



The Functions of Distance Learning

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Abstract

Basically, there are two types of college students on university campuses: one is the traditional students who graduated from high schools and then entered to a college directly; the other one is the untraditional students who entered into job markets first after graduating from a high school and then decided to go back to schools to receive further education. Some of these untraditional students might quit their jobs when they decide to go back to schools. Some of them, however, still hold a full-time position at work when they become students again. Ely (1997) proposed that maintaining a balanced life from work, family and school is not an easy task for these untraditional college students [1].

The number of untraditional students is continuously growing in university campuses (Schuetze and Slowey, 2002)[2]. In order to help these students alleviate their time management problems among work, family and school, a lot of innovative instructional pedagogies are developed. One of the pedagogies is to deliver courses through the internet, especially through unsynchronized distance learning. Under such a teaching environment, students watch pre-recorded course contents from the internet on their most convenient time. All class activities, such as participation, examinations, class discussion, homework assignment, etc., are conducted without face to face interactions between the instructor and students. Although it is hard to monitor and control students' learning process, Webster and Hackley (1997) found no differences in teaching effectiveness between courses conducted in classrooms and in technology-mediated distance learning environment. [3]

Akhras (2012) suggested that the objective of learning should not be limited to obtaining knowledge only [4]. An ideal learning process should be able to help learners understand who they are and enhance their motivation to learn. To this respect, frequent face to face interactions with instructors and with other classmates would be an important component for a learning process. Since face to face interaction is seldom presented in distance learning environments, delivering courses through the internet is therefore not suitable to create a multi-purpose learning environment. Pyoria (2007) [5] and Bates (2005) [6] indicated that distance learning could only provide students with articulated, unconscious knowledge. It would not induce self-learning or arouse learning motivation. As a result, distance learning might not achieve what most people think it would achieve, i.e., substitute for face to face classroom teachings. The purpose of this paper is to examine functions provided by distance learning from the perspectives of both instructors and students. Results of this paper should help educators reconsider the effectiveness of teaching from a distance.

References

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