

THE LIGHT

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Internet and Higher Education

Online and Distance Learning

BY DR. VINCE SININING

The rapid growth of distance education and e-learning continue to amaze me since the very day I defended my dissertation on the role of technology in higher education in 1996. Although the internet was widely introduced to the public in the United States in 1995, research into packet switching began in the 1960s. When I was a student of computer science in the 1980s, we were using Telenet – the first packet-switched network service that was available to the general public. Back then, users were fascinated with the green screen or some black with the cursor blinking. In order to run any program in those computers, you had to type-in every code. Today, anyone can access unlimited resources with a touch of a finger – on any smart phone and other devices, anywhere, anytime.

The growth of internet communication technologies sparked a huge demand for qualified professionals as online and distance learning mode of education became increasingly practiced around the world. While the west has explored this mode of learning quite well, for the past two months that I have lived in Kigali, I noticed that many people face difficulties when understanding the difference between online and distance learning, as well as recognizing its vast potential to enable people to learn more. Its not uncommon also to find even educators and policy-makers who are confused when exposed to cross-study comparisons about online and distance learning. Without having to conduct any research, I can sense how individuals have different expectations and perceptions of online and distance learning.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s,

I had the opportunity of being one of the pioneering members of the United Nations Working Group on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at the UN Headquarters in New York. The active involvement of Steve Forbes, Chairman of the Forbes Magazine, and Mike Lackey, President of AIT Global inspired many delegates at the UN in getting involved. In 2000, the UN Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary General to create the UN ICT Task Force, and was officially created in November 2001 by then SG Kofi Annan. A year later, one of the sessions of the General Assembly was devoted to ICT for development. During this time, countries were more concerned about the digital divide in the context of globalization and the development process. In one of our substantive sessions of the ECOSOC in 2000, we agreed that “ICT is central to the creation of a global knowledge-based economy and society. ICT can play an especially important part in accelerating growth, eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development in developing and transition economy countries and in facilitating their beneficial integration into the global economy.”

“As a delegate back then, I advanced the concept of “sustainable development” through education and the use of ICT. We didn’t have android phones back then, no iphones, no tablets, and thus, it was understandable when most people don’t buy the idea of online and distance learning that can provide

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access to education, especially to least developed nations. If one conducts a research, pursuing an online and distance learning is way much cheaper than traditional programs, and allows any motivated person to learn more than what a classroom instructor can offer. In one meeting of the General Assembly, I remember one Prime Minister who said that, he refused to pay these expensive consultants for advise when his grandson can google everything on the internet.

Now that I am involved in higher education with emphasis on online and distance learning, I find it necessary to share my thoughts – that online learning and distance learning no longer mean the same thing.

In many traditional schools, online learning is integrated as part of the classroom instructions. Students use online learning to engage in any class discussions and projects. We used the term “blended” or “hybrid” learning which means a mixture of teaching techniques, learning styles, and delivery methods. Traditionally, education is delivered on a face-to-face interaction in a classroom. Nowadays, many institutions are using the face-to-face interaction to introduce or reinforce content, hands-on and collaborative activities, then combine a mix of content delivery using the internet communication

technology commonly referred to as “e-learning.” You will notice that online focuses on methods while distance is about geography. Combine both and you have an effective tool of delivering education using today’s internet technologies: blended learning. Mature learners will appreciate this kind of opportunity to learn independently with online learning in addition to the wide variety of methods in teaching and learning.

Today, online or virtual education is now part of the planning agenda of most organizations concerned with education and training. The quality of distance learning has greatly improved in the past few years, as both students and educators have become more comfortable with the technology, and as stories of best practices have been shared and duplicated [U.S. Department of Education’s National Forum on Education Statistics].

However, success in any web-based learning depends on the student’s ability to manage time. Being on your own requires a lot of commitment and dedication to complete a research project or case study. Many students procrastinated through weeks of the semester, and find themselves so far behind that they could never recover. On the other side, students who are well-motivated advance the program, saving time and money. Online and Distance learning features a number

of advantages, particularly for working students. The most relevant benefit involves the luxury of keeping your work schedule and remaining at home while studying -- and consequently the control you have to finish faster any given coursework.

In one of the meetings I attended at the Ministry of Education in Kigali, I can’t help but noticed the flyers in one of the corners of the Board Room: “Increase Access to Education”. Having visited the schools in Rwanda’s Southern Province, I met so many hard working and dedicated teachers and I asked myself “how can they have access to higher education” noting the remoteness of their location, as well as their financial capacity to attend a higher education institution? Pursuing their post graduate and graduate studies in education would have been impossible without the “online and distance learning” mode that I came to observe in their classroom teaching exercises. Indeed, I am proud to dedicate my life now in transferring my knowledge to these hardworking men and women by providing them “access to education” anywhere, anytime, at a cost they can afford.

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