

Chapter 13

Distance Education

Experts and the Distance Education Ecosystem: An Analysis on Learner and Educator Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the analysis of how learners and educators perceive the role of Distance Education Educators (DEE) in a Distance Education Ecosystem (DEco). Scholars have been using ecology and ecosystem definitions as analogies through which definitions and models for creating better learning environments are discussed. This chapter presents an overview of these studies followed by the findings of a research on learner and educator perceptions regarding the role of DEEs within the DEco. The research, based on a former DEco definition compiled in a study at Anadolu University, Turkey, uses a twofold Delphi study: one conducted with experienced DE Learners (DEL) and the other with DEE. In both studies, the participants were asked to define the roles of DEE within the framework of the former DEco constituents and common and differentiating issues are analyzed. DEE, formerly described as a consumer in DEco further was categorized as an input unit, producer, and decomposer. The results revealed four key roles for DEE: empathetic facilitator, devoted expert, productive technology user, and patient negotiator.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of increasingly student-centered learning activities in the 1970s, facilitated by new instructional technology introduced in the 1980s, is contributing to a dramatic evolution in faculty roles, and raises fundamental questions within

the professoriate about how it will contribute to the teaching-learning process in the 1990s and beyond. In particular, the likelihood of significant increases in distance learning enrollments within the next decade will have a profound impact on faculty members' instructional roles. (Beaudoin, 1990)

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We are already far beyond 1990s and are halfway in the second decade of 21st century. Distance education has gone beyond *the likelihood of significant increases*; for the digital citizen it has developed into a route for acquiring knowledge, developing reasoning and judgment and preparing intellectually for life. Technologies have increased the pace of knowledge creation and have provided usable tools for designing environments in which these creations are shared. Digital citizens expect learning environments to be responsive to their needs (Van Dusen, 2000) and distance education educators (DEE) are not in front of the classroom or at the center of the practice; they have become one of several resources available to learners (Beaudoin, 1990).

Distance education is a system in which a group of independent but interrelated elements comprise a unified whole to accomplish a predefined goal. Participants with diverse backgrounds, various motivations, expectations and different teaching and learning styles, either individually or within communities, interact. The major objective in designing the system is to cultivate efficient learning experiences and every practice is unique regarding its content, participants, objectives and the environment in which it takes place. Current research and applications reflect different methods, strategies and techniques to explain and understand this system. Ecology, the study of relations of living organisms with respect to each other and their natural environment, and its holistic view has been supportive in understanding the components, interactions, boundaries, uniqueness and diversity of the distance education system and ecosystem classifications are used to explain particular components.

This chapter presents findings of a research on how learners and educators perceive the role of DEE in terms of a Distance Education Ecosystem (DEco), formerly defined in a research project titled *Application of Ecological Design Principles to Open and Distance Learning* carried out at Anadolu University, Turkey. In this proj-

ect using Delphi study, explanations for a DEco with reference to ecosystem definitions (inputs, producers, consumers, decomposers, organic and inorganic compounds and outputs) were collected from 33 participants who were academics from different disciplines and had expertise in distance education. DEE, together with learners and peers, were named as consumers of the DEco. Since the interactions of organisms with one another are important in ecosystems, the author, also as a member of the above mentioned project, wanted to search further on the learners' and educators' perception of DEE within this DEco. Thus, two surveys, one to be conducted with experienced distance education learners (DEL), and the other with DEE, again using the Delphi study were designed and conducted. Surveys were identical; each consisted of three rounds where participants shared their definitions and comments regarding the role of DEE's within the DEco. In the following sections, the above mentioned research is presented with an introduction of current DEco and DEE approaches.

DISTANCE EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM

In recent years, various researchers have associated ecology and ecosystem definitions with distance education, mobile learning and interactive learning environments. These definitions and models can be grouped as:

- The *learning environment ecosystem* focusing on learning theories and models and defining the collaboration of facilitators, content developers, designers, institutions towards managerial strategies (Zachry, 2000; Koper & Tattersall 2005; Ivanova, 2007; Hanley, 2010; Ray, 2010; Pata, 2011; Johnson, 2012)
- The *learning ecosystem* focusing on the necessity of up to date information and

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