



Chapter VII

A Preliminary Exploration of Social Needs in Distance Education

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This chapter explores the concern for social needs in distance education. As a foundation, the chapter discusses the evolving learning environment and stakeholder expectations that distance education must address as it grows in prevalence. In addition, technology is a key enabler of any distance learning program. This chapter analyzes several theories that integrate learning and technology for potential insights applicable to distance learning. These insights lead to an exploratory study to compare the “need for affiliation” between students working in groups for distance classes (virtual groups) and students working in groups for on-campus classes (actual groups). The preliminary results of the study indicate that some issues concerning socialization do exist between the two groups. Ultimately, the study points to the need for more formal and definitive measures of the social aspects of group work in distance education.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is struggling to identify what it should be. Clearly, there are many stakeholders vested in the results of the ultimate definition. State organizations want to efficiently use taxpayer dollars for education;

instructors want to efficiently present course topics for effective learning; students want to optimize their learning process to maximize their careers. It is safe to say that, ultimately, all parties want the best outcome; the biggest problem is that no one is sure of all the parts that need to be considered.

For the purpose of this discussion, distance education is defined as creating a learning environment that facilitates structured learning without the traditional practice of face-to-face interaction in an on-campus environment. This means that the practice of rural teachers who traveled between settlements to educate students in their homes meets the spirit of the definition. However, in today's world, distance education usually implies some sort of technological support through the Internet, email or videoconferencing.

As distance education becomes more viable for undergraduate education, the education industry should understand into what learning environment it is trying to assimilate. The practice of traditional education is changing quickly also. One pedagogical model receiving significant attention is called Learning Centered Education (LCE). This concept "places learning and learners at the core of the educational process" (Bilimoria & Wheeler, 1995). Essentially, a learning partnership is created whereby the teacher identifies what needs to be learned and the students help identify the means by which their own learning occurs. The concept works because it realizes that there are obligations on both sides of this partnership; the teacher facilitates and the student participates.

In summary, distance education is not a new concept. However, the unprecedented growth in technology and pedagogical changes in education power its growth. Internet, email, videoconferencing, etc., are enabling distance education to take a firm hold technically. The evolving model of Learning Centered Education provides one pedagogical perspective from which to view distance education.

BACKGROUND ON LEARNING

One of the fundamental concerns remaining in learning is when it is that learning actually occurs. John Locke (Chaplin & Krawiec, 1960) believed that humans start with a blank slate – *tabula rasa* – and that we, as human beings write our experiences on that slate throughout life. These experiences are what we have learned. Early researchers in the field of psychology picked up on this notion and tried to measure learning quantitatively: How much was being added to the *tabula rasa*. Ebbinghaus (1913) conducted several experiments from which he derived a famous retention curve to show how well individuals learned nonsense syllables over time. Gulliksen (1934) and Hull

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