



E-Learning as a Flexible Medium

Assessing Distance Education Modes

The medium is the message, according to Marshall McLuhan. If the medium is the message, we should consider that the medium's flexibility in terms of time, place, and user needs is crucial to the success of distance education.

Rapid technological changes accompanied by a growing number of institutions embarking on Internet-based delivery of education mean that more institutions are involved in distance education than at any other time in history. As institutions throughout the world increasingly offer courses via electronic means, there will emerge a global higher education economy in which institutions will face global competition for students, especially those involved in continuing professional education and lifelong learning. The emergence of the global higher education economy could well act as a catalyst for overcoming the institutional inertia that typifies the organisational culture of many universities. This transition from the Industrial to the Information Age was encapsulated by Dolence and Norris (1995), who argued that to survive organisations would need to change from rigid, formula driven entities to organisations that were "fast, flexible, and fluid" (Dolence and Norris, p. 31) -- adjectives not typically used to describe the salient features of universities.

Technological Development and Globalisation

Distance education operations have evolved through the following four generations (Taylor): first, '*the Correspondence Model*' based on print technology; second, '*the Multimedia Model*' based on print, audio and video technologies; third, '*the Tele-learning Model*', based on applications of telecommunications technologies to provide opportunities for synchronous communication; and fourth, '*the Flexible Learning Model*' based on online delivery via the Internet (Table 1).

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Table I: Models of Distance Education: A Conceptual Framework

| Models of Distance Education and Associated Delivery Technologies | Characteristics of Delivery Technologies | | | | |
|---|--|-------|------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| | Flexibility | | Pace | Highly Refined Materials | Advanced Interactive Delivery |
| | Time | Place | | | |
| First Generation - The Correspondence Model | | | | | |
| Print | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Second Generation - The Multimedia Model | | | | | |
| Print | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Audiotape | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Videotape | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | No |
| Computer-based learning (e.g. CML/CAL) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Interactive video (disk and tape) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Third Generation - The Telelearning Model | | | | | |
| Audio teleconferencing | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Video conferencing | No | No | No | No | Yes |
| Audiographic Comms (e.g. Smart 2000) | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Broadcast TV/Radio + Audio teleconferencing | No | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Fourth Generation - The Flexible Learning Model | | | | | |
| Interactive multimedia (IMM) | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Computer mediated comms (CMC:e-mail, CoSy, etc) | Yes | Yes | Yes | No | Yes |

Sources:

1. Dolence, M. G. and D. M. Norris (1995). Transforming Higher Education - A Vision for Learning in the 21st Century, Society for College and University Planning.
2. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (2001)
<http://www.irrodl.org/content/v2.1/usq.html>.
1. Taylor, J. C. (1995). Distance education technologies: The fourth generation. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 11(2), 1-7.
<http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet11/taylor.html>

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