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Topic 1: Traits which have characterized distance education since its inception.

## SETTING THE DISCUSSION

Given the broad brush that must be used to describe Distance Education, several elements seem to emerge consistently. The concept of distance defined by a physical separation of teacher and student; the issue of feedback as a defining characteristic of Distance Education; the presentation of material as a technology-driven aspect of Distance Education; and, the unique nature of the learner who benefits from Distance Education are all major characteristic traits. Other elements may be described from different perspectives, but these four seem to stand out as key.

## TRAITS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The most basic feature of Distance Education is distance or, the physical separation of teacher and student, or the absence of a classroom environment. The early correspondence model described by Peters focused on the desire of the tutor to send a teaching message to students in distant locations as St. Paul sent his epistles to “groups of Middle Eastern and European churches to spread Christian teaching” (Peters, 2001, p. 19). Much later the development of the postal system answered the obvious obstacle of distance. As time was an indicator of distance, it took weeks or months for lessons to be written, delivered, and a response received back from the student. Today the time element can be within minutes or seconds, thus the nature of distance separation has become less explicit. Technology laid the foundation for a new breed of education as recognized by William Lighty when he referred to a “new type of teacher” and a “new type of student” (Holmberg, 2005, p. 22). Descendants of some of the early correspondence schools still

exist, for example the Collier Engineering School of Mines is the ‘grandfather’ of today’s Education Direct, part of Thomson Publishing (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 25).

Feedback is a major element that defines Distance Education differently from the standard classroom education. It is the feedback of student to tutor and tutor to student, mediated by technology that is a key feature of Distance Education. Holmberg describes this as “. . . the real communication by means of which students have access to personal tutoring and counselling” (Holmberg, 1995, p. 2). As the development of Distance Education grew, feedback has become more and more immediate. Both Harper and Hermod recognize the importance of feedback in their discussions of Distance Education systems (Holmberg, 2005, pp. 18-19).

The presentation of material is another interesting trait of Distance Education. As Peters argues, vocational training was a motivator of Distance Education (Peters, 2004, p. 15). Such vocational demands arose in many countries during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and many programs are still in use today, witness the staggering statistics presented by Holmberg (Holmberg, 2005, p. 31).

Finally, the ‘adult learner’ is a unique trait of Distance Education. The disenfranchised adult has been a motivating force in the development of Distance Education. Moore and Kearsley note the early work of Anna Eliot Ticknor’s home school for women and the development of Distance Education from the Land Grant universities for people in rural areas (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, pp. 26-27). It was the recognition of the special needs and desires of adults that motivated the development of Distance Education. Holmberg alludes to the maturity and independence of the adult learner, “The reference to the maturity of distance students is indicative of the relevance of student independence in our context” (Holmberg, 2005, 33).

CONCLUSION

The elements of teacher-student separation, feedback, presentation of materials, and the unique characteristics of the adult learner are the key traits of Distance Education. However, since 'traits' implies a degree of permanence, a more appropriate term might be 'states.' By viewing these elements as 'states' we can recognize the dynamic character of Distance Education with the development of technology, and the varied influence of cultural environments. Whether 'traits' or 'states' Distance Education is destined to become a more influential player in the field of adult education.

Works Cited

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