



COMMONWEALTH of LEARNING

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What Happened to the Social Agenda for Distance Education

Summary

Until the turn of the century, the discourse of distance education was essentially about access: trying to reach the underserved populations and the second chance and non-traditional learners and helping developing countries educate large numbers of learners with limited resources. But Dr. Mark Bullen argues that with the emergence of online learning in the late 1990s, this social agenda of distance education has given way to a more functionalist and technologically deterministic agenda.

Until the turn of the century, the discourse of distance education was essentially about access: trying to reach the underserved populations and the second chance and non-traditional learners and helping developing countries educate large numbers of learners with limited resources.

This was the social agenda of distance education. But with the emergence of online learning in the late 1990s we have also seen the rise of a much more functionalist and technologically deterministic agenda.

A key factor driving the growth of online learning since the 1990s has been the financial pressure on public postsecondary institutions to address increasing demand without additional funding. Many institutions looked to online distance learning because it was seen as a way of avoiding the costly construction of new buildings. However, instead of using this technology to reach the non-traditional learner, it was used to support on-campus learners to create blended learning. This form of e-learning gradually began to overshadow the socially-oriented distance education programs.

The dominant themes in our educational technology discourse are no longer about access but about the technological imperative, and the need to prepare learners for the 21st century, for the “knowledge economy”. If you look at any recent government policy on Information & Communication Technology in Education you’ll see this theme is front and center.

Participatory access is rarely mentioned.

This shift in the discourse is troubling.

First, the access problem hasn’t been solved. It’s still a major issue, especially for the developing world. While there was a 53% increase in higher education participation globally between 2000 and 2007, in low-income countries it increased only marginally from 5-7%.

Second, this narrow focus on the “knowledge economy” overlooks the current reality of many developing world economies. They are heavily dependent on services such as tourism and agriculture and will continue to be for some time to come. It’s unrealistic to think that there will be an economic transformation in all these countries. Yes, there will be a growing need for “knowledge workers” but a single-minded focus on educating for the “knowledge economy” may have the unintended consequence of forcing people to leave their countries to see work elsewhere, thus undermining already shaky economies.

It also overlooks the fact that many of these countries lack basic infrastructure. In Belize, for example, 27% of primary schools do not have access to electricity and only 31% of secondary school teachers have formal training. Not surprisingly, Internet access is also low in many of these countries. In 2012 only 25% of individuals in Belize, for example, were using the Internet and there are 73 countries in the world that have even lower rates of individual Internet use.

Another consequence of this narrow focus on the knowledge economy is that ICT is seen increasingly as a means of developing IT skills rather than broad educational competencies. We see evidence of this in the sudden urgency to implement national tablet initiatives without coherent plans for how they will be used to support educational goals.

Also overlooked in this rush to jump on the technology bandwagon is the readiness of students and teachers. The uncritical acceptance of the net generation discourse has deluded us into thinking that our students will be like fish in water when they are given the devices. The research clearly shows this isn’t the case. As well, all too often these technology initiatives are rolled out without a sound plan for teacher development.

Massively Open Online Courses or MOOCs have also played a part in this shift by subtly appropriating the access agenda. They’re portrayed as the magic bullet solution to access. Everybody who wants an Ivy League education will be able to get one by simply enrolling in a MOOC. But these courses don’t lead to certification, their quality varies considerably and they tend to privilege Western, developed world knowledge and expertise. But that’s a small price to pay if you’re getting access to a prestigious American university, or so the argument goes.

I should point out, however, that the Commonwealth of Learning has been working with a number of institutions in developing countries to adapt the MOOC concept to meet local needs using local expertise.

Even the narrative underlying the Open Educational Resources agenda has shifted from emancipatory access to access in support of the knowledge economy. We see evidence of this in the alignment of OER and ICT in Education policies, with the latter being driven by a technological/economic imperative.

What can be done about this troubling trend? First, I think those of us who are working in the field of open and distance learning need to remind ourselves what our purpose is (or should be): to educate, to improve access to education, and to foster social change and economic development. Our use of ICT in education and online learning should always be pursued with these principles in mind.

Second, we need to remember that, despite globalization and the rapid diffusion of technology, there are still huge differences in both the physical and, what I would call, the “cognitive” access to technology across the globe. Solutions that may work in South Africa are not necessarily appropriate for Guyana or Belize and we should not assume that the simple provision of physical access will result in the effective use of the technology.

Transcript

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that distance education emerged as a response to a problem that has not yet been solved: how to provide access to quality education for all. Shifting the focus from solving the access problem to preparing for the “knowledge economy” may sound like a matter of semantics but it undermines our ability to adequately address the access issue.