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Two Worlds of Distance Education: The Function of Access and Technology

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Abstract: *In order to further our understanding of distance education as a social practice, this roundtable session suggests two disparate semantic and geographic worlds of distance education: The world that sees distance education as the means to eliminate the barriers to learning opportunities imposed by societal structure, and the world that views distance education as a technology driven form of education.*

Introduction

Despite the fact that distance education is increasingly adopted and integrated into mainstream adult educational systems, research reflecting what actually drives distance education in each society is limited. To be critically aware of the assumptions underlying distance education is important because it impacts the practice of teaching and learning. When distance education means “education through technology” – as is prevalent especially in the U.S. context – it loses the traditional link with adult education that has valued democratization of societies through expanding educational opportunities. It is also important to understand the forces driving distance education because educational systems are subject to economic and political processes that impact the needs of those who teach and learn. The purpose of the session is to provide participants with an opportunity to exchange their views on and experience of distance education along with the role of technology, based on the discussion and questions raised in this paper.

Historical Sense of Distance Education:

Opening Access

Historically, distance education has been an endeavor to widen learning opportunities of those who otherwise have no access to formal education systems. This historical sense of distance education has been closely associated with adult education tradition in that both distance and adult education aim to democratize societies by means of equalizing educational opportunities. More than twenty-two open universities established worldwide prove how convincingly the idea of distance education has been adopted as an alternative system of education in providing mostly adults with higher education or “second chance” studies (Brown & Brown, 1994; Eastmond, 1995, p. 53). At the center of this

movement is the belief that society should make an effort to provide its citizens with a decent level of education regardless of their geographical location, gender, previous education experience, financial circumstances, disabilities, etc. In Saudi Arabian culture, for example, it is through distance education that women came to be able to attend universities that were initially set up for educating men (Rawaf and Simmons, 1992).

In the historical sense of distance education, technology has been a secondary concern. The choice of educational media has been subject to the principle of opening access. A worldwide survey shows that 96 percent of respondents engaged in distance learning use printed course units and that 68 percent of them count it as the most important components of their course (Pittman, 1987). While this may have changed somewhat during the past decade, print remains the dominant medium of distance education. Unfortunately, this view of distance education came to be overwhelmed by a technology driven approach which was hardly compatible with an open learning philosophy.

Technology Driven Distance Education

As the use of technology emerged as a main feature of distance education, distance education came to be equated to education through technology. This narrowly defined sense of distance education shifted the focus of the field from democratization of educational opportunities to effective incorporation of state-of-the-art technology into education. Everyday language, in the U.S. context at least, eliminates correspondence or independent study from distance education because the former is not sophisticated enough when viewed from a technological standpoint. In driving this tendency, vendors of network hardware and software, corporate training advocates, and university administrators are

playing the role of promoters mainly due to economic reasons (Noble, 1998). Within the academic field of education, this technology driven approach is easily allied to groups interested in producing instructional tools and strategies, overlooking distance education as a social practice. The criticisms directed towards this transformed meaning of distance education (e.g., undermining academic ownership, commercializing academic discourses, testing technology with students, etc.) make it hard to tell whether the criticism is about the mindless use of technology in academia or about the practice of distance education itself; because the two are intricately interwoven. As much as the image of technology determines the practice of distance education, the field of distance education tends to be oblivious to the mission that has driven it throughout its history.

Questions to be Addressed

The focus of this roundtable will not be on whether we are “for” or “against” technology, but on how to mindfully position the issue of technology in the current practice of distance education. The following questions may lead the discussion among participants: (1) What does distance education mean in the context of differing societies? (2) What drives distance education in each society? (3) How has

technology been dealt with in the diverse contexts of distance education? (4) What tensions may exist between high-technology driven distance education and the open access philosophy? and (5) What type of education is envisioned by technology driven distance education and what influence does it have on learners and teachers?

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