

DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: From Correspondence Courses to the Internet

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is a descendent of distance education. Online education has a shared history with correspondence learning. In 1873, Anna Eliot Ticknor founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home. Ticknor's Society established one of America's first correspondence schools, a distance learning option conducted through the mail. This Society was aimed at the education of women and enrolled more than seven thousand women. Education by mail was a quality approach to provide education for all because it allowed universities to access an infinite number of potential students. Today there are institutions that offer only online courses. At the same time, brick and mortar or traditional institutions offer online courses in addition to their face-to-face courses. A review of the literature suggests that as indicated by enrollment figures, the number of students taking online courses is growing and continued growth can be expected in the future.

Keywords: Distance education, online education, internet courses, web-based education, and correspondence education.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

Online learning, a descendent of distance education, has spawned a number of educational institutions devoted solely to online degree programs in the United States. Traditional universities have also expanded their offerings to include online education (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Lei & Gupta, 2010).

The convenience of online learning has made it possible to reach a student population that was previously un-served, to reach more students at peak times of the day, and to maximize resources and flexibility for the university (Lei & Gupta, 2010). With this rapid growth in online education it seems prudent to examine the history of distance education in the United States.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the evolution of distance education from correspondence courses to the Internet. In order to accomplish this successfully a review of the literature was conducted. This review of the literature was based on selected articles addressing the history of distance education in higher education in the United States as found in academic journals and publications.

Studies have demonstrated mixed reviews of academic achievement between online education and traditional instruction. Still other studies have demonstrated how online instruction can be just as effective as traditional instruction.

In some cases, online instruction has proven to be even more effective than traditional instruction. Students, moreover, have communicated both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with online course delivery. These mixed results become even more confused with the plethora of e-learning options available from which to choose (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Lei & Gupta, 2010).

DEFINITIONS

Before proceeding further the following definitions are in order.

Blended and hybrid courses are defined as courses that deliver material both face-to-face and online and students interact with instructors both online and face-to-face.

Distance education is defined as instruction in which students are separated from instructors to reach a during the entire course of study

Face-to-face and traditional courses are courses that deliver material face-to-face and students interact with instructors face-to-face.

Online and internet courses are defined as courses that deliver material entirely online and students interact with instructors entirely online.

HISTORY

Online education is a descendent of and has a shared history with correspondence learning. In 1873, Anna Eliot Ticknor for example, the daughter of George Ticknor, a Harvard professor and recognized scholar, founded the Society to Encourage Studies at Home. Ticknor's father, in addition, played a significant role in the founding of the Boston Public Library. During his lifetime he was connected with education. Some of his interests were passed on to his daughter. She had her father's enormous library at her disposal and all the resources she needed to begin the Society to Encourage Studies at Home and to succeed at it (Bergman, 2001).

In addition Anna Ticknor, on her mother's side, had influential connections. Her cousin Charles William Eliot, became president of Harvard University in 1869, oversaw enormous university and higher educational changes.

Another cousin, Samuel Eliot, then president of Trinity College from 1860 to 1864, and afterwards principal of the Girls' High and Normal School in Boston from 1872 to 1876, was the chairman of the Society for all its years of existence (Bergman, 2001).

The Society to Encourage Studies at Home was one of the first significant examples of distance education. Elizabeth Cary Agassiz, the co-founder and first president of [Radcliffe College](#), referred to the society as the "silent university" (Bergman, 2001, p. 48). Ticknor's Society established one of America's first correspondence schools, a distance learning option conducted through the mail.

This Society was aimed at the education of women and enrolled more than seven thousand women. Applicants obtained information about the Society, by request. Once acceptance into the Society was granted, students selected one of the following six disciplines in which to study:

- **English**
- **History**
- **Science**
- **French**
- **German**
- **Art**

Educators mailed syllabi to the students, who were responsible for submitting assignments to instructor through the mail. A benefit for women whose time was limited due to domestic obligations was that all learning was self-paced (Bergman, 2001).

To be accepted initially, a woman had to be at least 17 years old and pay a fee of two dollars that covered the costs of printing, postage, and overhead. The term of correspondence was from October 1st through June 1st. Once a course of study was selected and paid her fee, Ticknor returned a printed receipt. The student was then asked three questions: her age, whether she had been educated in public or private schools, and whether she herself was a teacher (Bergman, 2001).

Students were instructed to learn by what Ticknor called "memory notes," and basing their memories with vivid anecdotes. Students submitted their memory notes to their instructors for feedback. In that way, Ticknor thought, both student and educator would be able to assess how well the student had retained what was read. For women whose domestic chores seldom afforded uninterrupted study time, this self-paced learning appeared to be ideal (Bergman, 2001).

There were exams but grades were not communicated to the students, nor were the exams utilized for anything beyond evaluating the effectiveness of instruction. Exams were administered very much like take-home exams are given today. Students were instructed not to open the envelope containing the questions until there was sufficient time available to complete the exam (Bergman, 2001).

The Society to Encourage Studies at Home enrolled over seven thousand women, in spite of the fact that the Society was not widely publicized. Furthermore, it was founded during an emerging trend toward coeducation and the establishment of institutions of higher education for women in the United States. Student recruitment efforts basically ignored class and geographical boundaries of students. Ticknor recruited educated and affluent friends, however, to pledge as volunteer correspondents to provide to women what men had previously refused them (Bergman, 2001).

A memorial of the Society, printed after Ticknor's death, stated that the Society's purpose was to encourage ladies to develop the habit of devoting time every day to study. It is difficult to assess the impact of Ticknor's Society; however, personal testimonies provided indications of how women's lives were transformed as a result of their involvement in distance learning.

It is tempting to consider Ticknor's initiative as conservative in matters of gender equality and education (Wein, 1974). Agassiz, an advocate for the Society, openly praised Ticknor for changing women's lives. The Society to Encourage Studies at Home was revolutionary, and provided women an opportunity to obtain a liberal education aside from the elite women's colleges.

The society was instrumental in the education of women, whether they elected to apply their education in the home or in their careers (Bergman, 2001).

William Rainey Harper, first president of the University of Chicago, is recognized as being a founder of university correspondence education. He developed a Department of Home-Study that was a vital part of the University. Students were allowed to take as much as one-third of their course load by mail.

This program was closely related to the expansion of the university extension movement in the United States. Richard Moulton, one of the founders of university extension (first at Cambridge University, then at Chicago), communicated the justification for extension programs part of a university's responsibility to reach all of society and to provide education for all.

Education by mail was a quality approach to achieve such a goal because it allowed the university to access an infinite number of potential students (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). The past provides an opportunity to move forward based on the lessons learned from the history of distance education. Some of those lessons include the following:

- **distance learning has not realized the upward path some might have suggested but some requirements for success have been such as adaptability, visionary leadership, commitment to service, internal and external political savvy, etc.;**
- **a new and previously un-served student population can be reached;**
- **quality of instruction can overcome other obstacles;**
- **conflicts may arise between face-to-face faculty and distance learning faculty; and**
- **quality of the program is in question when the profit motive becomes the overriding factor (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).**

Both forms of distance education, online learning and correspondence learning, share similar problems, such as:

- **the lack of an overall quality education in comparison to the education provided onsite from a first-rate university,**
- **the view that distance learning was dispensable in comparison to a university education,**
- **the unrealistic expectations of distance learning resulted in a deficiency of incentives for faculty who felt the time-consuming realities and a shortage of sound financial support requiring the program to support itself, and**
- **the quality of instruction (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).**

PROJECTIONS

It is projected that even though the trends in enrollment in higher education overall have been on the rise, the future will see a decline according to Hollenbeck, Zinkhan, & French (2005). This decline is due to the economic downturn and the rising cost of tuition. In fact, "the most recent annual College Board survey shows higher education rising 7.7 percent from the previous year" (p. 39) in tuition costs (Caruth & Caruth, 2012). This increase in cost has required institutions of higher education to seek alternative options for instruction. It is projected that education will include distance learning methods and theories (Hollenbeck et al.).

Currently, postsecondary education is offered by smaller colleges (stressing teaching) and a broader type of university according to Hollenbeck et al. (2005). The first is the traditional, face-to-face "factory university" (p. 39). This type of university is place-bound and product-oriented and determines the time, place and pace for learning.

The "virtual university" (p. 39) is the second type which is offered by a web of institutional providers. In this type of university, the students determine the time, place and pace of study. Both types of universities have two common characteristics. They add value through their respective curricula and they are degree granting institutions. However, the virtual university relies on distance educational methods.

As distance education courses continue to increase, institutions of learning work to design effective assessment methods for online instruction. Seven aspects for assessing effective learning include the following:

- achievability,
- believability,
- measurability,
- desirability,
- focusing,
- motivation, and
- commitment.

These seven aspects emphasize application, as opposed to memorization. Students are expected to broaden their mental models by learning how to adapt to real changes in their surroundings (Hollenbeck et al., 2005). Examples of online universities in the United States include the following four for-profit degree granting universities:

- American Intercontinental University is an accredited university, a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), founded in 1970, and currently it has over 27,043 students.
- Capella University is an accredited university, a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), founded in 1993, and currently it has over 13,989 students.
- Phoenix University is an accredited university, a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), founded in 1976, and currently it has over 200,000 students.
- Walden University is an accredited university, a member of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools (NCA), founded in 1970, and currently it has over 48,982 students.

Studies have resulted in mixed predictions regarding online education. In one study on motivation for resident students taking online courses, it was predicted that enrollment in online courses might decrease because of students being overwhelmed with technology and constant online exposure. Students are in front of the computer too much already and even though they are becoming more comfortable with technology they are at risk of becoming de-motivated (Pastore & Carr-Chellman, 2009).

However, according to Kim & Bonk (2006) it is predicted that there will be a growth of about 10-20% in online certification and recertification programs in the future.

There will also be a rise in associate degrees offered online. Further projections made by the researchers indicated that the overall quality of online education will improve (Caruth & Caruth, 2012).

IMPLICATIONS

Distance learning, since its early days, has changed the playing field for formal education. The federal government, for example, has considered revising requirements that students wanting to qualify for federal assistance can take no more than 50% of their course load online and Harvard University has been considering reducing requirements for residency. Some universities are even requiring students to enroll in some online courses in pursuit of the "global scholar" (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006, p. 570). Additional changes in online education are demonstrated by the following:

- first-rate institutions are offering online courses,
- increase in public learning *via* the internet,
- growth in research on internet education and teaching, and
- growth of efforts that market the benefits of online education.

Hence, online education is becoming common practice in higher education. It is growing and becoming more established (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, and Liu (2006) presented numbers to illustrate how enrollments in online education is increasing 33% in the United States each year.

According to the Sloan Consortium the growth rate in online education exceeds the overall growth rate in higher education. These figures reflected the total student population in higher education (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Allen & Seaman, 2010).

The evolution of online courses and teaching online requires that faculty think and feel differently about the classroom and the learning environment. This change in thinking does not need not to be viewed negatively.

There is some reluctance, on the part of faculty, to move from behind the lectern to the virtual classroom.

As the role of online instruction in higher education develops, instructors are assuming multiple responsibilities as teacher, learner, and technical support person. Faculty should not feel alone in this evolution. Administration must also get behind this in support of the faculty (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Fish & Wickersham, 2009).

At a minimum, faculty needs initial and ongoing training in technology to teach online courses effectively until they feel comfortable with online instruction. Training faculty can be costly whether universities invite online technology experts on campus or they send selected faculty to offsite training (Lei & Gupta, 2010).

According to the Sloan Consortium, there is no single approach to training but most universities provide mentoring and training options for faculty teaching online. Specifically, 65% provide training courses and 59% provide informal mentoring options (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The size of online classes is a concern.

Class size is generally determined by individual universities. Over 20 states in the United States have policies limiting the number of students per class.

On the one hand, some universities advocate large size classes to encourage collaborative learning that produces the most positive learning outcomes. On the other hand, other universities maintain that the best instructor to student interaction is reached through smaller classes (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Orellana, 2006). Early approaches to distance learning did not require different thought processes toward teaching from previous lecture driven instruction. Online education is a new form of distance-learning that focuses on collaborative discussions between students and teachers. Those instructors teaching online, according to Mitchell (2009), felt that because of their online experiences they interacted more effectively with students in face-to-face classes than before. Additionally, teachers now view students as more autonomous and more self-driven (Caruth & Caruth, 2012).

Distance education, moreover, is thriving internationally, particularly in higher education and shows no signs of slowing down. The ease of learning *via* the internet has made it viable to reach students that were previously un-served.

In spite of the rising costs (Hyman, 2012) and challenges when studying outside of the classroom, students have more autonomy, flexibility, and resources to handle their coursework offered with distance education options than in the traditional environment. More educational programs are utilizing the Internet than ever before. Technology has facilitated this approach to distance learning. The growth of web-based distance education has been unprecedented over the past decade and shows little or no signs of slowing down (Lei & Gupta, 2010).

CONCLUSIONS

Online education is becoming an integral part of the American educational system (Caruth & Caruth, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Lei & Gupta, 2010). Currently there are institutions that offer strictly online courses and brick and mortar or traditional institutions also offer online courses. Online education appears to be well established in the higher educational scene. There are mixed views concerning the future developments of online education. Not all research points to a definitive understanding of how online education will unfold in the future.

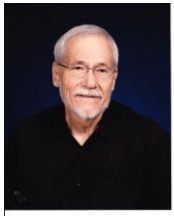
A review of the literature suggests that as indicated by enrollment figures, the number of students taking online courses is growing and continued growth can be expected in the future (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Kim & Bonk, 2006; Lei & Gupta, 2010). However it is measured, online education appears to be here to stay.

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