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ROMANIA



"GENERAL M.R. STEFANIK"
ARMED FORCES ACADEMY
SLOVAK REPUBLIC

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE of SCIENTIFIC PAPER
AFASES 2014
Brasov, 22-24 May 2014

OPEN DISTANCE EDUCATION – NEW CHALLENGES

Anca ANDRONIC*

*Faculty of Psychology and Pedagogy, University Spiru Haret, Braşov, România

Abstract: *Although distance education gets an increasingly special attention, emphasis should be put on the importance of style and strategies that have the greatest impact on the quality of distance learning. This may involve different technologies used alone or in combination. As such, there must be made a series of decisions on choosing the most effective methods which respond best to the established goal. The emphasis is therefore put on the role of facilitator as opposed to the role of "provider" specific for the traditional system.*

Keywords: *distance education, strategies, methods, impact*

1. INTRODUCTION

Although distance education gets an increasingly greater attention, we should focus on the importance of style and strategies that have the greatest impact on the quality of distance learning. Facilitating virtual learning requires some new approaches in order to practice and manage the teaching and learning process. For the program to be effective it requires a whole new mental set about technology.

Many institutions spend significant resources - not just time and money - to introduce distance education and invest considerable in creating new technologies required for distance courses and their proper management.

Also, it takes the teacher to learn to manage critical dimensions generated by the new learning environment in which such as: change of role, metaphor, culture, awareness and collaboration.

Distance learning may involve different technologies used alone or in combination. As such, there must be made a number of decisions on the choice-effectiveness of methods which best meet the goal set. The emphasis is therefore put on the role of facilitator as opposed to the role of "provider" specific for the traditional system.

Lisa Kimball (2001) compares metaphorically the distance education with a "canary in a mine that detects life-threatening problems before anyone else realize that they are in danger." So the real problem concerning the learning experiences encountered by teachers are those relating to the design and administration of distance learning programs.

The questions are: "How do we get the right balance, between presentation and practical activities, experiments, between individual experiences and collaborative learning? Among the tasks defined by the teacher – facilitator and those shaped by the student? "

The new technology requires us to rethink this dynamic of learning because we are not able to use familiar approaches. It gives us the opportunity to change the way we manage teaching and learning in general. The critical part of the question is, "How can we engage students via distance learning" or, more precisely: "How can we involve more the students in meaningful learning activities through this technology?". Facilitating distance education does not mean to implement our old lesson plans using new media technologies. Rather it is about the opportunity to expand our learning tools available at some point, to create a new dynamic learning aligned with the best ways of adult learning.

After Eunice, Kimball, Silber and Weinstein (1998) there are some critical aspects of distance learning. The most important issue concerns the mentality that has to change in order to take full advantage of new opportunities created by the technology of distance learning.

2. NEW PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES OF DISTANCE LEARNING

Lisa Kimball (2001) makes a description of this new approaches, presented in brief as follow:

The distinction between the dynamic approach and the linear one in distance education could also describe the major change from the old view to the new vision of education management. The first challenge for a teacher is to realize how to harness the power of new media technologies in order to take advantage of their ability to support the flexibility, parallel processing and time; it is also important to produce new designs and not use new media technologies in order to provide the same obsolete things.

The old model of designing learning had functioned based on a linear fashion, from defining learning objectives to "delivering the course". The first educators engaged in a comprehensive analysis of learning needs were often based on assessments made by others on the skills and learning objectives.

Large courses have been developed, and finally the course was being taught as planned.

Associated with this linear approach is a set of teaching strategies, strategies that corresponded to that linearity and were characterized by: centralization, uniform distribution. When students appeared to be bored and uninvolved in this type of program the solution was to find ways to use new information technologies to make the teaching – learning process more fun.

Much earlier, distance learning was nothing more than a way to generate some multi-media slides well-thought by an expert in a show well done. In this context, distance learning has been praised for its ability to reach a larger number of students at certain quality standard. But an expert teaching courses to a group of passive students is engaged in a kind of unidirectional teaching similar to the classic one, only that this lecture is delivered through television for students staying in their rooms at home.

Later on came a new vision of teaching and learning, this actually being an ongoing process rather than a fixed hour program with a beginning and an end, and the importance of a wide participation of students in the designing of their own learning was recognized as such.

Distance learning technologies are particularly well suited for a more dynamic approach to managing learning. Good teachers have always been open to change the lesson plans based on "student input". New media makes it easier. For example, it is easier to provide additional reading materials based on the students interest rather than rely solely on a manual ordered weeks or months before the actual course starts. The online environment can provide space to continue conversations among students about what to do and what not to do in a course.

Also, the same technology can contribute to design the projecting process of a course. For example, the teacher contacts most students via e-mail during the summer to learn more about their interests and expectations, but there are also required information about students' skills in order to be taken into account when designing the course. As such,



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the teacher was able to use this information to create preliminary project teams and to develop initial tasks to reflect the specific needs of the course participants.

One of the first things that the teacher must think in distance learning aims the type of atmosphere he needs and also, he must clearly define the learning experience he intends to provoke. In distance learning language and metaphor are important - as primary tools needed to create the ambience and help participants to evoke images and to put in their mind a particular space for learning, even if they do it at different times in different places .

In distance learning, many environments borrow the language from traditional educational institutions, to provide students with clues about what to expect, such as the classroom, lecture hall and library. This can be a good strategy to help students navigate through unfamiliar environments. However, there is a danger in using a language that fits the traditional learning environment and not the distance learning environment, as it may lead to transferring old models in the newly created environment - for example, one can expect to actually enter into classroom and wait for the teacher to come and teach.

One way to start a virtual course is to identify the types of interactions and experiences that the teacher believes are needed to support learning and also it is essential for him to capture the feelings that wants to evoke.

The teacher may want his students to have self-disclosure intimate conversations like those had late at night in a cafe or want to hire teams of students working on different topics like those made around a conference table. Putting the student in a virtual classroom can evoke any of these dynamics.

The Institute for Educational Studies at Endicott College has created a master year to transform education. The intensive program is designed around teachers worldwide who form a community and meet in a virtual campus using asynchronous Web-conferencing. In order to help participants "feel" they are part of a virtual campus, the program includes lectures, seminars, discussions, study groups.

Participants come together in a variety of classrooms, virtual seminars and discussions. But the most important aspect of the program is to create a learning "from peer to peer" if participants share their inner thoughts and feelings about their personal growth and the relationship with their role as educators.

3. CONCLUSIONS & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Both teachers and students need to be aware of how distance learning occurs. Students need different types of feedback to help "tune" their participation and expectations. There is a need for teachers to provide a "research in progress" feedback rather than a feedback on the final product, because so much of this new type of learning is process-oriented.

Even if in Romania, the image of open distance learning is still fragmented and marked by distrust, we trust that a constructivist approach in this area may open new possibilities, and one of which is to encourage adults to continue their education – an encouragement to actually learn throughout life.

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