Chapter 16
The Potential of Distance Education for the Inclusion of Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

We live in a changing world, where the role of educational institutions is being transformed. The available technologies allow new conditions to access learning; however, as they evolve very fast, sometimes it is challenging to track this evolution regarding the changes that entail to all of us, which may contribute to a digital divide if it is not well addressed. This chapter intends to present distance education as a reliable modality to include students in higher education. For that, it presents the universal design for learning and its crucial role to make inclusive virtual learning environments. Like every modality that exists, there are some challenges that need to be addressed, as well as some benefits that allow to see the potential of this modality to learning, overcoming some adversities that may occur, like the lack of time to go to face-to-face education or even the need of social isolation by risk of getting a disease.

INTRODUCTION

Educational paradigms are changing as technologies evolve and influence the way the new generations of people grow up, creating a new cultural context. The enhancement of information and communication technologies allows the creation of new conditions to access learning (Naumova, Vytovtova, Mitiukov & Zulfugarzade, 2017, Amante & Quintas-Mendes, 2016) at any time and place, with different devices, breaking boundaries in the educational context.

As a result of technological evolution, Distance Education (DE) has been developed with the main purpose of supporting specific groups of people that did not have the opportunity to access higher education, by removing access barriers and providing adjustable educational paths (Coughlan, Lister, Seale, Scanlon & Martin, 2019a). In fact, throughout the 19th century the expansion of schooling, associated with new beliefs and values has moved from an industrial society to a knowledge society, which brought new possibilities to the process of teaching and learning, regarding the modality of DE for those who could not attend school (Amante & Quintas-Mendes, 2016). At this time, London University delivered courses to women and ethnic minorities that were not allowed to study because of political and personal reasons (Lee, 2017).

Nowadays DE is mostly delivered online or in blended modalities, which allows many populations to access learning. However, depending on the removal of other means of study, it may contribute to the exclusion of some specific groups (Coughlan, Lister, Seale, Scanlon & Martin, 2019a), widening the gap between students. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that every person is unique and has different interests, needs and specificities such as individuals who work during the day, with low socio-economic backgrounds, with disabilities, refugees, prisoners, among others. Therefore, the educational paths which are suitable to some, may not be suitable to others.

The main focus in instructional design is pedagogical, however there may be practical or social issues that hinder access to education. In accordance with the ideas of Coughlan, Lister, Seale, Scanlon and Martin (2019a, 2019b), it is essential to understand individuals' specific contexts and adapt educational paths in order to engage people who are underserved in education by creating accessible courses.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework developed to improve and optimize the teaching and learning process considering the features of all people (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018), allows the "learner's ability to acquire, generate, and use new knowledge" (Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman & Choi, 2018, p.20). In this sense, UDL may contribute to design suitable educational paths according to the specific profiles of each student. This model, based on universal design assumptions, incorporates three main principles: providing multiple means of engagement- the affective networks that represent the WHY of learning; providing multiple means of representation- the recognition networks that represent the WHAT of learning; and, providing multiple means of action and expression- the strategic networks that represent the HOW of learning (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2018). Therefore, UDL eliminates the idea of an existing common background and places the student at the center of the learning process "no matter what skills, needs, motivations or interests an individual student brings, she will be able to learn" (Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman & Choi, 2018, p.27).

Considering the increasing offer of courses in DE and the diversity of students, this chapter aims to focus on these concepts, presenting the potential of this educational modality for the inclusion of students in higher education. To achieve its purpose, the main objectives of the chapter are: to describe the potential of distance education for the inclusion of diversified students in Higher Education; to present the Universal Design for Learning, and to describe the challenges and benefits of Distance Education.

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