DISTANCE LEARNING : CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract:

Mother Earth is terribly sick today, and what has muddied the waters is the unwelcomed visit of the one-eyed novel Coronavirus (Covid-19). It is another symptom of the serious diseases the planet is suffering from. It is like a heavy disaster that has ravaged everything in its path, killing thousands and thousands of people and causing countless of harmful effects; some of them are terribly damaging and detrimental while others are more or less considered as blessings in disguise. It is spreading day after day like a wildfire in every nook and corner of the world with no possible curative vaccine so far. Nonetheless, and regardless the pains, I feel that there is always something good in every bad situation even if may not seem like for a lot of people as the quote goes" Every day may not be good, but there is something good in everyday". It is so obvious that with the current pandemic many positive and unexpected things are floating over the surface. Examples of these blessings include "reduction in air pollution 20-30% in many cases in major cities around the world" (Airborne Nitrogen Dioxide Plummets Over China, 2020). Currently, the skies are bluer, the environment is cleaner and even people seem to be more responsible than any time before. In addition, we notice the perceptible decline in the number of traffic crashes as "Fraser Shilling, director of the Road Ecology Center at the University of California at Davis, found that highway accidents— including those involving an injury or fatality—fell by half after the state's shelter-in-place order on 19 March". (Shilling F, 2020). Moreover, People have understood that health is better than any other wealth because it is the most precious gift one can own. Furthermore, we have learnt to keep going in sadness and sorrow as Roy T. Bennett explains, "Your hardest times often lead to the greatest moments of your life. Keep going. Tough situations build strong people in the end". (Bennett, 2020). Besides, for us as learners and educators, the priceless gift of this pandemic is distance learning, which is another suitable alternative to bridge the distance with the learners and assure the continuity of their education as an urgent response to the actual health emergency. If

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the virus has succeeded to shut schools and quarantine people all over the globe, it surely won't prevent learners to seek knowledge.

Key words: The Covid-19, Distance Learning, Students.

Introduction

What do we mean by "Distance Learning"?

As its name clearly shows, distance learning does not necessarily require the physical presence of both learners and teachers. This type of education is also referred to as remote learning, e.learing, online Learning, digital learning and distance education, though they do not all provide the same meaning.

Merriam-Webster dictionary proposes the following definition for distance learning:

"A method of study where teachers and students do not meet in a classroom but use the internet, e-mail, mail, etc., to have classes."

Merriam-Webster dictionary

(Defining Distance Learning, 2020)

Hilary Perraton proposed in 1982 a definition for distance education as 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner' (Perraton, 2000)
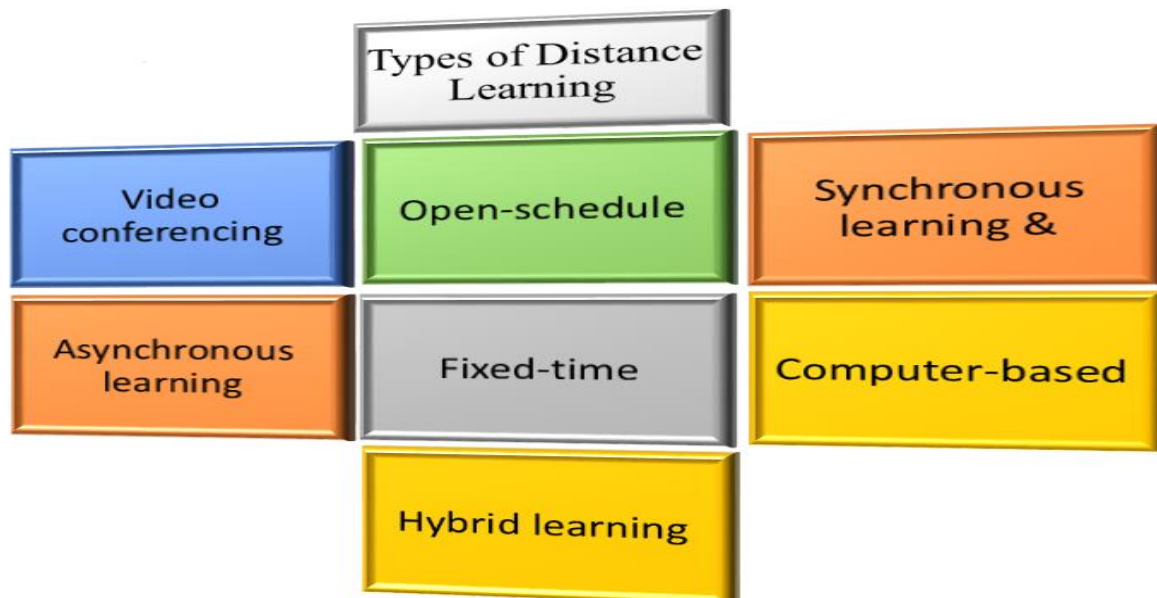
Distance learning vs. online learning:

> "There's a difference between eLearning and distance learning. eLearning is a style of learning, while distance learning is a method of attending class even if you can't be there physically." (Berg, 2018)

Many people may take it for granted to use both distance learning and online learning interchangeably. However, there are certain significant key differences between the two. Bri Stauffer mentions three major dissimilarities: (Stauffer, 2020)

1. Differences in Location: It simply means that the learners and their teachers can be in the same location such as classrooms working on their digital courses. Tutor James Anderson at State of Writing says, "We use eLearning in order to connect with our students. They can connect with us online, and we can work with them to improve their writing skills" (Berg, 2018). By contrast, distance learning students stay at home doing their work that is going to be checked and evaluated by their teachers but online. It is used as a tried and true method of teaching among others.
2. Differences in Interaction: Meaning that online learning requires in-person learners / teachers interaction. On the contrary, distance learning does not necessarily involve in-person learners / teachers interaction, but they obviously need digital forms of communication
3. Differences in Intention: E.learing is used among other teaching methods for variety is the spice of teaching and learning as well while distance learning is a method for delivering instruction solely online, not as a variation in the teaching style. I can also add another important overlap that is:
4. Differences in Timing: In distance learning, students who have other jobs or personal activities are free to choose their learning schedule according to their free time and learning speed.

Types of Distance Learning:

The type of distance learning entirely depends on the purpose(s) behind the online course itself. We can mention six types of distance education: (6 Types of Distance Education, 2020)

My own art design

a. Video conferencing: Video conferencing is a technology that allows users in different locations to hold face-to-face meetings without having to move to a single location together. This technology is particularly convenient for business users in different cities or even different countries because it saves time, expenses, and hassles associated with business travel. (KAGAN, 2019)

Here are the top 10 video conferencing software: (Video Conferencing Software, 2020)

1.   Zoom 2.Cisco Webex Meetings 3.Skype 4.Microsoft Teams 5.BlueJeans Meetings 6.GoToMeeting 7.Google Hangouts Meet 8.Jabber 9.Join.me 10.UberConference

b. Open-schedule: It is a type of learning that perfectly suits those learners who prefer to work on their own without time limits.

c. Synchronous learning: It is a type of online learning where both teachers and students from different areas join at the same time.

d. Asynchronous learning: Contrary to the synchronous learning, it is not a live education and it is not happening at the same time. Students are given tasks that they have to complete by themselves the time that fit them well.

e. Fixed-time: It is a kind of synchronous learning where learners should login to join the learning site on a specific timing. A concrete example of fixed-time learning is the Webinar

f. Computer-based: it is a form of education occurring at the same time, generally speaking, in labs using computers and other available devices.

My personal language lab as a teacher of English at the secondary school (Bechar)

g. Hybrid learning: It is a form of blended learning in which some students are digital. In addition, they remotely learn online whereas others are physically present. In other words, it is a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning and the teacher teaches both of them at the same time.

Pros of Distance Learning:

a. The main benefit of distance learning is that it works in all circumstances such as natural catastrophes, man-made calamities and other events such as the current coronavirus pandemic (covid-19).

b. Students live locally and learn globally.

c. Learners feel more relaxed and at ease when learning online.

d. Distance learning offers the opportunity to learn almost everything everywhere and at any time.

e. It saves time and energy since it is a kind of home schooling.

f. It is an open door to the rest of the world.

Cons of Distance Learning:

When dealing with distance learning, we should consider several constraints:

a. Learners in remote urban and rural areas do not only lack laptops, but even the internet access is not affordable as well.

b. "You cannot get blood from the stone" which means that not all distance learning users whether students or teachers were enough prepared and trained to apply the new digital education.

c. Lack of computing infrastructure in most of the third world countries.

d. The poor quality of the content: I personally had a look at some Algerian universities online courses that are very mediocre at best. Hence, the student may come with bare hands and feels bored because that content was nothing else but solely an administrative obligation

e.

Algeria, Distance Learning and The pandemic:

As a former teacher of English at the secondary education and a current Inspector of National Education (INE), I witnessed, in 2005, the new reform in the field of education. The Algerian Ministry of Education (AME) opted for a new approach of teaching called Competency Based Approach (CBA), which is mainly based on integration and aims at preparing not only a good learner, but a good and model citizen as well. Meaning that the learners should transfer and concretize the knowledge they have learnt in the classroom into real and tangible behaviour. Actually, teaching profession is shifting from a teacher-centered and lecture-based education to student-centered way of teaching and more interactive learning. The teacher is no longer the fountain of knowledge and the student is the epicentre of all focus. Meanwhile, another feature of the educational reform is the implementation of the ICT (Information & Communication Technology) which importance is crutial to reach the main objectives of the CBA in the kingdom of teaching and learning. In his article "Survey of ICT and Education in Africa", Amr Hamdy wrote:" The Ministry of Education is working on building the infrastructure for enabling the ICT environment. All secondary schools were equipped with computer labs (15 computers: 10 for students, five for teachers) connected to the Internet through ADSL, and 30% of this foundation had Internet access via cable modem. Half of the middle schools have adopted ICT as an integral part of the educational programme." (Hamdy, 2007)

As far as the ICT is concerned, learners and teachers are required to embrace distance learning which is gaining more and more attention and popularity. Actually, the Algerian Ministry of Education (AME) launched a media campaign including You-tube and TV channels, local and national radio stations to encourage digital education as a suitable alternative to face-to-face learning.

As the Covid-19 pandemic runs its course, the Algerian government ordered the immediate closure of the three education cycles, universities and vocational training centres on March 12, 2020 and would reopen again on August 23. Consequently, the need for digital learning and teaching has incredibly increased that's why the Ministry of Education has taken some urgent measures to avoid the bitter consequences of any blank school year. Moreover, The Minister of Education Ouadjaout proposed to "reduce the duration of the third trimester which lasts according to the supervisory ministry for three to four weeks. Such a proposal will allow resuming classes and conducting educational evaluation, based on the learning adjustment system." (service, 2020) Additionally, teachers of all streams have prepared a great number of on-line courses under the supervision of the ONFED (National Office of Teaching and Distance Training). I, as an inspector of National Education, contributed with a teacher of English in the preparation of 14 YouTube courses in order to help secondary school learners make up the third term programme of English. Here is an example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLEOfA3JipM

Necessity is the mother of invention:

The hard circumstances of the new pandemic have given birth to countless of online initiatives in the kingdom of teaching and learning. A concrete example was "The best speaker of English" contest that I, Inspector of National Education, organised among twenty secondary education schools in the district of Bechar some 620 miles far from the capital Algiers. The competition aimed at excavating and unearthing pearl stones from learners all over the willaya. It went through several stages:

1. Stage 1: The Department of Education contacted all secondary schools to prepare a local competition in order to nominate the best speaker of the school.
2. The teachers of English asked the students to prepare a speech of less than five minutes about any topic of their own and compete for the first place.
3. Stage 2: The video of the competitor is virtually sent to the inspector of National education via the We Transfer that is the simplest way to virtually send large files up to 2GB for free.
4. Stage 3: The jury members, two teachers from the university under the supervision of the inspector of National Education, gathered and chose the three best speakers among the twenty videos using an oral presentation grid.
5. Stage 4: The last stage was on the 16th of April 2021 (The Knowledge day) to designate the best speaker of English in the district of Béchar in its first edition.

It is worth noting that the event got a considerable media attention, and here is an example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txx19XgV_yI

Conclusion:

The conclusion I can draw concerning the implementation of distance learning in Algeria is that some learners and teachers as well are always reluctant to this novelty in education due to their lack of effective training. That is to say that they are still afraid of any new change in education. I can also mention another constraint that is the lack of technical support at the level of all the educational institutions; I remember that when preparing online courses, we did not even have a studio where we could easily record the lessons.
Finally, It's high time things changed to the best by doing the best as we have to remind ourselves that nothing is impossible because the word itself says, "I'm possible".

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