Chapter 2
From Correspondence to Connectivism:
Tracing the Evolution of Distance Learning From Its Inception to Post–Pandemic Realities

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ABSTRACT

By examining the historical milestones, pedagogical theories, and technological advancements that have shaped distance learning, we can gain insights into its effectiveness, scalability, and adaptability in times of crisis. Furthermore, this historical review offers a unique perspective to evaluate current practices and envision future uses for educational technology and methodology innovations. This research synthesizes findings from a review of literature consisting of 105 articles, offering insights into the challenges and triumphs of the rapid transition to remote learning. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic influence the ongoing integration of distance learning in education and help to ensure resilience, accessibility, and quality in schooling across diverse contexts and challenges. Combining the lessons learned and best practices realized during this extreme experience can shape the new normal in education.

INTRODUCTION

The global events of the early 21st century, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, have underscored the importance of distance learning in ensuring educational continuity. The rapid pivot from brick-and-mortar sessions to remote education facilitated the immediate need for online platforms and spotlighted both the good and the bad in the evolving landscape of digital learning environments.

To fully understand the rapid expansion and implementation of distance learning in schools amidst the pandemic and its aftermath, it is important to understand its development and the pedagogical theories associated with that development. This involves tracing the origins and progression of distance learning, from its early days as correspondence courses in the 19th century to today's online learning systems and methodologies. This representation can be extrapolated to inform the current state of online learning and eLearning and how the current state will shape the future.

METHODOLOGY

Narrative analysis was developed from the work of Jerome Bruner (1991) and is concerned with the array of information communicated through speech and text (Bamberg, 2012; Crossley, 2000). This study explores the evolution of distance learning by analyzing its history, theory, and use by applying a narrative analysis methodology. It utilizes a traditional review method to link studies on various topics to provide a current-day literature review. The synthesized knowledge from this analysis can be used to identify knowledge gaps or areas for possible research and best practices for continued use.

This study uses a case study methodology to discuss the background informing the development of eLearning and the impact the pandemic had on eLearning by studying primary and secondary school responses to the pandemic in the United States. The research included 105 articles from scholarly publications, conference proceedings, magazine articles, and blog posts describing different facets of teaching in the United States during the COVID-19 crisis. All articles were in English and referenced learning effects on primary and secondary students. After review, the research was limited to the evolution of distance learning; educator, parent, student, and technological issues during the pandemic; and future learning trends.

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