

Imperative Issues on the Educational Process among Asian Open Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the educational processes in Asian Open Universities. The major research questions addressed are as follows: (1) how does students' profile in Asian open universities differ from each other? (2) apart from physical separation, what other factors contribute to separation of learners in distance and open learning? Do cultural and language adaptations help in the educational processes? (3) what types of media are integrated into the educational processes in different open universities? In what ways do these media encourage interaction between teaching and learning? (4) what roles does information communication technology play in the educational processes? How do these roles differ among the Asian Open Universities? (5) what factors enhance/limit the widespread of information communication technology among the Asian Open Universities? The paper discusses the results and draws out similarities and differences of educational processes among the higher education open institutions. The implications about what best practices in instructional design and use of information communication technology can be learned from each other are also discussed.

Introduction

One of the major characteristics in distance education is the separation of learners and a teacher. Teaching is transferred to students through a media which can be in the form of printed material, radio or television broadcast or any other form of audio/video aids or a combination of these mentioned medium. Since the teaching can then be repeated whenever there is a desire in learning, this type of education can reach a larger population and is counted as a kind of mass education. This differs in traditional education in which a teacher faces a limited amount of students and the presence of an academic is a symbol for wisdom exchange in the early days. Academics in conventional university assume four roles: planning the curriculum, organising the resource necessary, teaching the material to students and evaluating students' attainment (Daniel, 1998, page 141) but these four roles are divided among different departments in a distance education organisation.

Teaching and learning are two different aspects. In setting up distance education institutions, face-to-face meetings, or other means of communication, with a facilitator, have been arranged to cater for the isolation of learners. Since the teacher's position is replaced by the teaching course content, terms like 'facilitator, tutor, collaborator, instructor' are used to specify persons who support the learning process. Distance education does not simply mean to release information on one side and to receive it on the other side. In order to ensure the educational process to be smooth and effective, distance educators have stressed the importance of guided didactic conversation and an industrialised form of instruction in distance learning courses (Peters, 1993, page 14).

The advance in technology provides a better environment to organise a video conference, to discuss and to communicate through telephones, electronic mails. In fact, distance education is renamed as **distance on-line learning (DOL)** to

characterise the inclusion of computer, information and high technology on this type of education then.

Background of the Asian countries

With a large continent like Asia, it is not surprised to see different social structures and cultures among Asian countries. Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and China share mainly the Confucian-heritage culture through which education has a high value of respect. Japanese people have a strong sense of loyalty and they stress on efforts rather than on intelligence. Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are multicultural countries whereas Thailand is famous for its Buddhism. India is also proud of its civilisation in the early days.

Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and South Korea were once called the 'Four Dragons in Asia' because of their economic growth due to low cost, mainly due to cheap labours, product for export. Japan had tremendous growth in economic, due to high technology electronic products, before 97. China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have their 'modernisation' slogan for economic growth.

Most Asian countries have very competitive education systems: students' learning is shaped by requirements in public examination. Education qualification is regarded a certification for jobs with high salaries and positions (Morris and Sweeting, 1995, page 257). Education was only confined to a small sector of people who got good results in these public examination before the existence of Open Universities. It is of merits to know how much influence has DOL on Asian countries.

Distance education in an international perspective

There was a saying that "school education is one stage of life, short in time and simple in content but the knowledge acquired after growing up is more complicated and extensive than that acquired at school" (Yao, 1990, page 13). It is no longer enough to get a qualification for a person's whole life. Modernisation in every parts of the world required education for the whole life. Technological change demanded a re-training of workers in order to fulfil employment. The re-training is not restricted to mechanical use of skills. Ethics and values are also essentials elements in education for the whole life (Daniel, 1998, page 5). Adult education has been classified into three types: fundamental or basic education (literacy), work-related or updating education and discretionary education (Hunter, 1990, page 25). Although these three forms of education may exist simultaneously, a country may stress one form more than that of the other forms due to its cultural, economic and social background. Does students' profile at a DOL organisation reflect a country's most common form of education?

Choice of medium

DOL applies various types of media to deliver teaching content and to support learning. The four basic media to deliver course contents are print-based, audio-based, video-based and computer-based. It has been analysed the strengths and weaknesses of each of these media and announced how to choose a media in order to fit teaching aims (Sparkes, 1988, page 262). Teaching texts, video tapes, audio tapes and broadcast through television or radio carry their different functions in delivering course content.

The fast development on personal computers, CD-ROMs, mobile telephones, fax-machines and other telecommunication instruments leads to the third generation on distance education or what we named as DOL. Teleconferencing and remote-classroom teaching provide synchronous communication between students and students, between teachers and students. Electronic mails and computer conferencing also provide opportunities to exchange ideas or to build up an academic community. Cost of these high-technology products and the confidence of learners using these equipment are important factors on whether DOL can be popular or not (Daniel, 1988, page 56). It is valuable to study how DOL has propagated through Asian countries and how information communication technology has helped Asian learners in the educational process.

Globalisation

DOL courses are produced, not by an individual but by a course team whose job is to ensure quality assurance. The rapid change in technologies does not allow too much time in producing current up-to-date courses. Academics are closer to the production process of these courses (Daniel, 1988, page 131). Developing technology-based teaching is costly in staff time and demands for research finding. It has been proposed that universities work together so as to gain understanding and expertise from each others. (Daniel, 1988, page 161). Such co-operation will accelerate globalisation of learning.

Research aims

With the understanding on distance education and the general characters in Asia, this paper aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) how does students' profile in Asian open universities differ from each other?
- (2) apart from physical separation, what other factors contribute to separation of learners in distance and open learning? Do cultural and language adaptations help in the educational processes?
- (3) what types of media are integrated into the educational processes in different open universities? In what ways do these media encourage interaction between teaching and learning?
- (4) what roles do information communication technology play in the educational processes? How do these roles differ among the Asian Open Universities?
- (5) what factors enhance/limit the widespread of information communication technology among the Asian Open Universities?

The paper discusses the results and draws out similarities and differences of educational processes among the higher education open institutions. The implications about what best practices in instructional design and use of information communication technology can be learned from each other are also discussed.

Methodology

There are three stages in collecting results. The first stage was an electronic world-wide forum that lasted for two weeks in September 1998. This aims to collect both the western and eastern views on educational process.

The second stage was to send a questionnaire to eastern countries. This is to gather qualitative opinions on their ways to deliver distance on-line education, their aims,

their practice on preparing the teaching contents and their ways to arrange communication between students and facilitators. The questionnaire was sent in November 98 to 69 Asian Open Universities. 43 questionnaires were returned.

With the results in the second stage, the third stage was still to send a questionnaire to eastern countries but this round was on quantitative results so as to confirm what we gathered in stage two. 245 replies were collected after sending out 482 questionnaires in May 99.

Results

The nature of distance on-line learning

One of the important issues discussed during the electronic forum was on the aims of distance education. Responses showed that academics are not satisfied that distance education can only provide highly informed or highly skilled persons. The four pillars in education are recognised and these four pillars are: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do and learning to live together. There were responses that announced their opportunity in learning is a result of DOL. Without DOL, these respondents would not have the chance to study.

All responses in the qualitative survey echoed that DOL provides the opportunity to learn and to educate all people. Only 4 responses agreed that this type of education can improve the quality of the society and these four responses are from China. Responses from China, India, Thailand and Iran indicated that DOL can train people and update their skill. Findings from stage 3 indicated that most of these learners are in their twenties and there is a very balanced ratio on male to female students.

Determination on programmes

Our collected responses showed that it is usually faculties/departments which decide on a programme, pass it to the University for endorsement. Usually, governments do not interfere on universities' policy. In quite a number of countries, outside expertise and subject specialist do input their wisdom on course/programme development. In certain occasions, the availability of a course depends on both the teaching and learning facilities. Responses revealed that market surveys on job demand and economic development also help in determining what courses or programmes to offer for study.

Course contents and assessment materials

Preparation on the course content is the second issue raised in the electronic forum. The instructional team does not simply produce the course content but to revise it after receiving students' feedback. The knowledge of processes is important just as the memory skill cannot be ignored. The current media on educational transaction include online web, voice mail, instructional television, interactive television network, face-to-face meeting and correspondence in United States.

It was collected that academic expertise is needed in the development of both course content and assessment materials. However, these two components may not be developed by the same person even though the developers may be within the same department. The production of these components is often centralised in certain countries.

Results in stage three revealed that only 6% indicated that their representative course was written by the course author independently. 20% of the respondents showed their course was prepared by the course team which includes the author. One-quarter of the

responses showed that their institution had a standard media formula for all courses. 36% of the responses indicated that instructional design staff was involved in preparing courses. Only 2% of the answers indicated that their student representative has taken part in preparing courses. This information confirms that course production in DOL has a definite order and regulation but flexibility is always allowed.

The teaching/learning media

The teaching/learning media is usually a combination of medium. Among these medium, printed material and television broadcast are the most common one. Teleconferencing is used quite common among India, Philippines. The statistics in stage three gave more details on the teaching mode:

2.4% of the responses indicated that they have electronic courses.

58% of the responses indicated that they organise face-to-face teaching supplemented by distance teaching.

17% of the responses indicated that they have equal proportion in distance teaching and face-to-face teaching.

1.6% of the responses indicated they have only distance teachings without face-to-face discussions.

Assessment structure

68% of the responses indicated that students have to submit assignments. However, it was only 2% of the responses that they will assess students simply by assignments.

70% of the responses indicated that they assess students just by one written examination at the end of a course. 11% of the responses indicated that they assess students by more than one examination during a course.

Structure of assessment questions

25% of the responses indicated that their assessment requires learners to write short essay on a set topic.

9% of the responses indicated that their assessment requires learners to work on group projects.

9.8% of the responses indicated that their assessment requires learners to write long essay on a set topic.

34% of the responses indicated that their assessment requires learners to work on short open questions.

Such collected results demonstrated DOL assess students mainly through examination and through short questions.

Personalised learning

About 60% of the answers showed their representative course had at least 80% of the course content were conducted through printed materials. Although there are radio or television broadcast to deliver course contents, audio or video tapes are the more common ones. These figures indicated that DOL in Asia is quite personalised.

It is gathered that lack of communication and wrong choice of teaching material or media create barriers on the educational process in certain Asian Open Universities. Students are separated not only by distance, but by their difference in culture, their learning style, their individual behaviour and their perception on traditional education. It is also pointed out that the lack of educational activity stop students from getting together. Family and work commitments are reported to deprive the studying time in

Indonesia. The access of materials at different locations is another factor on students' separation.

India and Philippines used English to instruct learners. Other Asian open universities mainly use their mother tongue as a language of instruction. English is not common among most Asian countries. 40% of the responses in stage three exhibited that language of instruction is the most important issue in the educational process. This is compared to only 27% of the responses picked on cultural practice as the most important issue.

Information communication technology

The third issue raised during the electronic forum was on information communication technology in distance on-line education. Its great potential was announced and the cost in implementing it was stressed.

Information technology has been implemented mainly in various teaching aspects at China RTVU and University of Air. It was collected that information technology was not widely used in the learning aspect among the other Asian universities. Certain countries could not provide comments as their lack of experience. A response from India claimed that computer-mediated communication is urgently required on a big scale but the cost on computers is very expensive to students with less income. The collected responses showed that computer mediated communications tend more towards the two-way communication between teachers and students than the teaching aspects.

Face-to-face tutorials are still provided to learners as the most common way through which they meet with a facilitator. More than half of the responses showed they did not exercise video conferencing, audio conferencing, computer chatting to communicate with students. About half of the answers indicated they do not require learners to approach on-line databases nor information banks.

More than 70% of the responses agreed that the availability of technology, availability of software, accessibility to students, acceptability to tutors, acceptability to students, suitability of the subject matter, cost to institution and cost to students all rated high importance when a DOL institution include information technology in a course. But among all these factors, the suitability of the subject matter is the most crucial factor. It is slightly higher than the factor on accessibility to students.

Implications

The opportunity to study

Even if there are Asian distance teaching institutions which may not be open to everyone, the opportunity to study is widened since tertiary education is no longer restricted to a small confined class of people. The flexibility provided by distance education brings the hope to study more realistic than ever.

Education qualification may path the way for better job positions. But there are certain Asians, such as the Chinese, who believe education is not for an individual, but for their country. They do not agree that distance education only brings highly skilled or informed persons. They believe their education can improve the quality of the society.

Teaching aspect

Subject expertise has a central role in developing the course content. Their knowledge on the subject matter is impossible to be left out. If such expertise is not within an

organisation that deliver the course, then someone outside the organisation is sought. One may doubt whether these outsiders persons can lead students to learn through distance education as they do not have the instruction/educational technology skills. Our future studies will see whether small DOL institutions face more critical issues in this aspect.

Learners' isolation

Our result indicated that DOL in Asia tended to have quite a high proportion in face-to-face teaching. But even though, our learners are quite isolated in learning. Learners are isolated in studying not because of separation in distance but because of difference in culture, their learning style, their individual behaviour and their perception on traditional education. Most of the DOL institutions use their mother tongue to give instructions but learners tend to believe the language of instruction has more consequence on affecting their studies than cultural practice has.

DOL learners are mainly assessed through one examination and through short open questions. It is quite understandable that because of the flexibility in DOL which allow learners to study at their leisure time, students do not have to contact each other. Also, the assessment structure does not encourage students to work with each other. Our collected results demonstrated that even with computer mediated communication, discussions are mainly held between learners and facilitators. Discussions among students are still beyond expectation. With more study on understanding Asian learners, we may then be able to bring them together on discussions.

Information Technology

The information in the 21st century is so rich and so easy to approach through computer technology. Social pressures have pushed information communication technology into the learning environment. Cost, accessibility and availability are serious problems that DOL have to consider, to face and to resolve. Yet these factors are not the most crucial ones to include information technology into DOL courses. Our survey confirmed that academic expertise is the most crucial one waiting for our resolution. It is by no means easy to become gifted in these latest technology and in leading Asian adult learners to construct meaningful studies. Our communication and our exchange of experience may help us to bring benefits to our learners.

Conclusion

This paper has reported the general features in the educational process among Asian Open Universities and has discussed the implications because of these general features. Globalisation on learning will be a trend in the near future with the increase use of video conferencing and electronic mails. But each place has its own social and economic background which induce special characteristics on learners. We believe the more understanding on Asian learners, the more benefits they have and the more care we will take to ensure a constructive educational process. We hope for an opportunity to exchange views so that the issue can be extended further.

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