

Chapter 18

Visions, Voices, and Virtual Journeys: The Future of Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

The future of distance education is certainly promising but frenetic as well. With the aid of technologies easily accessible to students and teachers alike the geographic barriers that once allowed only the few to engage in educational opportunities are now geographic bridges that promote distance learning where students and teachers from diverse latitudes and attitudes are able to engage in real time teaching and learning interactions. This teaching and learning environment is called “Viral Education,” where the process of education can be symmetrical or asymmetrical in the teaching and learning process as well as multi-task oriented in both product and idea development. This chapter looks at the future of distance education and provides a brief survey of emerging technologies that are just moments or months away from reality. In addition, this chapter explores the notion of customized education which is a continuation of democratic movements within and outside the classroom.

We offer, through technology what religion and revolution have promised but never delivered: Freedom from the physical body. Freedom from race and gender from nationality and personality, from place and time. Communicating by cellular

phone and hand-held computer PDA and built-in fax modem, we can relate to each other as pure consciousness.

(Giuliano, Levinson, Crichton & Levinson, 1994)

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of distance learning could not be more controversial than it is right now. While many higher education faculty are thrilled about the new promises brought by new methods and tools that can augment their teaching, many are still defiant and worry about the future of their livelihood. Some reasons distance learning is viewed with skeptical eyes might be the great number of courses offered through online platforms in which students can quickly access the information from anywhere in the world, the multitude of degrees offered by different online institutions which vary from technical degrees to doctoral degrees, and the noteworthy growth of the number of institutions that are offering those online degrees in the past few decades. However, this method of instruction can be very advantageous and can provide a lot of opportunity for people that otherwise would not seek continued education.

Profit online universities such as Phoenix, Walden, Kaplan, seem to be experiencing a prosperous time while traditional four-year Universities seemed to have felt the impact of the latest economic national crisis. Van Dusen (1997) suggests that “the literature of higher education is suffused with the rhetoric of systemic reform and strategic planning” (p.9). Indeed it should, since the belief that “Universities won’t survive,” that “the future is outside the traditional campus, outside the traditional classroom,” and that “distance learning is coming on fast” (Gibson & Herrera, 199, p.57) is not left unnoticed by traditional universities. They have certainly not turned their faces to the blooming of online and multi-media aided courses. Part of their initiative has been to adapt to 21st century learning environments of customized, multi-tiered, interactive ways to deliver educational materials and instruction as noted by The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). The NCES is considered the chief federal body for collecting, analyzing, and reporting educational data, and in its 2008 report,

it illustrated that in 2006-2007 61% of 2-year and 4-year Title IV postsecondary degree-granting institutions offered some kind of online, hybrid/blended online, and other types of media at either undergraduate and graduate level courses. It was also reported that in those institutions 11, 240 certificate programs were designed to be completed totally through distance education (Parsad & Lewis, 2008).

The population that is attracted to online learning also deserves to be described. It has been assumed that most common distance learner is one that is predominantly adult, that wants to continue his education through a convenient anywhere and anytime course while being able to work full-time as well as be able to care for the family duties (Verduin & Clark, 1991; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). However, the ever-growing number of “Digital Natives” a term created by John Palfrey (2008) that identifies persons born after 1980 and that are very familiar with the world of computers, internet, and mobile technologies is not left unnoticed by either traditional nor online universities. These digital natives, as characterized by Solomon and Schrum (2007), are very familiar the customization of their electronic environments. In *Web 2.0: new tools, new schools*, they noted that in a short amount of time that a student has been engaged to a computer he has changed the desktop background, the cursor type, the settings, the menus, the height of the chair, so on. While some students prefer to participate in a class where they have a face-to-face interaction with the instructors, we should be aware that digital natives are especially used to customizing their electronic environment and might welcome the opportunity to fully participate in the class from remote locations by accessing the technologies that comprise the multi-tiered teaching and learning environment. As it was reported by Palloff and Pratt (2003) when analyzing the profile of online learners, that “The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reports that undergraduates who participated in distance learning courses were more

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