

# What is the Value in Distinguishing Between 'Distance' vs. 'Online' Education Practised in both the Developed and Developing World?

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## Introduction

Amongst the plethora of definitions of **Distance Education**, it seems that the most comprehensive is still that of Hilary Perraton who states that it is '*an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner*' (Perraton, 2000, p. 13). This definition essentially matches that of the Commonwealth of Learning group (Learning). It displays considerable elegance because unlike those of others, it does not advocate technology (Peters, 1973 in Lea and Blake, 2006), or references to specific pedagogical underpinnings (Delling, 1987 in Lea and Blake, 2006). **Online Education** in contrast is specified by the context of a specific suite of technological tools, namely the advent of modern *information and computer technologies* (ICTs). It by definition much occur in the 'distance mode' advocated by Perraton above, so to some extent **Online Education** must be a subset of **Distance Education**. This essay explores the notion of fundamental differences between how these two modes are accessed in the so called 'Developed' and 'Developing' nations of the world. And concludes that, despite theoretical or ideological wants or desires, not only do substantial differences exist in practice, but failure to acknowledge the differences results in poorly designed, inefficient and economically wasteful educational programmes.

## Broad Differences Between 'Distance' and 'Online' Education

### Distance Education

Since **Distance Education** is the process in which teacher and learner are removed from each other for significant parts of the time, the issue then becomes, how the 'education' process can actually occur at these events. Since the removal of teacher and learner can be in either time or place suggests an covert assumption that 'technology' must be involved to facilitate this interaction. Most people though, tend to think of 'technology' as consisting of dials, knobs and displays of some sort, where as the early correspondence courses used the technology of writing' and print material and these are of course the first **Distance Education** courses conducted.

The philosophical underpinnings of different pedagogies ranges from the didactic approach (teachers fill up the students as 'vessels' of information), to interactive pedagogies (students and learners embark on different and new journeys of joint discoveries in the learning process). Different **Distance Education** courses have

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1. We take 'writing' for granted without understanding that it is a significant technology that took many generations or epochs to establish. Please see for example (Diamond, 1999; Fischer, 1997)

used different technologies to enable or support the pedagogy whilst still having the fundamental characteristic of having learner and teacher removed from each other (by time and/or space). Correspondence courses allowed for a 'discussion' to take place between the learner and teacher. Radio and television productions are by and large one way communication models that have the teacher's instruction relayed by the technology, but with no easy mechanism to have the students actively engage with the instructor.

## Online Education

**Online Education** broadly means the provision of education through ICTs that allow for two way interaction. 'Online' is of course a reference to the internet<sup>2</sup>, although it could theoretically mean any centrally stored location of information such as a local network. **Online Education** has also been named 'e-learning', or 'web-based learning'. The overriding feature being that it is learning that is practised through the medium of information stored on computer networks.

For the most part one can think of **Open Education** to be a subset of **Distance Education**. In other words it is a specified technology that allows **Distance Education** to occur. For the most part **Online Education** suggests that there is an element of two way interaction present. Even if the **Online Education** is simply the use of email (electronic correspondence course), that still suggests a back and forth between teacher and learning. The feature of interactivity would suggest that for the most part **Online Education** has an implicit pedagogy – namely non-didactic, more exploratory and discursive.

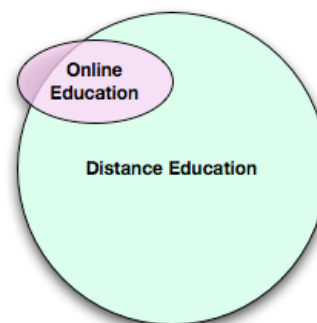


Figure 1: Online education is almost a complete subset of Distance Education.

Perhaps what is a distinguishing feature of **Online Education** in it's current and near future incarnations, is the ability to not only provide the educational learning tools for the student to use, but also it is able to provide a management system, and a student management system.

The management system allows the teaching institution to manage the provision of education to the student body, enrolment, provision of feedback and support, grading assignments and logging the entry of assignments and so forth. The student management system enables to students to chart or plot their own educational

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2. Although 'online' education is normally considered to be a subset of **Distance Education**, there is an area where one could be 'online' but actually the instruction is occurring in traditional face to face contexts. One can think of technology instruction or even language labs, in which the class sits down and accesses information that is 'online'. Online in this context could mean an local or wide network, or could of course mean the internet.

course or programme structure. Students can enrol, pay for and construct their own programmes through the online system themselves. This line of thinking fits very much in with the notion of '*flexible learning*' (Nunan, 2000).

## Differences translated into the Developed Nations' Context

By and large, it appears as if the differences between **Distance Education** & **Online Education** are becoming vanishingly small. The whole philosophy of **Distance Education** in Developed Nations is in part a social response to the philosophy of 'lifelong' learning. Adults in contemporary 'Western' societies not only expect their social roles to change over the course of their lifetime, but increasingly they actively seek it. As Usher argues *flexible learning* is both a response to the socio-economic and personal growth demands of society, whilst at the same time contributing to the shaping of the same society (Usher, 2000). **Distance Education** is the route by which *flexible learning* is achieved. **Online Education** is the technology that makes **Distance Education** courses '*market differentiators*' in an increasingly aggressive economic market for offering further education. The role of **Online Education** as a way to achieve interactivity within a **Distance Education** course is considered a desirable pedagogy both by educational providers, and by the discerning 'consumer' of educational packages.

## Differences translated into the Developing Nations' Context

The same suite of differences noted above, cannot be observed in the case of the vast majority of Developing Nations **Distance Education** courses. Whilst **Online Education** still remains a subset of **Distance Education**, the reality is that **Online Education** is something that is accessed mainly by the rich and elite of these nations. One could argue that the heavy online components offered by say the *African Virtual University*, or dual mode and flexible delivery within the *University of the South Pacific* (USP) underscore this point, but this misses the original philosophy behind **Distance Education** and the Open University concept, namely access to all relevant parts of society and hard to reach remote places. A student without the relative wealth to sustain this mode of learning, simply cannot access the technology. Take for instance a Solomon Islander who lives on the other side of the main 'Extension centre' of USP in Honiara<sup>3</sup>. She does not have the money to either buy the computer, or the internet access and in fact her family home does not have a reliable electricity supply. The option therefore is to access the centre's computer laboratory, although the taxi fare will be a significant portion of her salary. However, to get across town after work is not only expensive but time consuming. Personal experience shows that to essentially cross the city (which cannot be more than a few kilometres as the crow flies) takes on average 45 minutes. The facilities are not open 24 hours, so when she can come across town not only is time short, but she most likely has to book time on the computer or wait in line for her turn. She cannot stay too long at the centre because if she leaves too late, there will be no buses operating at that time and a taxi fare would be out of the question. And this is to say nothing of her traditional

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3. This kind of case study is something that I have witnessed or had relayed to me by students of USP studying Distance Education courses in the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and rural communities in Fiji.

role as mother and wife which requires her to be at home after work and not doing her studies across town. Bear in mind that this is for a student that lives in the capital. The student without independent means living in the rural areas, has these problems compounded by orders of magnitude.

**Distance Education** courses therefore remain as a way of providing relatively cheap and far reaching educational needs 'if' they employ print and audio/visual material such as radio, television, audio and video cassette resources.

## The Value in Distinguishing Between Developed and Developing Contexts

The argument so far has catalogued the differences between the developed and developing nation contexts with respect to **Distance Education** and **Online Education**.

It remains instructive to ask 'So what?'

So..., to answer this question, ... there is a profound value in making these distinctions between the Developed and Developing nation contexts not only in terms of understanding philosophical underpinnings, but also in the pragmatics of course content production and delivery.

Not only is the production of rich multi-media learning content many magnitudes more expensive to produce (Perraton, 2000) than traditional print media, but if the vast majority of the potential student population cannot access it, because of expense in running the online content, then the programme will fail in it's notion of *effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency* and *process*(Perraton, 2000).

The table below summarises the core differences between the two nation's context and how **Distance Education** and **Online Education** is utilised in each region.

	Distance & Online Education	Consequences
<b>Industrial / Developed Nations</b>	Distance education is bound in with the notion of 'flexible' learning. There is an argument that could be made to say that pragmatically, the two can be considered synonymous.	The assumption is that for the most part, the
	Distance education and now increasingly online education, incorporate multi-modal elements.	This is desirable in terms of fitting in with the different learning styles ( <i>flexible</i> ), but possible only if expensive production costs are met.
	Global reach by high profile departments into the rest of the world	<i>Theoretically</i> giving students more choices, encouraging competition and (according to market theories) giving the learner as consumer a 'better' product in the long run.
	Online education encourages learning through dialogue.	This necessitates relatively high teacher to learner ratios.
<b>Developing Nations</b>	Distance education enables large numbers of students to be accessed.	Since the teacher-learner ratio will be low(er) the pedagogies will be more didactic (one way transmission). Some courses (vocational programmes) may lend themselves better to this pedagogy than others (critical discourses).
	Distance education is 'cheaper' to distribute ...	... but one needs to bear in mind that this has to be offset by the production costs. Anything other than print tends to be magnitudes more expensive.
	Distance Education has been driven by perceived national demand, rather than 'lifelong' learning philosophy.	Resources pumped into development of Distance Education courses needs to be considered against the best available information as to the actual needs of the region.
	Online technology could be accused of being a technology looking for a relevant role?	Careful consideration needs to be made when an offer to establish 'cutting edge' technology is made. Online technology is not irrelevant but needs to be considered against realistic expectations.

Table 1: Summary of the differences between Developed and Developing nations and their employment of Distance Education and Online Education.

The table underscores the potential 'White Elephants' that are used to potentially enhance **Distance Education** courses in the developing world such as the strong aid money from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to upgrade USP's telecommunications network to enhance the previously named

'Extension Services'<sup>4</sup> programme(Agency). Ostensibly the full technical capabilities of satellite data transmission meant a plethora of benefits to enhance interactivity (inter-country telecommunications at no extra cost, video conferencing, integrated ICTs across different campuses), the reality remains that students without ready access to the internet, or at least USP's intranet are at a distinct disadvantage<sup>5</sup>. Echoing Perraton's comments on the use of technology to drive the pedagogy of the *African Virtual University*, the same can be said about the recent completion of ICTs at USP – “... *[the] methodology seems to have been made because the technology was there rather than because of an appraisal of the merits of different ways of developing materials collaboratively or of sharing them across frontiers*” (Perraton, 2000, p. 147). The notion that media rich material needs to be actively 'produced' has never been explored as an institutional directive. The drive towards 'flexible' delivery modes has for the most part consisted of USP's media unit filming the 'talking head' of the lecturer in a conventional face to face lecture/seminar mode. The result is not edited in anyway except to title the lecture series, and then mass copied to make available to USP's centres around the region. There have been attempts to produce audio/visual materials that are more engaging than simply 'talking heads' at the initiative of individual lecturers, but these resources tend to 'live and die' with the employment of the individual lecturer.

If the different requirements and needs of **Distance Education** within the USP context (as an example of a Developing region), were clarified along the lines that this essay suggests, then the relevant construction of courses can more easily commence. For instance, ostensibly the original role of the Distance Education unit was to provide educational opportunities for students in hard to access locations across the Pacific, and with a student base that extended beyond the ruling and merchant elite of the Pacific. **Distance Education** can fulfil that requirement. The most effective resources would remain print. There is still (in line with Perraton's plea (see (Perraton, 2000) p. 151) much to be gained from 'real' radio production (not just the droned recorded voice of a lecturer giving his or her face to face lecture), since even 'poor' nations will have access to a radio and batteries to drive the radio. There is even a case to be made for audio and video discs (CD, VCD & DVD)

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4. In other word 'Distance Education'. It has since been renamed 'Distance and Flexible Learning'. On a slight sidenote to this footnote - my own observation is that this was really a reaction to the political crises that overtook the University's ability to function in Fiji when the Fiji government was taken hostage by attempted coup leaders. The consequences of which were that the remainder of the semester as essentially 'cancelled'. The administration at the time therefore instructed departments to convert as many courses, and as much content within a course into 'distance' mode. Given that this was impossible to do at such short notice, University staff came to learn that the new directive was an initiative to turn courses into 'Distance & Flexible Learning'. No academic discourse was held either at a University wide level or even within the Education Department in which I worked during this period over this change in terminology.
  5. This is to say nothing of the reality of the implementation of the project which has suffered innumerable 'teething problems'. Reminiscent of the radio and television delivered classroom instruction that Perraton describes for many Asian DE courses (Perraton, 2000), USP's DFL programme offered video conferencing of courses through the satellite network mostly from the Laucala campus (Fiji) to either the Emalus or Alafua campuses (Vanatu and Samoa respectively). The results were a blurred 'talking head' of a lecturer with frequent 'drop-outs'. Interaction between students and lecturer were not possible with the 2-3 second delay between someone talking and the message arriving at the location. The result would be considerable time wasting to try and establish who was speaking, what the request was and what to repeat again.

to also be made available with the advent cheap portable players that are likely to be brought to even the remotest of Pacific island regions. But for the most part these are pedagogies that emphasise one-way transmission (from teacher to learner).

**Online Education** cannot without substantial financial investment, which by definition the majority of individuals do not have, be a central strategy the content and delivery of the **Distance Education** courses. **Online Education** can be of great benefit though in the management and relayed distribution of learning materials. Print materials or even print amendments can be quickly sent out to the regional centres who then send the information on to the students via traditional postal services. Clarification on assignment procedures or even assignment interpretations can be resolved within very short time periods compared to the traditional mail bag routes normally involved. Telecommunication channels can be gainfully employed to support course tutors based either at the regional centres, or who come in from outer islands to be updated by the course co-ordinator. It might even be possible to use 'live' transmissions particularly in radio, by transmitting through online technology to the regional centres, and from each centre to subsequently transmit on a suitable traditional radio frequency.

Without the distinctions being highlighted and acted upon that is appropriate to the regional context (developed vs. developing) **Distance Education** design, instruction and delivery is likely to continue to be a big drain on limited educational resources.

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