmitting information, distance learning department is justified by the following: the unprecedented dynamics of the need of knowledge; the necessity of upgrading new competences in professional practice; the need to come into immediate contact with the newest data of knowledge; the low costs compared to other established forms of education.

Considering the involved educational level, we can make a comparison between the content of the traditional (face to face) and the distance learning higher education.

The content of traditional higher education: is communicated in stages, based on a schedule; it is more flexible, the professor can intervene anytime in the material that has to be transmitted according to the verbal messages of students; it is presented in oral and printed form, at professor's choice; it is integrated in a natural, face to face activity; the students benefit of on spot explanations, the feedback is permanent and immediate; there are advantages of social mediation, the influences of the group, which has an important role in the motivational support of the students.

The content of distance learning higher education: regardless the form of presentation, the contents reach the student on larger sequences, and its covering cannot be imposed anymore by precise time limits; the content is difficult to modify during the process, for technical and financial reasons. The improvement of the course cannot be accomplished, only for the following academic years; it offers more access to information than to "communication spaces"; the printed forms of communication are dominant and the lack of visual indicators raises many problems related to feedback; the interactivity undergoes electronic and time constraint (coordination between professors and students); the social interactions are more empty of content because of the lack of fundamental dimensions, such as covering the material independently from the group, restrictions (time and technology) regarding the possibilities to work in groups and debates etc. (Maguire, 2005, p. 7).

The modern technology offers opportunities also for evaluating the performance in learning. There are numerous projects at European and international level aiming at using new technologies in higher education and some of them have the purpose of improving and increasing the efficiency of the evaluation practices of students.

The advantages of using the computer and the Internet within the evaluation process have been presented by many researchers and practitioners and include low administrative costs and a great adaptability to individual features of students. The foreseen problems regard the aspects on the efficiency in the evaluation using the computer as well as the relation between the way of evaluating and the conduct of those evaluated.

The outset is represented by the traditional methods of evaluating performances that are assumed and validated (most of the times by practice) in the technological environment. In this situation, the problem is if the results of the evaluation using traditional methods can be identical to those using modern ways.

Other authors question the balance between the innovations in evaluating students and the experience of academic staff to implement these innovations. In this case, we speak of the *professor*, more or less willing to get involved in an innovative process such as distance learning, being against the progress of information technology, tributary to traditional forms of education, but with real pedagogical qualities. More than that, on one hand there are put into balance what is possible and what is facilitated by technology, and on the other hand what is more difficult or "inhibited" by the new used environment. Some researchers wonder if the students are well enough taught, so that they can face successfully the requests of using technological instruments and electronics.

4. CONCLUSION

Although in recent years it was shown a decrease of distance learning share, due to the conservative tendency that characterizes higher education, we believe that this form of education is the most attractive educational product in the last decade. Learning process success is not guaranteed only by the quality of the technology used by universities, but also by obvious advantages: flexibility, interactivity, not interrupting the participants' professional activities, opportunities for learning performance assessment, low costs, etc. Promoting distance learning is justified by its potential to achieve some general goals of the current education such as lifelong learning, openness towards the society.

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