Distance Education Teachers in the Digital Age: New Roles and Contradictory Demands

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Abstract

The digital technologies challenge profoundly the organization of academic life both within campus-based and distance teaching universities. The implementation of the new technologies poses some critical dilemmas for policy makers offering distance teaching programs at university level, particularly within the framework of the large-scale distance teaching universities. This chapter contrasts the role of distance education teachers within the framework of the industrial model as compared to the premises of the digital age, and analyzes the new roles and contradictory demands posed upon the different ranks of teachers in distance teaching institutions in the face of the incorporation of the new technologies. The paper concludes with outlining some leading future trends of distance teaching in diverse higher education settings, with an emphasis on the new types of support systems needed for both students and teachers in distance teaching institutions in the digital age.

Introduction

Many of the distance teaching universities that have been established since the early 1970s were forerunners in redefining and reshaping the roles of their academic staff to match their unique learning/teaching environments. Distance teaching requires academics to devote far more time to the preparation of study materials than they would for a face-to-face classroom preparation. In many distance teaching universities the academic staff work in the framework of teams in the process of developing the self-study courses, which restricts in several aspects their academic freedom (Perry, 1977; Daniel, 1996). An additional important pattern of many distance education institutions has been the breaking up of the teaching responsibility between many actors. The question of: 'Who is the teacher in a distance teaching university?' generates quite often contradictory answers, and is perceived differently by the heads of distance education institutions, the senior academic faculty, course coordinators, counselors, tutors and students.

The new information and communication technologies (ICT) challenge profoundly the organization of academic life both within classical and distance teaching universities. The ICT are irreversibly transforming the ways we learn, teach, generate knowledge and conduct research, and academics are expected to adjust to the future changes of their traditional roles (AFT, 2001; Bates, 2001; Evans & Nation, 2000; Guri-Rosenblit, 2001, 2003; Van der Molen, 2001). The new teaching and learning environments require the academic staff in both conventional and distance teaching universities to assume new responsibilities and to develop a range of new skills and talents. The ICT pose some critical dilemmas for policy makers in distance teaching universities and challenge some of the underlying premises of the industrial model upon which the large scale distance teaching universities have been operating in the last three decades. The induction of distance education teachers into the new forms of delivery necessitates the establishment of new professional support services, and a total overhaul of the whole course development

procedures and the teaching and counseling apparatus of the distance teaching universities.

This chapter contrasts the roles of distance education teachers within the framework of the industrial model as compared to the premises of the digital age, and analyzes the contradictory demands and new roles posed upon the different ranks of teachers in a distance teaching institution in face of the incorporation of the new technologies. The paper concludes with outlining some leading future trends of distance education at university level, with an emphasis on the new types of support systems needed for students and teachers in distance teaching institutions in the digital age.

Distance Education Teachers in the Framework of the Industrial Model

Most of the mega distance teaching universities that teach dozens of thousands of students followed the model of the British Open University that was established in 1969. They were a product of governmental planning set to fulfill national missions, mainly – to absorb large numbers of students at a lower cost as compared to traditional campus universities (Daniel, 1996; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). This goal has been achieved through an industrial model of operation (Peters, 1994, 2001).

The division of the academic teaching responsibility into two separate phases constitutes the essence of the industrial model of distance education. The first phase is devoted to the development of high quality self-study materials by teams of experts. In most distance teaching universities the academic staff work together in a team that can include colleagues, tutors, editors, instructional designers, television producers, computer experts, and graphic production personnel, to develop and write the courses. In the course team framework, the faculty's academic freedom in teaching is clearly reduced when compared with their counterparts at campus-based universities (Perry, 1977; Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). The main responsibility of course team faculty is vested in writing and composing self-study courses, and their skills as teachers are relegated aside.

Most of the course developers do not participate in the second phase of the actual learning/ teaching process. The underlying assumption at this phase is that large numbers of students study the pre-developed courses through the didactic apparatus integrated into the self-study materials, and as the number of students increases, the cost per student decreases. The sheer size of distance teaching universities disconnects most of their senior academic staff from the essential interaction of learning. The teaching responsibilities are distributed between senior academic staff and other actors that participate in the teaching of the academic courses. Distance teaching universities were bound to require categories of staff which have no counterpart elsewhere.

Most of the distance teaching universities have recognized the need for general support services and devoted many resources to set them up. If the early 1970s were taken up with the quest for effective modes of course design, interest in the 1980s shifted to the design of student support environments (Mills & Tait, 1996). The distance teaching universities show, without the slightest doubt, that to deal effectively with large numbers of students from widely different backgrounds, it is indispensable to reinforce teaching and learning by efficient interactivity between students and tutors, and to provide efficient support services by a battery of professional staff. Since the late 1980s, a growing literature has developed which criticized the one-way linear industrial model and

stressed the importance of social interaction with both peers and teachers/tutors/ counselors (Hamilton, 1990; Rumble, 1992; Evans & Nation, 1993; Paul & Brindley, 1996). In many countries initiatives have been taken to increase the number of active study centers where social exchange and interactive learning can take place (Mills & Tait, 1996). Student support services are costly. To some extent they go counter to the drive for cost effectiveness in distance teaching (Guri-Rosenblit, 1999). The new technologies provide feasible solutions to enhance student support and interactivity in distance teaching settings, as discussed further on.

An important question which emerges from the issue of the distributed teaching responsibility between many actors is: Who are perceived as teachers or instructors by students? Are they the lecturers who planned and developed the self-study materials with an appropriate didactic apparatus? Are they the course coordinators or the maintenance course team personnel (wherever they are other than the course developers themselves), responsible for monitoring the whole process of teaching, setting and checking exams and assignments whilst being available for students' queries and questions? Or are they the tutors or personal tutors who are in close and frequent contact with the students throughout the learning process? This question is neither trivial, nor simple to answer.

From the point of view of a distance teaching university as an organization, self-study materials replace the lecture in conventional universities (Holmberg, 1995; Keegan, 1986, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Those in the professional and lower academic ranks who participate in the development and teaching stages are seen as support staff, but by no means are they regarded as substitutes for lecturers. The venia legendi, the right to teach at a university, is vested in the written materials. But students, as well as the teaching and professional staff in distance teaching universities, have been socialized within conventional settings, where the person who is in direct contact and dialogue with the students is perceived as the teacher, and all other means, such as books and additional media, are looked upon as auxiliary devices. This basic and profound socialization which evolves from early childhood through the adulthood gives rise to an interesting paradox in distance teaching universities which offer their students ample opportunities for interaction with tutors and other academic staff in regular face-to-face tutorials and seminars or in virtual settings. The more interaction that takes place between students and with tutors, counselors and course coordinators, the less obvious is the responsibility of senior academic faculty in the real phase of teaching and learning. This paradox becomes more acute in the digital age.

Distance Education Teachers in the Digital Age

The new ICT are most attractive for distance teaching. They have the potential to overcome three major problems of traditional distance education: to rescue the isolated students from their loneliness by providing interaction with teachers, tutors and counselors, as well as with their peers, throughout the study process (cf. also Salmon in this volume); to provide easy access to libraries and other information resources, which was nearly impossible in the past (cf. also Frank & George in this volume); and to update self-study materials on an ongoing basis. But the application of the ICT by large distance teaching institutions requires a major restructuring of their whole operation, and an immense investment in setting up a totally new infrastructure for developing and delivering their courses. Distance education as provided by the large distance teaching universities and

e-learning are based on two different teaching/learning paradigms. While the industrial model of distance education is based on teaching large numbers of students by a handful of professors, most of whom do not communicate with the students at all, efficient e-learning encourages the direct interaction between a small number of students with expert teacher/s (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Littleton & Light, 1999).

In theory, the possibility of enhanced communication in distance education between the senior academic faculty and students is enabled by the new technologies, but its actualization is much more complicated to achieve. Small numbers of faculty are unable to communicate with thousands or even hundreds of students. Most, if not all, large distance teaching universities cannot afford to hire many more academics in order to facilitate student-professor interaction (Guri-Rosenblit, 2003). A much more elaborated teaching network has to be established which will enable ongoing interaction between senior academic faculty and course coordinators and/or tutors, and between tutors and students in the actual study process of any given course.

Developing countries, in particular, do not possess the appropriate resources and technology to make e-learning available on a wide scale. Bates, who was asked by the 'International Institute for Educational Planning' of UNESCO to recommend national strategies for implementing e-learning in post-secondary education in various parts of the world, concluded that: "Those countries that are not yet ready for the knowledge-based economy are probably not yet ready for e-learning" (Bates, 2001, p. 111), and he suggested that those countries with large numbers of students unable to access later years of secondary or higher education should adopt the industrial model of distance education, that provides the best route for mass education, rather than engage in designing e-learning systems.

Also in the domain of information access, the mega distance teaching universities encounter more difficulties as compared to their conventional counterparts (cf. also Zawacki-Richter in this volume). Their egalitarian philosophy that requires them to provide equality of opportunity to all of their students and their large numbers of students, many of whom lack the ability or opportunity to reach Internet facilities and information resources, hinder them from substituting part of their courses, or parts of any given course, by online materials, and by a built-in reference mechanism in the pre-prepared textbooks. This accounts for the duplication phenomenon. Many distance teaching universities currently develop both printed and online versions of courses, and enable their students to choose their preferred mode of study. Such a policy adds on substantial costs to the already very expensive process of developing self-study materials (cf. also Hülsmann in this volume).

The new technologies enable updating study materials with relative ease, but at the same time they challenge the overall infrastructure of the large distance teaching universities. At campus-based universities, the individual lecturer or tutor in any classroom may alter and redefine reading lists, set assignments and study tasks in the light of teaching dynamic. Teaching faculty in most distance teaching universities do not have the latitude whatsoever to make such alterations. The principles of sameness and uniformity apply to assignments and exams as they do to content. In order to employ flexible update mechanisms, the distance teaching universities have to redefine and restructure their overall teaching mechanisms.

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It seems that in spite of the apparent advantages and merits of the new ICT for distance education, many of the distance teaching universities lack the appropriate infrastructure and necessary conditions, as well as the human capital, to utilize the full potential of the new technologies. To integrate the electronic media more fully and efficiently into their learning/teaching processes, a whole restructuring of their teaching and counseling operation is required, taking into account the contradictory demands put on their academics.

Torn Between Contradictory Demands

Policy makers and academic faculty in distance teaching universities are currently torn between contradictory demands. The quest for appropriate technologies, to improve the quality of distance teaching, lies at the heart of the development of distance education in general, and distance teaching universities in particular. The distance teaching universities feel an urge to lead the ICT integration in academic environments, but at the same time they are forced to acknowledge that such integration bears tremendously high costs, and requires a redefinition of their operation. The senior academic faculty are still required to devote most of their efforts to develop self-study courses, but nowadays they are also expected to be involved more in the actual teaching process. Course coordinators, tutors and counselors are torn between their obligation to stick to the content and didactic apparatus of the self-study materials, and their need to be flexible and attentive to differential students' needs in the ongoing interactive communication in the teaching/learning process. The principles of sameness and equity to all their students hinder many distance teaching universities from offering highly sophisticated technological developments that might be used by only part of their students. And the students' need for social interaction with both teachers and other students requires finding a most delicate balance between the functions of physical study centers and electronic communication.

A crucial question is who will be responsible for the ongoing update of the study materials - the developers of the initial course or the course coordinators of the course? And to what extent will the course coordinator and/or the tutors be granted degrees of freedom to update the course materials in the actual study process, and respond immediately to student queries and questions? From a variety of studies, it is clear that most students are expecting the person who directly interacts with them through the electronic media to respond to their queries within a short span of time (Collis & Moonen, 2001; Guri-Rosenblit, 2003; Sarid, 2003). Given that most tutors in distance teaching universities are part-timers, and have neither the knowledge nor the expertise of a full-time lecturer, it is of crucial importance to establish special communication and support systems that enable them to interact with other tutors and with the course developers. There is also a need to provide tutors with continuous in-service professional training and counseling support. In a large study conducted at the Open University of Israel it was found that the tutors are key persons in shaping students' attitudes towards the integration of the new technologies into the study process (Sarid, 2003).

Another crucial task facing the policy makers of distance teaching universities is how to reconcile between the traditional role of distance education to provide economies of scale with setting efficient e-learning study environments. In other words, how to find low cost/high outcome approaches. For many decades, distance education has prided

itself for providing economies of scale as compared to campus-based universities, while well designed e-learning environments turn out quite frequently to cost more than comparable face-to-face encounters (Bates, 2001; Guri-Rosenblit, 2001, 2003; Ryan, 2002; Hülsmann in this volume). Such a crucial dilemma requires the heads of distance teaching universities to set new priorities, and redefine the whole organization of the materials' development and teaching.

Furthermore, the evolution of the new technologies and their integration into learning and teaching have considerably transformed earlier roles of study centers and support systems of many distance teaching universities. Class teaching at study centers has shifted to different forms of interaction. Many functions of counseling can nowadays be performed by direct interaction between students and counselors through the electronic media. Nevertheless, students still need social meetings with tutors and other students in spite of electronic media. A balanced mix of various support modalities, suitable to the national setting in which each distance teaching university operates, is of crucial importance.

Concluding Remarks

The complexity of the ICT and the high costs associated with their implementation require a top-down macro level strategy for their effective utilization. Any serious shift of the existing learning infrastructures in any institution requires an overall institutional commitment, a gradual induction of both students and academic faculty to the new ICT uses, the planning of appropriate support services, and clear financial prospects. Distance teaching universities are obliged to alter their organizational infrastructure and overhaul the management of headquarters, local and regional centers. They are challenged currently to develop teaching and learning systems that are flexible in nature, and respond quickly to changes in subject matter, technology and student clienteles.

Distance education at university level will grow in the coming years and will attract new student clienteles. It will be provided more and more by mixed-mode institutions and consortia in addition to stand-alone distance teaching institutions. It seems that in spite of the growing competition between distance education providers, the status of the mega distance teaching universities will remain strong, and their main mandate will continue to be to widen access to higher education by reaching out to students who cannot attend or gain access to conventional universities for a variety of reasons.

The expansion of higher education implies the inclusion of less privileged students within its circles. Unprepared students from disadvantaged backgrounds will most assuredly need sophisticated and elaborate assistance in the study process. Many distance teaching universities have developed throughout the years first rate tutorial and counseling services, personal tutors, tutors, tutor counselors, intensive tutorials, seminar settings, summer and residential schools, and campus-like environments (Mills & Tait, 1996). The nature of student support systems will change in the future and will utilize the wide range capabilities of the new technologies. Not only students in distance teaching universities, but also the academic faculty of all ranks need ongoing professional and social support in the adaptation process of the new technologies.

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