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E-LEARNING AND THE GLOBAL DIVIDE: The Challenges Facing Distance Education in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the question of distance education and its pivotal role in promoting social change and development in Africa. It also discussed within the context of the global digital divide and the ongoing need for collaborative effort at global education, the limitation imposed by the socio-economic and political environment on the continent.

The paper in its findings conclude that the crisis within African societies constitutes a serious challenge to the implementation of and the effectiveness of distance education in Africa and therefore contributes to the widening of the digital divide rather than reducing it.

Keywords: E-learning, distance education, Africa, global divide

INTRODUCTION

True to the words of James Martin, education which use to be regarded as something that ended when one's working life began, will in this new era, go on throughout life because adult education will be of vital importance. In his musing cited in Thorvaldsen (1980, p.9), he correctly speculated that the following decades will be characterized by an extremely rapid rate of change in which work and leisure activities will change. Many persons will learn two, three, or four careers in a lifetime as telecommunications, automation and later machine intelligence will cause entirely different work patterns. And that electronics will create both the need and the tools for lifelong learning. In fact his speculation was rather cautious considering the world of today with satellite communications, cellular phones, computer technology, software and hardware and much more.

According to Alexander and Boud, all these have transformed education the way it used to be. The impact is therefore complete because it has changed the learner and what he or she is expected to learn and knowledge acquisition process. It has changed the teacher, the process of instruction and his or her own learning process as well and finally transformed the environment within which this knowledge will be put to use.

The change since 1980s has been steady with ever increasing capability provided by multi-media capable computers accompanied by a reduced cost. The rapid growth of the internet has added a new dimension to the entire process because it provides possibilities for high quality education in an investment and entrepreneurial friendly environment. Interestingly, the rise of the new technology seem to coincided with a crisis of confidence in traditional education and an increasing demand for higher and continuing education that have not been adequately met by traditional educational institutions(Alexander and Boud (2001p.3).

These observations, while they are true, continue to change as rapid and in tandem with the speed of technology as well. Our lives have all been transformed not only within the education section but within and between all sectors, within and between societies. But while the transformation within the process of learning and beyond might be true, it is important to establish the importance of education and its impact on societal development and for the purpose of this paper, an attempt will be made to examine distance education in Africa before and since the advent of the new technologies and the factors impacting the process thereof.

In the process of our analysis, we will establish that the environment in the developing countries is an important variable in determining the success of distance education. It will also be established that, rather than reducing the global divide, the socio-economic and political conditions within which the process of distance education is taking place in Africa, widens the divide. In an effort to achieve these goals, this paper is divided and discussed under three themes; Distance education and E-learning; The Widening gap- the African experience and; the Challenges facing distance education in Africa.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

Distance education started in the 1800s with individual pioneers using the latest technologies of the time such as the printing press and the post office, to reach distant students. The situation is no more different today whereby the technologies available are greatly enhancing the potential of distance education as well as the learner's experience. What has changed is the nature and speed of communication brought about by the technology in use. Distance education has transformed itself over the years by incorporating new technologies such as the radio and the television as well as the video, and more recently the computer, the electronic networks, the Internet, the world -wide- web (WWW), videoconferencing and satellite broadcasting. (Barbara Fillip, 2000).However, this transformation has not in any way changed the purpose of education in any of the societies of the developed and developing world. According to Govinda Shrestha, the purpose of education remain the same, because "education has served as the main instrument for disseminating various accomplishment of human civilization and plays a crucial role in producing and transferring knowledge and skills in society" (Shrestha, 1997). The contribution of education to economic growth, the reduction of poverty and injustice and general awareness is well documented. And according to the World Bank, education is "essential for civic order and citizenship and for sustained economic growth and the reduction of poverty (World bank, 1995: xi).

In fact, education is also seen as “one of the keys to social development and virtually every aspect of the quality of life” (ICPQL, 1996:170). This report by the Independent Commission for Population and Quality of Life (ICPQL) reaffirms the global acceptance of education as an important vehicle for social change and development.

Distance Education: As an extension of traditional education process, distance education extends beyond the conventional educational environment and therefore needs special methods and vehicles for carrying it out. Starting from the correspondence studies in Shorthand in England initiated by Pitman in 1884 and the establishment of the first University of Correspondence teaching department at the University of Chicago in the 1880s by Harper and many other similar initiatives around the globe, to the present day explosion of e-learning and online education on the internet, distance education has come a long way. Distance education is described in many ways across the globe, from “external’ or “off-campus study” to ‘correspondence education”, ‘independent study”, ‘home study” or ‘open learning or education”. Whatever the term used to describe distance education, the central characteristics of the type of education is the separation of the learner from the teacher or instructor. Distance education is therefore an educational process “in which someone removed in space and/or time, from the learner conducts a significant proportion of teaching” (Perryton 1992). According to Desmond Keegan (1986), distance education exhibits the following characteristics:

- the separation of teacher and learner,
- the planning and separation of materials under the influence of an educational organization,
- the use of technical media to unite teacher and learner,
- the provision of two-way communication, and
- the absence of the learning group.

Considering the debates (for or against) that seem to follow distance education from the beginning, there is an on going and rather increasing acceptance of the idea across the globe today. The reasons for this general acceptance are numerous and it includes among others, the fact that it fulfills some of the educational needs which conventional or campus-based educational system cannot address. For our purpose, we will not engage in the debate about its usefulness or acceptability because that aspect of the distance education debate has been extensively researched for decades (Cole, R.A. (2000), Minoli, D (1996), Willis, B. (1994), Harasim, L 1990), Castro, A. S. (1988) but it must be emphasized that, the acceptance of this educational process was also felt in developing as well as developed countries.

Generally, we all see distance education as “classrooms without walls...class size without limits... teaching that transcends space time so that teachers with valuable specialties and invaluable experience can reach students hundreds of miles away... and their students can reach back, to share questions and answers that make distance learning truly interactive”(Minoli, 1996:8). Africa was not left out and for more than three decades now, many countries on the continent depended on “off-campus”, “correspondence” or distance education as a means of reaching a substantial part of its population that might otherwise have been fallen outside the conventional educational system.

The reason for the acceptance of distance education in Africa was characterized by Govinda Strestha as an effort to narrow the information and knowledge gaps between the information haves and information have-nots (Strestha, 1997). To some scholars (Beal, Dissanayake and Konoshima, 1986), the issue facing Africa was not about general acceptability of distance education but that of effective application of knowledge gained within conventional education system to solve societal problems. That was true then and very true today. It is the resulting inequities in the access to and distribution of knowledge and the weakness in the systems for accessing and applying knowledge that enabled the environment for the growing interest in distance education. Again, the focus of our analysis is not on the "whys" and "why not" of the general acceptability of distance education in Africa. For our purpose, we shall presume that distance education is generally accepted and it gained solid footing in many African countries for decades. Our objective is to identify its limitations and why it may have not improved the general educational goal as preconceived and the examination of the conditions that resulted in its ineffectiveness as an educational option in Africa today.

THE WIDENING GAP-THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

Interestingly, while over 80 institutions provide distance education services in Africa by the mid-1990s, the University of South Africa was the first Open University in the world in 1951, as a dedicated correspondence university (Jenkins, 1989). The Zambian National Correspondent College was established in 1964 and the Malawi Correspondence College in 1965.

By the end of that decade many other countries such as Ethiopia have joined this special group of nations. Other areas in which African countries have introduced distance education has been in the areas of non formal education like health, agriculture, family planning, rural development and the environment. In this area, Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia launched radio campaigns for public awareness and education on a massive scale. In the area of formal education distance education is used to enhance the quality of conventional education, through the use of broadcasting and correspondence courses. In addition to this, the adoption of satellite centers or study centers as part of the distance education programs is very common in many African countries today. In many developing countries, distance education has been used to pursue conventional educational ends because of the obvious advantages such as: 1) it is economic (school building and other facilities are not required, 2) flexibility (one can study in his/her own time, and 3) its operability over long distances (and it can cater for widely scattered student population) (Dodds, Peraton and Young, 1972:10).

Another important characteristic of distance education infrastructure in Africa is that, like in many developing countries, it operates under some government department or ministry. For example, the following distance education institutions, received public funding and each with the exception of Kenya, is part of the ministry of education:

- Ethiopia- Distance education division responsible for senior secondary adult education operates from under the ministry of education,

- Kenya's school of distance studies responsible for teachers in-service operates from the University of Nairobi,
- Lesotho's distance teaching responsible for teacher's in-service operates from the literacy department of the ministry of education,
- Malawi's College of distance education responsible for secondary education operates from the ministry of education,
- Zambia's national correspondence college responsible for secondary education operates from the ministry of general education and
- Zimbabwe's teacher education course responsible for secondary literacy operates from the ministry of general education.

This arrangement was of tremendous advantage to early distance education programs in many countries in Africa. With Botswana, Kenya, South Africa and Zambia spearheading this process in the 1960s especially in the area of teacher training and secondary education, the other countries joined in later. According to Peraton (1992), by this period commonwealth Africa had thirty publicly funded distance teaching institutions. The fact that distance education took early roots in many African countries does not mean that all has been rosy ever since. There were many obstacles to effective distance education from the onset. This is not limited to the method of teaching and a learner's condition (physical and mental) but also to structural limitations as well. On the learner's side of the equation, there is;

- a lack of resources needed for meaningful development and sustenance of technology- based learning (Foks.1984),
- a lack of infrastructures to support modern technologies and,
- a lack of recurrent funding necessary to acquire or develop appropriate software and courseware on a continuous basis and maintain, service and replace the equipment. (Shrestha, 1997: III).

However, the environment within which these programs takes place is an important determinant of the level of success it is likely to achieve. The failure or the limitations experienced by distance education can therefore be divided into two broad categories:

- The political environment limitations and,
- socio-economic environment limitations.

Both the learners and instructors or teacher are affected by these environmental factors.

Political Environmental Limitations

Political environmental limitations are important factors conditioning the effectiveness of distance education in Africa. It includes the political situation in the country in which the program takes place.

Political situation will include, political stability or instability, ethnic conflict or civil wars, absence of democracy and lack of effective state building and nation building. This also includes policy initiatives and the presence or absence of effective governmental infrastructures.

We must remember that the policy of the government is as good as the government itself. No matter the lofty goals set by any government, if the government operates within a state that is incapable of effective governance or responsible policy initiative, any attempt to carry out distance education policies will falter if not fail. With the nature of African state and its inability to effectively promote the interest of the individual, there has been in many cases a break down and decay of infrastructures.

Many people blame the decay of educational infrastructures on ineffective and irresponsible governmental policies in Africa. The distance education sector is not spared these debilitating experiences. The ineffective structures of the state and the corruption within governments have led to political instability. This does have a direct impact on distance education as we have witnessed in the past two decades, the downward spiral in education initiatives in Africa. We have seen disproportional budgetary allocation of funds to prosecuting wars or defending or sustaining political power at the expense of building necessary foundation for growth in the society. Like many problems facing African countries today, the problem of ineffective distance education system can therefore be directly linked to the nature of the African state, which continues to perform under par.

The problem of the state in Africa stems from the European incursion and the lack of survival of the pre-colonial state structures (Ojo. 2004). This situation led to the reordering of the socio-political and economic aspects of the society and the contradictions within post colonial state in Africa. The predicament of the African state did not start at independence but began as a result of the African state's inability to defend itself, maintain its authority, and to protect its population during the colonial period. For instance, the colonial powers were not interested in state making and did not need any legitimacy or the approval of local populations and African states were therefore established as conduits for extracting resources. These states lacked legitimacy and cannot be described as states per se.

As a result of this quasi-state situation, the colonial authority makes the ethnic groups the sole repository of power, loyalty and legitimacy. The ethnic groups therefore assumed a far more important role during the colonial state and continue to do so today. In order for the state to successfully develop the right condition within which to perform its functions, including the promotion of effective African centered education, it must be perceived by the population as the protector of their interests and in order for the state to sustain the process it must also establish a level of trust between itself and the people. This seemingly endless dance of death is compounded by global transformation which imposes additional stress on the legitimate authority of the state. The effective participation in the global environment, the use of new technologies which sometimes represent the dominance of the western ideas and values and the ability to promote sustainable growth in these societies, is impossible to attain because of the nature of the new African states.

The African state is limited in its ability to compete. And it will be unfair to refer to the African state as being soft or weak or collapsed because it is a state in the process of being. It is in the process of re-inventing itself which is compromised by the changing nature of the global system and the speed of the change.

Many Africanists contend that the current spate of global transformation is nothing but a re-colonization process that not only democratizes dis-empowerment but facilitates the sustenance of the status quo (Claude Ake, 1996). The question of nationhood has not been about how to define nation per se but how to effectively utilize the state to recreate or redefine itself as a representative of all. Sometimes it is difficult to perceive the problem because the African leadership has accepted the inevitable dominance of the ideas newly adopted from abroad or imposed by the previous colonial administrations.

Normally a state develops its attributes over time, after it must have impressed its relevance and value in the memory of its citizens. No wonder it has taken the United States, United Kingdom or France, such a long time to be able to maintain the degree of democratic postures that they have assumed today. To illustrate this, we have just witnessed the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States after over 220 years of independence. For the African state, the pre-colonial state was terminated by the colonial state, which represented a disconnection between the people that it dominated and had no interest in ever protecting them, except when its lucrative economic infrastructure was in danger. The succeeding post-colonial state lacks an history and has no connection to the pre-colonial state, except some values that was dynamic enough to resist the years of colonial domination. The post colonial state is therefore in flux, in a process of integrating a non- native value system and infrastructure, in an un-comprehensive domestic environment. Those institutions that have survived colonial domination exist in contradiction to newly adopted European values.

The level of confusion is enormous and it undermines the successful assertion of the new state structure because of the lack of trust and disconnects resulting from the colonial experience. So when we condemn the African state for its ineffectiveness, we must understand the contradictions resulting in political instability were by-products of the colonial experience. But the reality is that these contradictions constitutes an obstacle to state-building and nation-building and therefore to an effective implementation of a distance education policy.

Socio-economic Limitations

The ability of the institutions to provide necessary tools for effective learning is handicapped by the nature of the government and the state itself but the individual learner is also a subject of socio-economic conditions as well. Poverty is a problem since many of the, learners do not have access to requisite educational materials. The state of public libraries and educational institutions is disturbing in Africa. The learner is poor and hence may not have the means to acquire the materials necessary and the government is so inept that it may not have the resources to make these materials available. In many of the African states, teachers and instructors are not adequately paid and could go for months without receiving salaries and are in many cases denied the opportunity to acquire up to date technology or share them with their professional colleagues because of lack of government incentives and opportunities. The infrastructures necessary for effective distance education such as constant electricity supply, accessible internet services and funding is absent. It is difficult to implement distance education in a situation where more than fifty percent of the population lives in darkness most of the time.

It is difficult to carry out effective learning through the internet when the learner has to travel miles to internet cafes and still not guaranteed that there will be electricity when he or she gets there. The learner may not even have the money to buy enough "internet-time" to undertake the require study.

Distance education may cost less but in reality it is out of the reach of the average Africans because of the level of poverty and the lack of effective infrastructures necessary to deliver it. While the pressure for such facilities grew in the late eighties the resources for education generally in Africa began to decline.

The distance education colleges, usually departments of ministries of education, suffered similar or often more stringent cuts as those suffered by their formal secondary school counterparts and the standard of their services declined (Dodds, 1994). Another problems associated with this, is that of effective policy control. This led to the mushrooming of many satellite campuses without adequate capability to conduct educational instructions talk less of issuing degrees. These study centers became an outlet for exploiting students by providing them inadequate instructions and offering certificates at the same time. The Nigerian University Commission in 2003 has to close down many satellite campuses and ordered many institutions to clean up their distance education programs and to meet requisite standards.

CONCLUSION: The Challenges facing Distance Education in Africa

The environmental situation presented above is very common in Africa and a political economy analysis of the African societies will lead us to the same conclusion, which is the place of Africa in the international economic system and the impact of colonialism and imperialism on contemporary African government and society. The distance education sector is not spared the same predicament. Many African countries have a problem of meeting the subsistence needs of their people including education.

Ethnic strife, political unrest, food insecurity and droughts are major issues competing for Africa's meager development funds. Many villages and communities are without water and roads let alone electricity and telecommunications networks. Many Africans lack access to basic traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, let alone the internet and access to new technologies. Even in countries fortunate to have traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, these media seem to be underutilized and use most of the time to propagate leadership agenda which is to sustain them in power and may therefore be of little or no distance educational value.

The challenges facing distance education in Africa is the recognition of the limitations imposed by the nature of the African state and how to deal with internal political strife, corruption and now HIV/AIDS. Distance education therefore occupies a minor place in overall African development strategies (Agunga, 1997). It must be recognized that in order to improve the situation in many African countries, the priority has to change. Education must continue to be seen as a way of promoting socio-political and economic development which will in turn allow the learners to take full advantages of the process.

This will command a shift in priority that will allow the governments of Africa to expend a lot of resources in providing necessary infrastructure and funding for conventional and distance education. Political stability and progressive policy initiatives that will lay necessary foundation for development is important. Basic social amenities should be made available to everyone and in every corner of the country. This will allow the learners to take advantage of distance education to the fullest.

New technologies should provide the necessary foundation for the effectiveness of government initiatives in all areas of the society. The government by providing these amenities will be able to combat poverty and corruption and therefore be able to inspire effective distance education within their countries. Other issue raised by the use of new technologies in Africa is that of the loss of cultural values.

According to Agunga (1997) "Will IT lead to a loss of cultural values for the developing world? when IT's objective is global integration of the marketplace. For example if the ultimate goal is to breakdown national markets leading to economic and political integration and if increasing concentration of media ownership leads to loss of local control or independence of the political economy, what about cultural values? Is integration or the tendency for people to be alike always better?

What will happen to Third World cultural values, morality, traditions, and continuity in the 21st century when English becomes the global language? How will Third World culture, if there is such a thing, be served by the unopposed and unregulated global annexation of Third World media systems?"

These are relevant questions that African policies on education need to address. But governments in Africa must find a way to take advantage of new technologies especially through distance education to promote and sustain its developmental programs. The first important step is for African governments to develop a clear policy on the use of technology in education and its potential in distance education. Ideally, this policy development exercise should be integrated with other related policy processes dealing with the information and communication infrastructure and applications in other sectors such as health and agriculture. This is particularly important if the concept of truly multipurpose tele-centers or community centers is to be implemented.

In rural areas in particular, it would make more sense for all relevant sectors to work together on developing community access to ICTs for a multitude of purposes, rather than strictly for educational purposes or strictly for agricultural purposes. However, if community access is provided within an existing institution, that institution's primary objective might become the primary purpose of access. For example, if access is made available in a school, the teachers and students of that school might be the primary beneficiaries, with distance education students in the local area as potential secondary beneficiaries and additional services offered to the community might be "educational" in nature. (Fillip, 2000) There are other structural issues that need to be in place for an effective distance education programs comparable to the one in the first world. Many of these countries must provide basic amenities needed for connectivity.

In Africa, and especially in countries like Nigeria, it is difficult to find the wires that connect homes and businesses along the main roads, as it is in advanced countries of the west. By adopting wireless technology, less developed countries save a great deal of time and money by having to build a vast 'wired' infrastructure network. (Okpanku 2004). It is reassuring that many countries in Africa are opting for this wireless technology as a means of providing telecommunication and the internet. Okpanku also calls for fiber optic transmission, broadband and high speed data services at business premises, educational institutes and homes, which could be addressed by deploying a solid and dependable wireless ICT infrastructure. Limited access to new technologies like the Internet and broadband services has strongly constrained, according to him, the development of Nigerian information economy and as such the dire need for a sound option.

The problem facing many African countries is not limited to education or distance education alone. It is vast and pervasive. It is structural as much as it is political and economical as much as it is social. It is therefore necessary to discuss the problems of distance education within context of the society in Africa and the role of the state in the developmental process.

If the state is incapable of promoting the interest of its population because of its configuration, how can it be effective in putting in place and implementing a viable distance education program? The success of an educational agenda is a function of the environment within which it exists. The environment will enable or disenable the attainment of its goals and in a competitive world, the African distance education agenda is incapable of reducing the gap between the developed and the developing world but by the constraints imposed by the environment may inevitably be contributing to the widening of the digital gap.

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