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A Discussion of the Similarities and Differences in the Contexts and Practices of Open and Distance Education in Developed and Developing Countries

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A Discussion of the Similarities and Differences in the Contexts and Practices of Open and Distance Education in Developed and Developing Countries

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Abstract

Open and Distance Education enjoys the acceptance and support from governments in most countries of the world. However, their motives (e.g. why do they support Open and Distance Education provision) and contexts as well as the subsequent practices are quite different as they correspond to their priorities. But there are some (less) similarities also. These differences and similarities were examined and ascribed to the social / cultural, economic, political / ideological and technological factors that compose the backbone of each developed and developing country. The nature and importance of the differences suggest that there no “turn-key” solutions regarding Open and Distance Education. The challenge is to find the successful match between priorities and solutions.

Key words

Open and Distance Education, developed / developing countries, similarities, differences, contexts, practices.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the similarities and differences in the contexts and practices of Open and Distance Education in developed and developing countries. To do so, it starts with the definitions of the terms to be used and continues with locating and commenting on these similarities and differences. It attempts to achieve this by drawing on the literature on the subject and to demonstrate the resulting contrasting interpretations of Open and Distance Education.

1. Defining terms and concepts

Many things have been written about the terms “distance learning” and “distance education”. The same does not apply to the term “distance teaching”. However, all definitions (Peters, 1973, Moore, 1973, Holmberg, 1977 and 1994, Delling, 1987, Tight, 1988, Moore and Kearsley 1996) have some elements in common:

- A physical separation (in terms of time and/or space) of the teacher and the student.
- Instructional design that separates teaching from learning

- Some kind of exchange / interaction (in terms of questions, answers, advice, guidance, support etc.) between teacher and learner.
- Use of technology to mediate teaching and learning (Lea and Blake, 2004).
- Increased flexibility for the student (e.g. time and pace of study).

Therefore, we can infer that both “distance teaching” and “distance learning” are the main elements of a two-way process and communication (through technology) between students and tutors resulting in feedback (from tutors) on students' effort to gain the knowledge, skills and attitudes required. But this is exactly what we call “education”. Thus, we can adopt and use Keegan's equation (1997): “distance teaching + distance learning = distance education”. The term “distance education” is more comprehensive and precise (UNESCO, 2002) despite the every-day usage of the term “distance learning”. Juler (1990: 24) puts it in the right context: ‘Distance education means creating educational communities which teachers, students and others are linked in discourse wherever they may be through networks appropriate to their circumstances’.

Things are quite different when referring to “open learning”. The term “open education” is rarely used and the term “open teaching” not at all. This is normal as the learner is at (or becomes) the epicentre of the educational process (at least, in the mission statements of ODE institutions). Again, definitions (Coffey, 1997, Lewis and MacDonald, 1988, Johnson, 1992) have in common the fact that “open learning” “... involves helping learners take responsibility for aspects such as what they learn, how they learn, where they learn, how quickly they learn who to turn for help and whether, when and where to have their learning assessed” (UNESCO, 2002). On the other hand, Hawkrigde (1997) explains the imposed limitations to all these and Hu sets the requirements of successful open learning:

- The more learners may choose in learning process, the more ‘open’ learning process will be
- The more accesses, the more opportunities
- The more flexible, the more open and
- The more fair, the more success (Hu, 1995: 329).

Therefore, Open Learning and Distance Education may be combined. The open learning concept is greater, more difficult to define and can include and use distance education. So, for the purposes of this paper, the term Open and Distance Education (hereinafter ODE) will be used.

2. Assumptions for the discussion

Before discussing the similarities and differences in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions, the following assumptions have to be made:

- 1) the use of some broad categories / factors as starting points for the discussion must be viewed as a matter of convenience only and
- 2) none of these factors can stand alone – each one has interconnections and is interwoven with the others in ways that cannot always be found and clarified (see below).

3. Similarities and differences in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions of the world

The following tables will enable us to see the similarities and differences in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions and the resulting contrasting interpretations of ODE. Some factors will be used to facilitate this task. These are the social and cultural, economic, political and ideological and technological factors. Table 1 shows the similarities and Table 2 the differences in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions. This analysis draws heavily on Perraton's (2000) work on the subject.

Table 1
Similarities in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions

	Developing and developed regions
SOCIAL – CULTURAL	Both saw ODE as means for widening access to education for major parts of the population (UNESCO, 2002, Taylor <i>et al</i> , date not available).
	Both considered ODE as a means for meeting the growing demand for education and training (Manjulika and Venugopal, 2002, Gaba and Panda, 2005).
	Both established Open Universities capable of accepting large numbers of students – the bigger of them ‘with over 100.000 active students in degree-level courses’ are called ‘Mega Universities’ (Daniel, 1996: 29).
	ODE was seen as an educational method that allows people to work and study at the same time.
	Acceptance of ODE as a concept and method of education grew enormously (UNESCO, 2002).
	Both were partially successful in reaching disadvantaged people – this must be viewed in conjunction with other factors in each society (e.g. poverty that generates poverty due to lack of education, social discrimination, minorities’ standing, etc.) (Khan, 2005).
ECONOMIC	ODE was seen as means for using existing resources to serve more people, thus being more efficient (UNESCO, 2002).
	ODE was seen as a tool for cost effectiveness because large and costly infrastructures (campuses etc.) can be avoided.
	The above two were considered to be the answer to the problem of financial constraints and difficulties.
	Both sought to combine the (perceived) cost effectiveness and efficiency with quality and standards maintenance.
	They both understood that efficiency threatens flexibility and vice versa because flexibility requires diversification of, say, the media used and, hence, is adding to cost.
	They both were forced to accept that what is needed in any case and in any ODE system is the good teaching material – lack of it erodes all other advantages because it results in high drop-out rates, waste of resources and poor learning experiences for the learners (mainly the

	amount of student interaction). ODE does not ask for buildings etc. but asks for investment in intellectual capital through staff development, help to teachers to undertake new roles and cover the cost of material production and distribution (Lewis, 1998, Mandell and Herman, 1996).
POLITICAL – IDEOLOGICAL	Governments expressed their commitment in establishing and supporting ODE but they were not aware of the whole picture. Many countries do not wish to use programmes originating elsewhere but lack the expertise in developing high-quality materials and support structures, fail to choose the appropriate current and future technologies or ignore the fact that sound financial planning and management are needed to ensure sustainability (Potashnik and Capper, 1998).
	Governments tried to response to the demands posed by economic development, the public demand and the need for widening access.
	There is evidence that ODE has failed to meet the expectations held upon it about educational expansion and access – the causes of this can be attributed to other factors also, e.g. social, economic and technological (Zondiros, 2008).
TECHNOLOGICAL	Print is the media mostly used in both regions – this is normal due to its advantages. But there are exceptions: for example, China used a different technology in the form of TV broadcasts to reach their student population.
	Both seem to accept Daniel's (1996: 56) notion: 'Technologies that are popular with students, academics and administrators are likely to be successful'.
	The adoption of new technologies is not driven by their appropriateness in achieving particular teaching and learning outcomes (Lea and Blake, 2004). The degree of experimentation with new technologies is high but it is unsure if the technological tools fit the appropriate pedagogical models (Chee, 2002, Maor, 2004).

Table 2
Differences in the contexts and practices of developing and developed regions

	Developing regions	Developed regions
S	ODE has a short history of about 50-60 years.	ODE has a long history of about 100-150 years and, therefore, there is more experience gained.
O		
C		
I	ODE serves younger students than in developed regions (Kawachi, 2007).	ODE mainly serves 35-40 year old adults.
A		

L – C U L T U R A L	Demand for higher education differs among regions but is generally higher than previous years (Bekhradnia and Bailey, 2008, Howell <i>et al</i> , 2003).	Demand for higher education remains relatively stable – more emphasis is given to continuing and lifelong education and ODE is considered as a valued alternative to achieve this aim (Bates, 1995).
E C O N O M I C	ODE is expected to meet the needs of an economy based in manufacturing due to lower labour cost – this a result and a cause (at the same time) of a ‘knowledge divide’ (Manjulika and Venugopal, 2002).	ODE is expected to meet the needs of a knowledge-based economy (Bates, 1995, Howell <i>et al</i> , 2003, O’ Lawrence, 2007).
M I C	ODE cost is covered mostly by public funds.	ODE institutions have begun to expect students to pay their own fees for the increased flexibility the offer.
	Lack of resources is always a constraint for ODE in these countries.	There are resources but many “players” fight for them (conventional institutions, etc.).
	Any economic upheaval has negative impact on the money spent on ODE (Baldacci <i>et al</i> , 2002).	Any economic upheaval has a much less negative impact on the money spent on ODE.
	High dropout rates erode ODE’s comparative advantage over conventional education – lack of adequate support and guidance may explain this (Bartels and Willen, 1985, Shin and Kim, 1999, UNESCO, 2002).	Dropout rates are usually lower, mainly because learners are managed in a different way (guidance and support provision) (Rumble, 1992, Kiser, 1999, Wang <i>et al</i> , 2004).
P O L I T I C A L – I	The need for expansion and access is mainly a result of the fact that these regions are developing and require more well-educated workforce.	The need for expansion is mainly a result of the fact that these regions are already developed and want to extend learning opportunities over the whole life span (UNESCO, 2002).
I	Expansion through ODE is seen as an answer to geographical constraints in vast countries with millions of people (potential students) (Visser, 1994).	Expansion through ODE is not so much seen as a response to geographical constraints.
	Access in higher education does not focus on certain disadvantaged groups.	Access in higher education focuses (more or less) on certain disadvantaged groups.

D E O L O G I C A L	Developing countries try to “borrow” lessons learned from the developed ones on their ODE effort (Harry and Perraton, 1999). There is evidence they also try to learn from the developed countries’ mistakes (Ramanujam, 1997, Butcher, 2000, Khan <i>et al</i> , 2001).	Developed countries deal more with the ways ODE systems are structured aiming at effectiveness and efficiency (Baumeister, 1995, Shale, 1995, King, 1995).
	Choices of technology for ODE were made in terms of reaching people who could not be expected to have campus-based education (Lea and Blake, 2004, Khan, 2005).	Choices of technology for ODE were made in terms of reaching people who did not have the opportunity to be educated and addressing the needs of working people who could not leave their jobs.
	Choices of technology were made in terms of reaching people inside each country.	Choices of technology were made in terms of reaching people who were resident out of the country – to widen the catchment areas (Blight, Davies and Olsen, 1999).
	Lack of basic infrastructures led to the extensive use of print in ODE – for other infrastructures to be established, political support were needed, e.g. China (UNESCO, 2002).	The existence of appropriate infrastructures did not answer the problem of learners’ access to the necessary equipment – new technologies may narrow access if they become a barrier to learning (Zondiros, 2008). New technologies’ adoption requires a lot of time.
	Recent technological developments augment the ‘digital divide’ – this must be taken account along with the ‘knowledge divide’ (Manjulika and Venugopal, 2002).	Developed countries have the knowledge to produce and support digital technology but face problems of a different nature (e.g. access, cost, faculty / staff development, etc.) (Haughey and Anderson, 1998, Lewis, 1998, Mason, 1994).
	Delivery of ODE from person-based to print-based.	Delivery of ODE from print-based to new media.

4. Conclusion

Variable circumstances and different priorities drive developed and developing countries in choosing different issues to address and different strategies to implement regarding ODE. But both are subject to the same condition as it is expressed by Daniel (1999: 298) as a plea: ‘I conclude with the plea that we discipline ourselves to specify more clearly the particular dimensions of openness we seek to develop through open learning and the educational objectives that we wish to achieve by distance education. There are many challenges facing education and training that open learning and distance education can help us to meet. However, there are no

panaceas and we should make clear in each case how we are trying to match solutions and problems’.

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