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Motivations of Appearance and Possibilities of Adaptation of Distance Education to Local Contexts: An Issue of Concern beyond Emergencies

Madjda Chelli

madjda.chelli@umc.edu.dz

Constantine1 Frères Mentouri University

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I. **Abstract** : Distance education program formats are generally designed to serve students having other commitments that limited their ability to take classes in the traditional education program formats. This conceptual paper traces the motivations of appearance and development of this type of learning programs. Efforts to import distance education to the developing world are considered with a particular focus on context. The paper's aim is to ponder over the possibilities of adaptation of distance education to local contexts, through the descriptive analytical approach. Results show that different motivations and contexts would yield different horizons of investment and adaptation; which go beyond the circumstances

Keywords: distance learning; motivations of appearance; horizons of adaptation and investment.

دوافع التعليم عن بعد وإمكانات تكيفه في السياقات المحلية: مسألة تتجاوز منطق الطوارئ

الملخص:

تعتبر مناهج التعليم عن بعد شكلا من أشكال التعليم أعد لتلبية احتياجات طلبة ذوي التزامات تحد من قدرتهم على الالتحاق بمقاعد الدراسة في المناهج التقليدية. سنحاول في هذه الورقة البحثية تتبع أسباب ظهور وتطور هذا النوع من التعليم وسنتطرق إلى تطور هذا النوع من التعليم في الدول المتقدمة. كما سنتطرق إلى جهود نقل التجربة إلى الدول النامية بالتركيز على نقطة جوهرية ألا وهي اختلاف السياق. أما الأهم في نظرنا فهو محاولة قراءة وتفسير هذه المعلومات التاريخية الإحصائية للوصول إلى أرويات استثمار للتعليم عن بعد في السياقات المحلية، باستعمال المقاربة الوصفية التحليلية. وقد توصلت النتائج إلى أن اختلاف الدوافع والسياقات ينتج أفاقا مختلفة للتكيف والاستثمار، وأن مسألة التعليم عن بعد مسألة تتجاوز منطق الطوارئ.



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الكلمات المفتاحية: التعليم عن بعد، دوافع الوجود، أفاق التكيف والاستثمار

1. Introduction:

The rapid expansion in information and communication technology has had an influence on the educational systems in the world. This led to the appearance of Distance Education which provided substantial opportunities for learners.

Some research studies discussed the historical and philosophical backgrounds of this type of learning, while others were objective experimental studies (Fojtik, 2018) that dealt with the educational role of technology, which is, for us, the right question to be answered.

Many studies dealt with the advantages of distance education and even suggested it to supplant traditional education. On the other hand, health constraints of the Corona pandemic have legitimized it in a simplified manner.

This study will attempt to trace the motivations of appearance and development of this type of learning programs; tackling the definition, the different terminologies, the target audience and the evolution of distance education in the developed world. The different efforts to import distance education to the developing world are then considered with focus on its context's peculiarity. More importantly, however, it sets to interpret the aforementioned historical and statistical information to ponder over the possibilities of adaptation of distance education to local contexts. This is done based on the assumption that different motivations and contexts would yield different horizons of investment and adaptation.

1. Distance Education: Motivations of Appearance

1.1 Definitions

According to Holmberg (2008: 09), distance education is 'characterized by teaching and learning being brought about by media: in principle students and their teachers do not meet face to face. One or more media are used for their interaction and for communicating subject matter'.

Keegan (1990 and 1998) (cited in Holmberg: 2008: 09) identifies the following as "characteristics and differences between distance education and traditional teaching and learning":

a-The teacher and learner are separated throughout the learning process.



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b-An educational organization plans and prepares the learning materials and provides student-support services

c-Technical media (print, audio, video or computer) are used as carriers of the course content.

e- The two-way communication enables the student to “benefit from and initiate dialogue”.

f- The learning group is absent throughout the learning process, with “occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes”.

1.2 Different Terminologies

The difference between distance education and open learning is, according to Homlberg (2008: 10), that the latter permits “evading avoidable restrictions”. He gave the example of permitting student entry regardless of “prescribed entry requirements”.

For Holmberg (2008) the term distance education began to be used and officially adopted in the 1982 instead of correspondence education which dominated until the middle of the twentieth century. The terms e-learning and m-learning, however, are modern applications of distance education of electronic and mobile wireless communications (Holmberg: 2008).

Gray Harriman(2010)cited in Bencheva (2010: 63-64)presented different types of E-Learning resources as follows:

-**Online Learning** refers to learning taking place via the web and may have different forms (text, graphics, animation, audio, video, discussion boards, e-mail, ..). Online learning is characterized by being "on demand" and self-directed; though it may include synchronous chat, or web based-teleconferencing.

-**M-Learning** or Mobile Learning refers to the use of handheld devices (mobile phones, laptops..) in teaching and learning.

-**Distance Learning** refers to learning taking place either when the instructor and the learner are not in the same physical location, or when they are in the same location but not at the same time. Distance learning is now carried out via a number of media ranging from postal mail to teleconferencing or the Internet.

-**Blended learning** refers to learning that combines different delivery methods (collaboration software, Web-based courses, Electronic performance support systems, and knowledge management practices). It refers as well to learning that



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mixes various event based activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live E-Learning, and self-paced instruction.

Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) cited in Bencheva (2010:65) listed six reasons for the use a blended learning system: “pedagogical richness, access to knowledge, social interaction, personal agency, cost-effectiveness, and ease of revision”.

Researchers in some studies (2007) cited in Bencheva(2010:65) believe that “traditional classrooms will continue to offer benefits that arguably cannot fully be obtained in any other manner, but that any gaps in process effectiveness will continue to be narrowed as technology becomes friendlier for both instructor and student”.

In fact, we consider it appropriate to share the view of Bencheva (2010: 66) that “Before commitment from Traditional learning to Blended learning or full Online learning a thoroughly investigation has to be done”, because not only each mode has its own advantages and disadvantages; but that each situation (the case of Algeria for instance) has its own peculiarities that demand creative solutions considering different aspects from the part of the researchers.

1.3. Students Making Use of Distance Education

The category of students who make use of distance education is mainly that of adults who besides having a family life want to study for:

- Competence for a university entrance
- A degree examination
- A job
- Specific skills
- Personal development and education per-se
- Or just to have distance education elements in their degrees...etc.

1.4 The The Philosophical Bases of Distance Education

In an important article on the relationship between technology and academia, (Distance Education: Has Technology Become a Threat to the Academy?), Douglas Eamon (1999) discusses the philosophical underpinnings of views on the relation of technology to academia. He divided these views into three groups: the defenders of technology, the middle view - as he called it - and the defenders of academia.

Advocates of technology proceed from the simple logic that the educational mission of the university is to impart knowledge through lectures and guidance, and



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that these methods require effort and are therefore costly. Thus, the development of information technology will make it possible to design effective educational materials that are available to students through computer communication, and this will lead to the abandonment of the costly traditional education.

As for those of the middle opinion - as Eamon called them - they believe that the knowledge provided by the university is useful, but agree that productivity is an important and legitimate factor in evaluating universities, and that information technology may improve the productivity of universities. Thus, the role of the university will continue even if it would change a lot.

As for the defenders of academia, they believe that the university has a role in socialization, acculturation, guidance, consolidation of values and building knowledge through direct interaction between the student and the teacher. The university's effectiveness, according to them, should not be measured by the commercial profit model of private sector. The university may adapt to technology and distance education, but it will not give up its core values and that the teacher will welcome technology, but will remain its master, deciding under which circumstances it can be used.

The philosophical background of these views sheds light on the economic motivations of technology.

1.5. Evolution of Distance Education

First of all, it is worth to mention that the theoretical background of distance education is based on the hypothesis that teaching and learning without the learner and teacher meeting face to face could be possible and effective (Holmberg: 2008).

However, as far as the questions of students' independence, prescribed or self chosen pacing of the study, individual or group learning, there are two views: that of William Harper of the USA (1856-1906) and that of H.S. Hermod of Sweden (1860-1920). While the former insisted on the importance of highly structured courses and prescribed pacing; the latter insisted on the importance of the freedom of the individual student to study when and where it suited him.

All in all, as Holmberg(2008:) said, "the practice of the best correspondence schools provided the solid basis on which modern distance education has developed".



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a- European, US and Australian Experience

In England, distance education in the form of correspondence instruction dates back to the 18th and 19th centuries. An early attempt to provide distance education was made by Pitman in 1840. This later on became Sir Isaac Pitman Correspondence College. In Germany, correspondence teaching of foreign language begun assumedly in 1858. The Rustin approach was an early distance teaching activity based on "the development and distribution of self instructional material" in Germany in 1899. In the USA, between 1864 and 1890, there was the Boston-based Society to Encourage Study at Home where monthly correspondence with guided reading and frequent tests were a vital part of the organization's personalized instruction.

Then, the existence of examining bodies like the University of London (1836), favored private and individual study and opened the market for correspondence schools and colleges in the UK.

In the USA, however, Harper was the first to introduce a system of structured correspondence study at the university level. In the 20th century, distance education is to be characterized by "the provision of academic and practical occupational study opportunities" with Harnods in Sweden becoming the most influential correspondence organization from 1960 to 1970. In Australia, the university of Queensland entered the field of distance education in 1911(summarized from Holmberg: 2008).

In France a state correspondence school was created in 1939 to cater for the education of children whose schools closed because of the war. This has developed into what is today the large Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED), now mainly teaching and training adults.

In general, Holmberg (2008: 21) considers the founding of the British Open University in 1971 an indication of the new era of public recognition: "The image of distance education changed almost all over the world from one of possibly estimable but little respected or even pathetic endeavor to one of a publicly acknowledged promise of innovation"

According to Messina (2002), more than 1.6 million students were enrolled in distance learning programs in the United States, in 1998. Since 2002, online



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enrolment rates in higher education have grown to 21% whereas the traditional classroom instruction ones did not exceed 2% (YaNi, ?).

b-African and Arab Experience

The University of South Africa-as a pioneer of publically supported universities-was founded in 1873 as an examining body and emerged as a development of the University of Good Hope. It started teaching at a distance in 1946 and was definitely established as a distance-teaching university through a governmental decree of 1962.

According to Gharef (2011), distance education, in the Arab world, is still in its first phases and that most Arab universities have not yet adopted distance electronic learning in higher education. Here are some experiences summarized from Gharef (2011):

-The experience of the Arab electronic university in 1977, with free access to all those interested regardless of degree, age, profession and personal skills. The university delivers electronic efficacy certificates, sent to student via email and paper certificates sent via postal mail. (Alfadel (2004) cited in Gharef (2011)).

-The university of Khartoum had a distance education unit in 1999 to activate the work of the university's faculties and benefit from the potential of distance education (Mohamed Alhadi (2005) cited in Gharef (2011)).

-The United Arab Emirates experience was to insert a computer module in the programs of secondary schools in 1989/1990. Then, the experience was applied to intermediate schools (Official site for UAE government, accessed on 28-09 2009, cited in Gharef (2011)).

-The Saudi Arabia experience started with an e-classroom at the secondary and university levels. The university of King Abdelaziz was the first to apply electronic learning approaches for both distance and traditional learning students (Sartaoui and Djaoudat (2003) cited in Gharef (2011)).

- The Syrian Virtual University was founded in 2002 and as a broker with American, European and Australian universities. It delivers diplomas in different specialties (Syrian Virtual University, accessed on 25/03/2007 cited in Gharef (2011)).

- The Tunisian virtual university was founded in 2002 to account for the increasing number of students and it collaborated with foreign universities. The university won an Arab E-Content Award and focuses on three types of learning: university specialties, continuous learning and lifelong learning.



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c-The Algerian Experience

The Algerian electronic strategy can be summarized in these levels

-The promotion of the use of information and communication technologies in governmental administration.

- The promotion of the use of information and communication technologies in commercial institutions

-Encourage large public access to information and communication technologies nets.

- The promotion of e-commerce.

-The reinforcement of the infrastructure of communication.

- The development of the human potential.

-The promotion of research, development and innovation.

-The development of a national legal framework.

-Information and Communication collaborative plans.

- Reinforcing international collaboration.

-Electronic evaluation and assessment.

-Organizational procedures.

-The financial resources (Le projet de programme e-Algerie, accessed on 21-07-2009 cited in Gharef (2011)).

The integration of the ICT within the educational system was introduced in the country's educational ICT policy in 2002 (Hamdy, 2007: 5). Hamdy (2007: 6-7) mentioned three ICT initiatives related to infrastructure:

-The technopole of Sidi Abdallah which comprises technology and industrial parks.

-Net enterprise to support new ICT companies.

-Technobridge incubator which supports research in ICT.

According to Bin Harzallah (2021: 74), in Algeria, the application of electronic learning in higher education has only around 2006 began to take hold locally and is still struggling to gain much ground. And

the possibility of online registration in this type of education was not announced until 2009 (Boutkhil GUEMIDE and Chellali BENACHAIBA, 2012: 42).

As to the Algerian experience with distance electronic learning, it started, according to Gharef(2011), with the experience of the National Centre for Distance



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Professional Learning (CNEEPD). This was the first experience in virtual learning under the supervision of the University of Continuous Formation (UFC). Here are some electronic projects summarized from Gharef (2011):

-AUF project for a master in computer graphic design and visualization

-AUF Transfer for Trainers training in virtual learning.

-DESS UTICEF master for training experts in information and communication technologies.

-COSELEARN to train experts and technicians in the use of QUALILEARNING platform. The project is a collaboration between the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the Swiss institution QUALILEARNING and nine countries from the Mediterranean and North Africa. It aimed at setting a technical and pedagogical support group to cope with the increasing number of students, and equip universities with the apparatus necessary for distance learning.

-FORTIF is master training of experts and trainers in distance education. The Algerian university of Continuous formation and the UNESCO are among the participants in this project.

-the platform SERPOLET was used to prepare lectures in the internet

- FPD-CARO project by the university of Bejaia based on concepts such as autonomy, self-learning, social learning, constructive knowledge ..etc. This project is about inserting a virtual learning besides the traditional learning one. It accomplished the setting of a web site and a learning context based on ACOLAD platform. The remaining six phases of the insertion can be summarized in publicity and awareness-raising about the importance of distance education, training teachers in distance education, setting the administrative and technical structures, producing lectures and scenarios applying new ideas, distance group work, distance learning contexts.

In general, there are short, mid and long term objectives of these projects:

1- The short term objectives are mainly decreasing the use of human and material resources through video conferencing (which can register and broadcast lectures synchronically) and the setting of a distance electronic learning platform (which is meant to provide real study online options).



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2- At the mid-term objectives are the setting of a distance learning system that incorporates elements from electronic learning and TV broadcasting, in a vision which goes beyond the university boundaries.

3- The Algerian research network supports distance learning. Its backbone based on Algerian telecommunication supports and line seems inefficient.

4- @ide project, a cooperation between Algeria and Europe, which aims - from the Algerian part- to cope with the increasing number of students, the insufficient number of teachers, access to university centers for those who live far. Algerian experts are adapting the European experience to the Algerian context.

Hamdy (2007) enumerated a number of other objectives of the initiatives that were adopted. These can be summarized in the following points: to Promote the development and sharing of e-learning resources, the development of an integrated e-learning curriculum in primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions, the establishment of a national ICT centre of excellence, of the dissemination of knowledge and skill through e-learning platforms.

Bin Harzallah (2021) from his part mentioned recent Algerian efforts in the development of the Algerian distance learning system, some of which are the Algerian Research Network (ARN), the ARBAC, and the development of a platform for online courses and distant learning MOODLE. These and other efforts have specific technical aspects objectives.

Despite the huge efforts, the Algerian experience of distance education cannot but be part of the African one (described in Aderinoye, 2009) which suffers from the following weaknesses: the lack high-speed Internet infrastructures, the lack of access to computers, and expert human resources for the implementation and of support hi-tech delivery methods. Such weaknesses would hinder the accomplishment of the exhaustive list of the above-listed objectives. One solution to cope with such weaknesses in distance education, according to Aderinoye(2009) is to take on a "variety of forms": paper based courses, radio instruction, and television broadcasts; the latter are accessible to learners who lack tools and technical expertise.

2. Interpretation of Statistical information and the Possibilities of Adaptation to Local Contexts



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In the previous section, historical /qualitative statistical information about the development and reality of distance education in the advanced world and the developing countries was presented. Here are some of the interpretation remarks:

In the developed world, distance education springs from the cultural, social, economic and even scientific backgrounds. There was a preceding basic infrastructure, emerging economic needs and hence the appearance of specific guiding objectives to accompany the implementation of distance education.

In the developing world, the cultural, social, economic let alone the scientific backgrounds of distance education are different. In the developing world, there is a weak infrastructure, different needs of the society, and hence 'local' guiding objectives to accompany the implementation of distance education.

The scene in the Algerian context is no less complex. The Algerian experience of distance education as far as general objective setting (if we consider the list of objectives provided in Gharef (2011) and the Algerian participation in projects such as COSELEARN, for instance) is concerned, intersects with the European experience. After all, the Algerian experience with the E-Learning, is an experience with an internationally emerging type of learning, aiming-primarily- at benefiting the housewives, the workers, the employees, residents of remote areas and those who cannot pursue their education due to social, economic or political reasons. As far as the implementation of E-learning is concerned, many challenges may emerge.

A-Cultural Challenges:

The developing countries' 'local contexts', in fact, offer distance education a myriad of possibilities of adaptation, which might creatively solve their 'local problems'. Possible platforms of investment in distance education in Algeria can consider:

1- Awareness of the cultural basis of technology, namely the conflict between the advocates of technology who believe in the abandonment of the costly traditional education and the defenders of academia who believe that the university's effectiveness should not be measured by the commercial profit model of the private sector. This is a very important point of discussion in our local context, since it is linked to the values: do we spend money for education or that education brings money in our culture? What is the minimum of education our culture is ready to offer to its citizens? What are the local cultural limits of the "economic



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productivity of education”? These questions make the pace with which technology develops and changes objectives subject to our local cultural filter. After all, technology should be in the service of our cultural values. This is one way to resist “dependency” and start affirming the ‘local’ identity. This is primordial for both policy makers and people in general. Such an awareness set the minds free from blind imitation and directs them towards thinking about “creative” ways of benefiting from technology for local purposes.

2-Priorities of local societies: if the number of people who need distance

education programs for professional promotion, for instance, far exceeds the number of those who need distance education programs for personal/non institutionalized development, then distance education programs should first target professional promotion. Besides, the above listed Algerian projects could be oriented towards the satisfaction of the different needs of society (some for professional promotion, others to overcome distance problems, some others to overcome problems of a large number of students...etc.).

Thence, it is all about the “creative” use of distance education, which might be insightful even for the developed countries where it first emerged. Berman (2008) cited in Muhirwa (2009:1) was very positive to suggest that “the developed world can learn from uses of radio in developing countries, and that the medium deserves greater attention as a means of giving educational opportunity to rural, isolated people worldwide”.

B- Technical Challenges: few researchers tackled the issue of the educational role of technology (I have an unpublished paper in Arabic on the issue) where basic notions in traditional education such as group interaction, objective assessment, and even the nature and amount of knowledge acquisition challenge this role. This is to be the core of criticism to distance education for me. In some studies, however, the technical aspects in the Algerian context, for instance, such as limited access to technology, lack of access to internet facilities, digital inequalities (not all students can have high level connection, computers or smartphones, ...), led to inability to provide equal opportunities to students (Kaid, 2021). Kaid (2021) mentioned also the lack of engagement of students in distance education, and problems in assessment as challenges of E-learning. These are the true challenges of E-learning, as I have mentioned above.



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Conclusion

In fact, an important phase precedes importing technologies or modernization in the large sense to local societies: it is that of considering the cultural bases of this technology together with a vision of how to maximally benefit from it in their local contexts. The local contexts of the developing countries offer a lot of possibilities of adaptation of distance education to creatively solve the 'local problems' and also offer different platforms of investment. We fairly share the view of Muhirwa (2009: 1) that 'As with most interventions, however, —context is everything. If new technologies are introduced into a foreign environment in the absence of a clearly understood demand and careful preparation (...) there is every risk that the tool will take priority over the purpose'. The term 'emergency' in the title refers both to political, social and economic interventions legitimized by the advent of the developed world over the developing world and to health emergencies such as the COVID 19 pandemic. The introduction of ideas/technologies into local contexts should obligatorily be done through the filter of local cultures, if any benefit ever is to be sought.

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