

Insights into a Distance Learning Programme: Participatory Reflections and Reactions

Chan Swee Heng & Wong Bee Eng

Department of English,
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication,
UPM 43400 Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
shchan@fbmk.upm.edu.my & bee@fbmk.upm.edu.my

Abstract

Distance Learning in Malaysia has a relatively young history, with participation from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) beginning only in 1997. As of now it has completed a ten-year cycle. We have been involved as instructors in the programme since its inception, and as participatory observers, we have been able to make petite observations, synthesise and reflect on distance learning practices centering on a model that defines the major parameters and their relationships. This paper discusses the various perspectives in line with the adapted model of distance learning, giving insights and reactions to the major operatives involved in the enterprise. The effort underscores an understanding of UPM's definition and redefinition of the distance learning construct, and the directions it has taken and is taking in the process of playing out its role of being an important provider of an alternative path in democratised education.

Abstrak

Pendidikan Jarak Jauh di Malaysia mempunyai sejarah yang masih muda secara relatif dengan penglibatan daripada Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) bermula hanya pada tahun 1997. Hingga kini ia telah melengkapkan satu putaran sepuluh tahun. Kita telah terlibat sebagai instruktur dalam program semenjak permulaan, dan sebagai peserta pemerhati kita boleh melakukan pemerhatian, sintesis dan pertimbangan terhadap praktik pendidikan jarak jauh berpusatkan ke atas satu model yang mentakrifkan parameter utama dan hubungannya. Kertas kerja ini membincangkan pelbagai perspektif selari dengan model adaptasi pendidikan jarak jauh, memberikan pemahaman dan reaksi kepada operatif utama yang terlibat di dalam usaha ini. Kegiatan ini menggambarkan kefahaman takrifan UPM dan takrifan semula konstruk pendidikan jarak jauh dan arah yang perlu diambil serta proses yang memainkan peranan sebagai penyumbang penting pada laluan alternatif dalam demokrasi pendidikan.

Introduction

Distance learning over the years can be categorised into the following modes: 1) Correspondence Study, which involves the concept of the instructor and the student who send letters or notes, instead of talking to each other, and 2) Open Learning which basically “emphasises the ‘openness’ of the teaching-learning process and that the students are allowed to operate with a degree of autonomy and self-direction.” (Harry, John & Keegan, 1993:12-13). Open learning depends on the use of text, and technology. Rarely do teachers speak directly to learners. Lectures are mostly pre-recorded and delivered through a medium either through print, audio-visual devices and increasingly, through a variety of computer-based systems.

In designing a distance learning programme, many considerations are given to various aspects of learning. They include theories of learning related to behaviourism, cognitivism, and other more practical issues such as developing empathy with the students (Holmberg, 1989: 338). In emphasising this particular approach, he addresses concerns of distance teaching as well as the organisation and administration of the programme supporting Keegan’s view (2000) that “a firmly-based theory of distance education will be one which will provide the touch stone against which decisions – political, financial, educational, social – when they have to be taken, can be taken with confidence”. With a model in place, ad hoc responses as a problem-solving approach would be obviated as “situations” often arise in the normal course of events in this form of education.

From the quote, we are directed to the point that making of educational and social decisions may be politically motivated such as by the consideration of national manpower needs and the desire to raise national standards of human resource qualification. Distance learning thus provides an alternative path in education where the government could give overt encouragement and support for the greater good.

In this paper, the writers who are also instructors of the UPM distance learning programme themselves had closely followed the evolvement of the system. Given this instructor cum researcher role, we are of the belief that salient comments and reactions as participant observers could provide

meaningful insights into a distance education experience which had span over a ten-year implementation. The action research basically adopts an interpretative, naturalistic approach giving due emphasis to the role of observation which draws attention to the importance of the practitioners' own understanding of the learning environment in which they are immersed in.

The Distance Learning Programme at Universiti Putra Malaysia

The local pioneer of distance learning in Malaysia is Universiti Sains Malaysia with Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) setting up its own distance learning programme in 1995. This was done in response to a call by the Ministry of Education of Malaysia to provide an alternative path to education that is democratic and liberal. The first step taken was the establishment of IDEAL (Institute of Distance Education and Learning). One of the first few distance learning programmes that was offered by IDEAL was a degree course in the Teaching of English as a Second Language, followed later by the Bachelor of Arts (BA) programme. The distance learning innovation as an off-campus path to a university degree was also complemented by another form of adult education that was labeled as an external programme. The latter programme caters to students who still prefer the mode of a lecture system where lecturers are able to interact with them in a normal classroom situation except that classes were held at night. Subsequent to this set-up was a more centralised effort that saw the establishment of Pusat Pengajian Luar (PPL) or the Centre for External Education. It now manages both the distance learning and the external programme.

UPM's effort in being an education provider in distance learning can be gauged by the statistics shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Student Intake for UPM Distance Learning and No. of Graduates (1997-2006)

Year	Intake	No. of Graduates
1997	1815	-
1998	1801	-
1999	3032	52
2000	1974	1807
2001	2998	1453
2002	2430	825
2003	0	1608
2004	582	1189
2005	940	1192
2006	951	1257
TOTAL	16,523	9183

Source: Centre of External Education UPM

From these figures, the number of 'active' students up to the year 2007 was further compiled as 2556. There are currently nineteen Bachelor programmes and ten Master programmes (Appendix) though some are inactive with zero enrolment. The writers are involved in the Bachelor of Arts in English which has 41 active students and the Bachelor of Education (Teaching of English as a Second Language) with 94 students.

The Structure of Distance Learning

The components involved in distance education are clearly laid out by Harry et al., (1993). This discussion essentially anchors on this model and its components and their relationships (Figure 1). The model was modified to include an assessment component which was not found in the original. The system begins with course development. Distance education modules were developed by faculty members of the respective faculties. The institution plays a central role in disseminating information and providing a support system. An elaborate management system is imposed whereby it takes care of communication between the various stakeholders involved in the enterprise and other office matters such as printing, organizing the learning, and administering tests and reporting test results.

The centre in fact has the status of a university faculty with a director and deputy director to oversee the operations.

From the diagram, it is obvious that distance learning is indeed multi dimensional. At the heart of the experience is the learner and Rowntree (1992) sums up the features about the learners and learning in the distance learning mode to be:

- learners taking responsibility for their own learning
- learning alone or in small groups
- learning at their own pace and in their own time
- learning from materials
- use of audio-visual media
- active rather than passive learning
- self-assessment
- less frequent help from a teacher
- a more individual-centred role for teachers
- learning from other people besides teachers

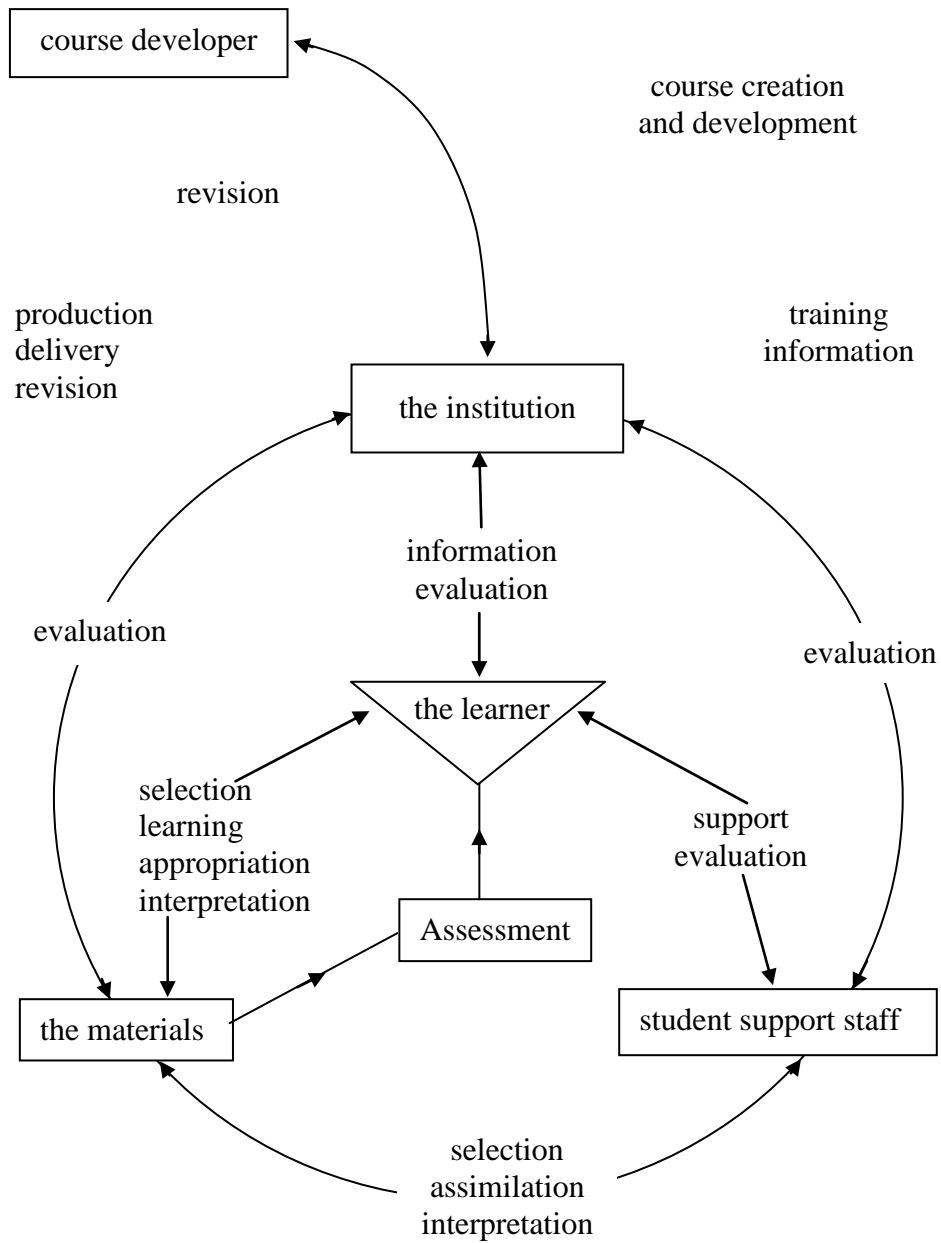


Figure 1 The components of the educational relationship in distance education (adapted from Harry et al., 1993)

In the following section, our observations and comments are centred on the main features which we concur to be the prior concerns in the orchestration of distance learning in UPM.

The Academic Structure of Distance Learning in UPM

To provide context for discussion, the general academic set up of the distance learning programme in UPM is first described. Essentially the structure is as follows:

- (i) Face-to-face lectures/ Video conferencing (Twice per semester)
- (ii) Face to face Tutorials (Thrice per semester)
- (iii) Mid-semester test (held in centres)
- (iv) Final examination (held in centres)
- (v) Hi show (Recording of a lecture that is posted on-line for viewing)
- (vi) Bulletins for specific course instructions – such as instructions for course assignments which are posted online
- (vii) Establishing centres which are often located in other institutions that provide premises for tutorials, examinations, and to process handing up of coursework/assignments

Thus the model adopted by UPM does not fully subscribe to a full open university concept. A fair measure of face-to-face interactions is provided subscribing to the belief that personal interaction has a role to play in successful learning.

UPM has decided on face-to-face interaction as one of the forms of learning whereby lecturers were scheduled to meet students twice over a semester and this was supplemented by face-to-face meetings with tutors. The early phase provided four sessions with the tutors which were then reduced to three due to pragmatic considerations such as cost. From our experience, it is essential that tutors selected should be well qualified to meet the all rounded needs of a BA programme. However, hiring of tutors was carried out with little input from lecturers concerned. More crucial, it was felt, there should be opportunities for lecturers to meet up with the tutors in order for them to discuss the various modules and the expectations for the courses. The lecturers could have a chance to brief them on the course focus and changes and modifications that may take place over the semesters. This opportunity to meet them was not provided

for though the institution did initially made the attempt. Feedback from students during the face-to-face interactions indicated that some tutors were not able to meet their needs as a result of the tutors' lack of exposure to the different courses in the programme. That one tutor is appointed to meet all the demands of all the courses appears to be unrealistic and in fact daunting.

Role of IT

Rowntree (1992) has noted that audio visual devices are increasingly used in open learning particularly supported by a variety of computer-based systems. In fact, IT has become the key medium in open learning providing web-based communication where students are able to access information about the course, assignments and results of their performance. This use of the computer for teaching has been a slow development in our distance learning programme. Video taping of lectures was the norm to provide access for students who could not make it to the face-to-face lectures. However, there has been feedback about the poor quality of the video tapes. Hardly any provisions were made to establish web-based communication between tutors, lecturers and students. At one point, there were some efforts made in English language proficiency courses that encouraged lecturers to set aside assigned hours in the evening for students to make web-based contact. However, from personal experience, this was also not effective. One reason was the slow downloading time of the modules and as a result, students reported that they still preferred the printed modules rather than going to the computers to access the modules. As a result, these sessions were later abandoned. Other supports to print in the form of audio-visual material – especially audio-cassette tapes, slides or filmstrips could be explored to make learning more effective.

The latest technological innovation was video conferencing and the posting of web-based lectures. These have become a more exciting development as a result of broadband intervention. The satellite system was formerly relied on for transmission and it was costly to use. The broadband system made costing and infra-organisation far more manageable. The recent engagement with video conferencing was a definite step forward though from our experience the facility has yet to be widely accessed. One reason could be the need to change the mindset of

students to avail themselves to technology and secondly, perhaps a more interactive culture of learning needs to be promoted with some training needed for both lecturers and students to familiarise themselves with this mode of asynchronous learning. Bischoff (2000) sees the lack of training as a definite barrier to effective teaching noting that “even experienced onsite instructors need training, coaching, mentoring ... to translate their effectiveness from the actual to the virtual classroom” (p. 58). In the first face-to-face encounter for semester 1 of the 2006/7 session, we could only report one virtual student engagement though we were connected to a number of centres all over Malaysia, including that of East Malaysia. The second encounter, however, saw zero interactive participation.

Lecturers would also need to be retrained to enter into this kind of face-to-face interaction where there is greater openness in the delivery. Similarly, lecturers have to re-orientate themselves to another system of giving lectures that will be posted on the web and this event has become known as hi shows. This non-interactive teaching took some getting use to by the lecturers themselves as they had to pre-record the sessions which basically involve talking to a computer. The experience was rather unnerving as we were used to a live audience all these years and the amount of materials needed to be prepared also turned out to be inadequate for the allocated time frame when it was delivered to a non-live audience. We feel that more awareness should be given to familiarise ourselves to the approach and in future, we could work towards a system where reviews could perhaps be done so that improvements are in place.

Learning driven by ICT seems to be the way forward (Aggarwal, 2000; Mogoulas & Chen, 2006). However, its dominant use calls for careful analysis of the presuppositions of its application and a close monitoring of its implementation and dissemination (Lehtinen, 2000). Otherwise, there may be little justification of the means to the ends, which is successful learning.

Course Material Development

Over the ten-year implementation, a number of issues are noted. First the modules developed should be systemically reviewed. A content expert could prove useful in the review process. This helps the writer to be more in tune with current developments and emphasis in the field. Another

related concern is the approach used in module writing. The module was developed with a “wrap-around” approach, which means that it was written around a selected text. However, a reality could be that the text itself could go out of print. In such an event, guidelines are necessary to inform teachers and learners of alternatives. The management needs to make provision for extensive revision with monetary allocation for the effort. At another level, the feedback of the modules from users such as the tutors and students could also be obtained to complement expert opinion.

The effectiveness of the process of revision is also very much a management issue. The person entrusted with the task needs to develop a machinery of monitoring, giving feedback and liaising with writers and evaluators. What was noticed was lack of sustaining power in the material evaluation project. It was given a kick-start but channels of communication were not rigorously maintained resulting in the effort fizzling out and suffering a stalemate.

Assessment

Another important component is that of assessment. While formal assessments are in place, what is perhaps lacking is the element of comprehensiveness in the matter of ongoing progress evaluation. At the moment each unit of our modules is accompanied by many exercises which are designed to reinforce learning. In our opinion, students could avail themselves to interim tests as a gauge of their progress learning. This package of self tests may also reveal to the tutors, the specific areas that may need attention when the students go for their tutorials.

From experience, the system of examination procedures in a distance learning programme calls for thorough cooperation from many quarters. Invigilators must be experienced and cautioned to read instructions carefully. There were occasions when scripts handed up were incomplete. Some were even misplaced along the line of dispatch. However, solutions are being innovated to meet the needs of this aspect of distance learning education. A logging system starting from the centre to the centralizing unit and to dispatch to the instructors now charts the flow.

The Learner

The learner in distance education is someone who must be autonomous and needs to be very much aware of the fact that he needs to take responsibility for his own learning. Often he is very much alone. There had been cases where learners were not assigned tutors as it was cost inhibitive to cater to a very small number of students in a centre. Centres may also not be too accessible especially if the students are teaching in very rural postings. Use of technology to reach them is part of an effort that promotes more active learning. With new technologies, the authorities are exploring possibilities of on-line tutoring so that every student has this opportunity (personal communication with the deputy director of the UPM centre).

As Rowntree (1992:72) says, “open learners usually work with packages of material. But the package is rarely enough. Most open learners will need support from human beings – people who can help them with their learning and respond to them as individuals.” He categorised the learners’ concerns as the following:

- whether the learning is worth the time and effort
- how other people react to their learning
- how successful they feel they are at it

Thus a support system needs to be available to ensure that the learners do not drop out. In designing such a system, a number of issues could be taken into consideration. Initially the question may be: how much training have students been exposed to in terms of preparing them to enter into this mode of education? To encourage this type of active learning, could the management devise a package of study skills as a supplementary service to successful learning? Learning is not just about the provision of academic content, the psychological and the affective warrant attention too. Can a mentoring system be in place so that the learner has someone to talk to? Can there be a “buddy” system so that the emotional support is available?

Students come to the centre and are told what it means to be an online student, and therefore to be active learners. However, have we created a support group for them? Is there a space for online discussion so that they

can confer on academic and non-academic matters? Do they have counselors? Does the course coordinator have access to web-based facilities to talk about the courses and for the learners to interact with her at certain times of the week? Rowntree further points out that “open learners often need help and advice on matters that have nothing to do with the subject matter they are learning about. They may need help in getting started organizing their time, coping with self-doubt, and deciding on the next step after completing their learning programme” (p. 83).

Support may also come from a line manager in advising learners on how learning can be applied to their work and the learning centre staff could also be sensitive to their needs such as providing information related to book agents, taking note of questions and channeling them to the relevant sources.

In addition to national level politics, there is also institutional politics that have an effect on the development of distance learning. Entry requirements for most distance learning programmes are different from on-campus requirements as the clientele is different. However, internal policies may decide on eligibility as in the case of UPM. From 2003 onwards steps were taken to ensure that double standards do not exist in entry qualification. All students are now required to have STPM qualifications (equivalent to pre-university matriculation studies). This has resulted in a drop in enrolment as revealed in Table 1. While it is commendable to maintain standards, the query that arises is its effect on the issue of democratizing education. Internal competition is another factor that the UPM distance learning programme has to contend with. For example, the Open University in Malaysia accepts students based on different criteria. In addition, some degrees offered through distance learning were not recognized immediately by the Ministry of Education, resulting in confusion as to the worth of the programme.

Concluding Remarks

A dynamic and proactive approach needs to be adopted if distance education in UPM is to be brought to greater heights. As Harry, John and Keegan (1993:40) note, the definition of distance education should continually be broadened. This involves clarifying “the inherent strengths that new technologies bring to the field, to recruit new audiences to the

benefits of distance learning, and to guide further study and research in this aspect of outreach education". UPM in its ten year cycle of providing distance learning is going through this process of redefinition. New innovations are being tried out and currently there is an extensive evaluation of the programme being carried out. The system needs constant feedback and updating in its search to become a more meaningful player in the enterprise of distance learning which can be both educationally and financially rewarding.

References

- Aggrawal, A. (Ed.) (2000). *Web-Based Learning and Teaching Technologies: Opportunities and Challenges*. London: Idea Group Publishing.
- Bates, A.W. (1984). *The Role of Technology in Distance Education*. New York: St.Martin's Press.
- Bischoff, A. (2000). The elements of effective online teaching. In K.W. White & B.H. Weight (Eds.). *The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook of Attitudes, Strategies, and Techniques for the Virtual Classroom*, pp. 57-72. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Harry, K., John, M. & Keegan, D. (1993). *Distance Education: New Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Keegan, D. (2000). *Distance Training: Taking Stock at a Time of Change*. London: Routledge.
- Lehtinen, E. (2000). Information and communication technology in education: Desires, promises, and obstacles. In D.M. Watson & T. Downes (Eds.). *Communications and Networking in Education: Learning in a Networked Society*, pp. 312-328. Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Magoulas, G. D. & Chen, S.Y. (Eds.) (2006). *Advances in Web-Based Education: Personalized Learning Environments*. London: Information Science Publishing.
- Rowntree, D. (1992). *Exploring Open and Distance Learning*. London: Kogan Page.
- Yates, C. & Bradley, J. (Eds.). (2000). *Basic Education at a Distance: World Review of Distance Education and Open Learning: Volume 2*. New York: Routledge.

Appendix

No. of students actively following distance learning in UPM (2007)

No.	Programme	No. of Student
1	Bachelor of Arts in English	41
2	Bachelor of Arts in Language and Malay Linguistics	1295
3	Bachelor of Business Administration	115
4	Bachelor of Communication	235
5	Bachelor of On-line Communication	3
6	Bachelor of Education (Guidance and Counselling)	40
7	Bachelor of Education (Malay Studies as a First Language)	2
8	Bachelor of Education (Teaching of English as a Second Language)	94
9	Bachelor of Science (Hons.) Biology	1
10	Bachelor of Science (Hons.) Chemistry	1
11	Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) Biology	8
12	Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) Chemistry	1
13	Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) Mathematics	13
14	Bachelor of Science with Education (Hons.) Statistics	0
15	Bachelor of Science in Development of Human Resource	287
16	Bachelor of Computer Science	20
17	Bachelor of Science (Hons.) Mathematics	2
18	Bachelor of Science in Human Development	131
19	Bachelor of Science (Hons.) Statistics	0
20	Language Proficiency Courses	0
21	Master in Literature (Malay Language)	38
22	Master in Corporate Communication	62
23	Master in Development of Human Resource	136
24	Master in Education (Teaching Malay as a First Language)	28
25	Master of Science in Corporate Communciation	0
26	Master of Science in Human Development	0
27	Master in Development of Human Resource	0
28	Master in Development of Human Resource Online	3
29	Master of Science (Teaching Malay as a First Language)	0
30	Master of Science in Natural Resource Development	0
31	TITAS (Islamic Civilisation and Asian Civilisation) Courses/Malaysian Constitution	0
TOTAL		2556

Source: Centre for External Education UPM