Distance Learning: Responsibilities and Challenges Facing Educators in the 21st Century

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Abstract: The emergence of distance learning has brought to the fore new responsibilities and challenges that must be taken into consideration by educators especially at the university level (White, 2003; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Thus, two main questions might need to be risen: what are the new roles of educators with regard to distance learning? Also, what are the challenges that face educators in distance learning? Hence, the present paper goes through the new roles and responsibilities that distance learning educators need to bear in mind to make an outstanding contribution in the learning process. Basically, educators are in dire need of the use of new mediums and skills. Additionally, this paper deals with the main challenges facing educators in the area of distance learning. The emergence of the latter comes not to be free of some constraints including issues related to planning, teaching, and evaluating. Raising an explicit awareness towards these responsibilities and challenges plays a tremendous role in promoting the status of distance learning. This paper provides beneficial implications for educators, curriculum designers, and stakeholders in that it provides a good platform to reconsider serious issues related to distance learning/education.

Keywords: *Distance Learning; Educators; Responsibilities; Challenges; Implications*

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades or so, the developments of learning environments have partially contributed in changing the general map of learning and teaching. The emergence of E-learning as well as the development of life conditions has paved the ground to the need to what is called distance learning (White, 2003). White attributes this emergence to three main factors. First, the rapid change of the world given the space and time constraints. Second, the significant changes of the learning environments which have been affected by the opportunities provided by online learning. Third, the outstanding developments in information and communication technology. According to Bower and Hardy (2004), despite the strong connection between distance learning, or distance education as used interchangeably by many researchers, the emergence of distance learning goes back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. The first form of distance education was what they called *correspondence study*, "a method of learning via postal mail" (p, 6). The major characteristic of distance learning/education is its opportunity to study at one's own time without face-to-face communication. Talbot (2007) provides a comprehensive definition of distance learning/education and declares that: "Distance learning or distance education, as the word 'distance' implies, takes place when you, the student, are geographically remote from the educational institution at which you are registered. You will also be remote from your tutor and other students for most or all the time" (p. 1)

In spite of the precious opportunities distance learning offers to learners in the new era, Talbot (2007) believes that studying at a distance can be a "mixed blessing" because, in addition to the outstanding opportunity it grants, a lot of hard work is emphasized as well. Thus, distance learning/education puts great responsibilities and challenges on the shoulders of distance learning educators. The present paper seeks to deal with the responsibilities and challenges facing educators in the new millennium and asks two main questions: what are the new roles of educators of distance learning? Also, what are the challenges that face educators in distance learning? This paper is divided into four main sections. The first section deals with the rationale. The second section investigates the interconnectedness of E-learning and distance learning/education. The third section provides a set of roles and responsibilities that distance learning educators are in need. And the last section is mainly concerned with the major constraints and challenges facing educators at the level of distance learning.

Statement of the problem: Given the fact that distance learning/ education has brought new ideas and unfamiliar issues with new learning environments, a number of challenges and responsibilities need to explicitly be raised so as to provide insightful suggestions. Bower and Hardy (2004) state that for any institution to grow and develop, it must take into consideration these challenges, and educators need to be flexible to avoid any probable obstacles and face more wisely the new changes caused by distance learning/education. In other words, educators need to be skilful in tailoring their learners' needs in different learning environments.

2. E-learning as a basis for distance learning

The diffusion of distance learning/education has been surrounded by many circumstances. E-learning has greatly facilitated the process of learning at a distance and has provided propitious opportunity for learners to learn at any time or any space. Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt state that one of the main strands of evidence for distance education's changing role "is the growth of e-learning, an umbrella term for receiving instruction over the public internet" (2006, p, 571). By the same token, Naido (2006) illustrates that "... e-learning would incorporate all educational activities that are carried out by individuals or groups working online or offline, and synchronously or asynchronously via networked or standalone computers and other electronic devices" (P, 1). Undoubtedly, the plethora of communication tools including emails, webcams, videos, computers, tablets, and smart phones has contributed in facilitating the process of learning at a distance. Additionally, e-learning makes education accessible to a large number of people. As Mason and Rennie (2006) implicitly declare, online learning in general provides outstanding opportunities for its users to reflect on the information since they can capture and store documents and resources in all formats.

However, using e-learning as a platform for distance learning, as mentioned before, is a mixed blessing. All the stakeholders need to react and adapt, in one way or another, to the new environment of online learning and learning at a distance. Educators are undoubtedly one of the important responsible who can facilitate this learning. They need to reshape their awareness, skills, and knowledge to tailor insightfully their learners' needs. Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt (2006) declare that: "If educators are going to engage in the practice of online education in a thoughtful fashion, then they need to understand two things: first, that online education has evolved from previous conceptions of education; and second, that there are social, political, economic, and ethical assumptions and implications in what appear to be simple actions of design and instruction" (p, 567). Evidently, engaging in online education is not a random issue which is governed by merely taking a decision, but rather it requires a holistic understanding of the surrounding conceptions in which education/learning has evolved. It is necessary for educators of distance learning to make a linear connection of the development of learning environments so as to be systematic in building wisely distance learning/education courses. That is to say, numerous responsibilities need to be taken seriously by educators. The next section deals with these responsibilities in much more details.

Roles and responsibilities of distance learning educators: For any instructor to engage in distance learning/education, a variety of responsibilities must be borne in mind. White (2003) illustrates various roles related to awareness and skills on the one hand, and others related to communication and interaction on the other hand. For communication, it is indispensable to orient and encourage learners to working within unfamiliar environments. It is axiomatic to expect learners' anxiety when they engage for the first time in distance learning course. Thus, it is up to the educators to orient them properly to engage in this new environment. In this respect, interaction is of concern to tailor learners' needs through using technologies. As mentioned in the previous section, many communication tools are available to organize and systematize the interaction between educators and learners. For instance, emails and webcams are good tools in which interactions can be organized.

Awareness and skills, on the other hand, are interesting components for any educator. Having a distinguished background about distance learning issues make educators in an advantageous position to understand the long term effect of distance learning and how it might be integrated given the specific characteristics of age, social class, and the environment. In addition to this, educators need to manage multiple roles within online environments-for example facilitator, coach, co-ordinator-alongside student demands for individualized feedback (White, 2003). Additionally, they need to be innovators and create different sources of learning

based on the available materials taking into consideration the constraints of *digital divide* Warschauer (2003). Moreover, the use of new mediums of technology is at the core of educators' responsibilities. They need to master various skills especially computer skills. For example, for language educators, they need to be familiar with computer-assisted language learning (CALL). In this context, Evans, and Nation (1993) stress the importance of providing training programs for Australian teachers at all levels. Given this huge number of responsibilities, many challenges and constraints in turn need to be overcome to provide a good platform to teaching/learning at a distance. The next section is concerned with the main challenges facing educators of distance learning/education.

3. Challenges and constraints facing distance learning educators

Whereas distance learning/education has brought new issues to the landscape of education, various challenges have come to the fore as well. One of the evident challenges is the psychological and the physical distance between educators and learners. Sometimes it is hard for teachers to detect the psychological barriers interfering in learners' motivation and attitudes. In this regard, blended learning might be a solution that keeps balance between face-to-face and online learning. Following Garrison and Vaughan (2008), "blended learning in higher education provides a vision and a roadmap for higher education faculty to understand the possibilities of organically blending face-to-face and online learning for engaging and meaningful learning experience" (p, 6). Furthermore, working virtually usually includes learners and educators with different cultural backgrounds. Cultural differences, as stated by Pallof & Pratt (2005), are one of the primary hindrances for online collaboration. Moreover, educators are in need of a solid leadership. Controlling learners at a distance requires some characteristics of leadership such as vision, managing differences, and providing useful solutions in high time (Pallof & Pratt, 2005). Educators as leaders need effectively to monitor and manage the life cycle of virtual work and raise the degree of trust in case there are different learners. Furthermore, educators are under pressure to experience heavy workloads. They then need to prepare specific courses to fit their learners' needs, manage their participation, and use different mediums. Hence, time pressure is a great challenge for distance learning educators.

As discussed in section 2, distance learning/education is strongly related to e-learning. Accordingly, limited resources can be a big obstacle in facilitating the process of learning at a distance (White, 2003; Pallof & Pratt, 2005). In other words, digital divide (DD) is a principal challenge in that learners may not have the same access to the different ICTs. For example, Morocco's performance in the network readiness index is poor in comparison with 115 countries. Table (1) is an indicator that measures the propensity for countries to be able to exploit the opportunities offered by information and communications technology, and is published annually by the World Economic Forum (Cattaneo, Diop & Walkenhorst, 2007).

Table 1: Morocco scores poorly in terms of network readiness (Country ranking in the Network Readiness Index)

	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
Estonia	23	25	25
Czech Republic	32	40	33
Tunisia	36	31	40
Hungary	38	38	36
India	40	39	45
Turkey	48	52	56
China	50	41	51
Poland	53	72	47
Romania	58	53	61
Egypt	63	57	65
Bulgaria	64	73	67
MOROCCO	77	54	64

Note: The number of ranked countries amounted to 115 in 2005/06, 104 in 2004/05, and 99 in 2003/04.
Source: World Economic Forum.
Cattaneo, Diop & Walkenhorst, (2007)

It is crystal clear that if any country strives to enlarge ICTs, much effort is recommended for spreading networks. The government's policy in providing the technological mediums contributes in the success of distance learning/education. In the light of these challenges, and the different responsibilities as discussed in the previous section, distance learning educators can draw numerous implications to improve their conception of the new learning environment. These implications are well illustrated in the following section.

Implications: Based on what has been discussed, educators need to take some implications into account. First, they must design courses at a distance based on the availability of the technological mediums. Following slavishly programs of distance learning/education in different environments can impede the learning process given the dissimilarities between regions and countries in using the technological devices. As discussed in the previous section, Morocco's ranking in the Network Readiness Index is different in comparison with other countries. Following the discussion of the challenges facing educators of distance learning/education, it is indispensable to provide programs of training for educators at the level of course design, evaluation, and the use of technological devices. Moreover, institutions must be supplied with free connections (WiFi) to facilitate online learning. Distance learning courses, especially with groups with different social backgrounds, might engage with cultural differences. Accordingly, educators need to raise their awareness about diversity and develop their intercultural competence. Also, they are in need to use different learning styles to keep encouraging learners to participate in learning at a distance. In the same context, since the field of distance education is constantly bringing unfamiliar issues, educators need to keep up-dated as much as possible to keep the pace with recent developments.

4. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the field of distance learning/education is a fresh area of research; despite the arguments supporting its status in enlarging learning opportunities, much effort is recommended to provide techniques and approaches to promote this learning environment. In other words, research on the field is still at its embryonic stage and it puts much responsibility on the shoulders of researchers, practitioners, and educators to provide effective ways in order to improve learning at a distance.

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