

Distance Education in the Era of Globalisation

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Abstract *Globalisation is upon us and is influencing several areas. Evidently open and distance are also being affected by it. The paper attempts to analyse the process of globalisation and its impact on open and distance learning. Globalisation is likely to be a mixed blessing for Open and distance learning: on the one hand globalisation is likely to enhance access, and to empower the learner to influence the design and delivery of courses, on the other globalisation may threaten the notion of community and alter the sense of time, space and identity due to increasing use of electronic technology and digitisation of knowledge delivery.*

Introduction

The 1980s and 1990s brought upon the world a shift in arrangements and institutions of exchange that were far-reaching in impact. The State began to withdraw in the economic domain and markets began to gain positions of dominance as greater and greater reliance came to be placed upon them. Secondly, countries began to cooperate more with each other in exchange and interaction through trade, transport and communications. The production factory also went global. These changes began in the United States and Britain under Reagan and Thatcher, and within the then socialist camp, China .

Several developing nations, including India, have also witnessed reforms over the last two decades. These reforms have been characterised by huge increases in information technology, as well as communications technology coupled with deeper penetration of markets and rolling back of the State. One way of looking at the sweeping changes is to view them as indicative of a resurgence of the civil society vis a vis the State. Along with is that the sway of nationalism will diminish as flow of capital and information will transcend national boundaries with ever greater ease. Another way of looking at the phenomenon is as a rise in the role and power of private capital, both domestic as well as international, including international finance capital.

Needless to say, these economic reforms are likely to have an impact on education, including distance education. There are two kinds of impact that are likely: on the one hand, liberalisation is likely to provide the opportunity of using cutting-edge technology (which is itself advancing) in the production and dissemination of distance education material. It is also going to be increasingly easy to gather information and knowledge, and to communicate educational results and methods, and to share experiences, primarily through the Internet. On the other hand, the process of globalisation will bring about rapid and far-reaching changes in the cultural sphere. As local and traditional cultures and lifestyles come into greater and deeper contact with foreign and modern cultures and lifestyles, there is the possibility of disruption and upheaval in the former. The local culture may even be supplanted. The likely effect of distance education is likely to be positive for distance education but not so positive for Open Learning.

In what follows, we shall discuss about institutions that use the distance education mode for delivery and are also open learning systems. It is, of course, possible that a distance education institution is not an open learning system but we do not consider that case here. Let us discuss the likely distance education scenario first.

Distance education uses a variety of systems for delivery -- internet, compressed video, satellite downlink, audiotape, videotape, correspondence courses, etc. Distance education will no doubt have increasingly greater impact, as technological changes increase opportunities for access by all segments of the population provided of course, more and more people have access to technology. In addition, the concepts of lifelong learning, personalized instruction, and learning facilitation, are emerging, as the primary reasons why students seek higher education.

In distance education, diversity in learning opportunities are structured to meet the diverse needs and circumstances of individuals. Those who may not otherwise have access to learning opportunities, can gain these through Distance Education. Distance learning does not necessarily imply that there is no contact between learners and teachers, in spite of the fact that face-to-face meetings usually do not take place and the number of "contact hours" is reduced or eliminated. Communication between students and instructor is important for enhancing learning as well as for student motivation and involvement. Globalisation can provide technology that increases access through asynchronous or synchronous means leading to effective distance learning. Courses may include a combination of video conferencing, interactive course materials, simulations and multimedia, group-based assignments.

Promoting learning around demonstrable outcomes, student achievement of those outcomes, and assessment of learner progress by reference to these outcomes is the key to efficient distance education systems. Course content should be arranged to provide students with continuous feedback regarding their progress. New technology provides scope for delivering instructional material by asynchronous modes like web pages as well as synchronous mode like teleconferencing.

The convergence of telecommunications, publishing, television and computing, is creating a media environment with enormous implications for distance education, flexible learning, and mass higher education. As the price of electronic equipment falls, access to these knowledge media will increase and the globalisation of communication will permit the globalisation of higher education. The effective use of distance education would imply that a well laid-out system of infrastructure is in place.

Trends in globalisation are found also in changing theories of distance education and open learning. It is argued that notions of distance education are part of the trend towards uniformity under conditions of globalisation, while those of open learning are part of the trend encouraging difference and diversity.

What are the features of globalising of education?

To understand globalising of education, we must perceive it as being essentially multinational in character. Although there is a culture of globalisation, basically

globalisation is a set of practices. This is the case in the field of education as well. How can we identify whether an institution is actually offering courses that are global in nature?

First, there should be students who enrol for the courses in more than one country. For truly global reach the students could be in different continents. It is not enough that the students be at different countries. They should be able to communicate with each other and with the teacher. Many universities and colleges of America now offer courses in many countries. They have no face-to-face component and rely almost entirely on electronically transmitted or postal delivered course material.

The second characteristic of a global education system is the presence of an objective on the part of the institution to provide courses on an international scale. Globalisation of education does not mean something that comes from outside the country and gradually wraps itself around and permeates educational institutions. It is a process that the institution participates in, as do similar institutions all over the world. If an institution wishes to globalise it must design and offer courses, preferably web-based which are available to anyone with access. Access can be monitored by providing passwords and may be fee-based. But the university must strive towards an international reach.

Related to these are features about course content and support services. Course content could be made multi-cultural in nature, particularly in social sciences, in order to enable learners to perceive themselves as being members of a global village, and allow them to appreciate plurality of cultures. There could be international collaboration in the design, development and delivery of courses. There can even be franchise arrangements.

Partnerships among different institutions can take many forms. Institutions can be complementary partners, developing some sort of network relationships. Universities can even collaborate with institutions that have different core business. There can, alternatively be a consortium of universities where each one develops part of the programme, but the programme as a whole is available to all. Or there can be actual educational partnership in developing courses jointly. As of now, global support structures are rare. The internet and electronic mail provide the richest opportunities for global support services. Services have to be developed to make it easy for submission and evaluation of assignments and counselling and tutoring to be done online. The future development of global support services would depend a great deal on developments in communications technology.

Institutions can also increase the scale of global operations by engaging in global research projects in which there could be joint work and reports, and exchange of data and experiences. There could also be electronic and video conferencing, or exchange of library material. The global institution would have to overcome problems of languages, and would have to attempt to develop accreditation, administrative and quality assessment norms.

What factors are leading to the growth of globalisation?

Probably the single biggest cause, as has been mentioned at the beginning, and which also happens to be a *characteristic* of liberalisation, is the worldwide retreat of governments. If almost *everywhere* the presence of governments is minimised, then globally markets begin to play a greater role, so along with liberalisation we get globalisation. Even in higher education the state is playing a smaller role than ever before. And there is consequently a lack of funds. There has been in some cases even a fall in revenues. This sort of financial

pressure in many countries is making open learning institutions look to global markets. Moreover, developments in information and communications technology themselves generate a process whereby interrelatedness and interdependence is increasingly understood and appreciated. Thus globalisation leads to development of information and communications technology, but this in turn reinforces and provides a feedback loop to globalisation.

There are several arguments that have been put forward against globalisation of distance and open learning.

The first argument is based on the fact that the new delivery mechanisms for most distance education system are increasingly electronic and rely largely on the digitisation and computerisation of knowledge. Earlier in the paper, this was argued to be factors in increasing access. However, there are adverse effects as well of this rising use of digital technology. Some experts have pointed to the cognitive effects of learning from screen-based information rather than traditional text-based material, arguing that linear, narrative structures associated with books, will break down and knowledge and information associated with the internet and CD-ROMs will be fragmented and disjoint (Poster, 1990). Edwards (1994) has argued that there is a loss of the sense of time and space which is induced by digitisation of knowledge. There is also lowering of concentration and attention span.

Another argument against globalisation is that increasingly, education is in danger of becoming a packaged consumer good (Field, 1994, 1995, 1996). The respect and veneration that the teacher used to command in the traditional system, where the teacher was often seen as a 'sage on the stage' is likely to give way to institutions being perceived as sellers of educational material. The students are the consumer and clients. There is the danger of this process being exacerbated by the rising culture of consumerism itself, where conspicuous consumption is the rule, and status feelings guide the use of consumer goods.

Other arguments against globalisation are based on the position that this process is in a position to subvert or threaten the existence of traditional communities and traditional knowledge systems and cultures. Local knowledge and wisdom can actually get devalued and too, a common global epistemological base of knowledge is getting promoted. Moreover, there is everywhere a gradual managementisation of society and hence the stress on areas like management and computers. Related to this is, as has been argued above, the sense of a loss of identity. Also there is a loss of the particular, as people are sucked into the 'global village' but into a culture that is often alien and not of their own making. This is sometimes true in the field of education.

Some of the likely directions and trends in globalisation of education are these: there is likely to be greater use of English as a link language. This is in keeping in with both use of communications technology and in globalisation. Here we may say that little has been done to address the cultural issues of globalisation.

Another trend is that economic globalisation is generally proceeding at a faster pace than educational globalisation. Related to this is the fact that it is less unlikely in education than in the economic sphere for monopolies with huge wealth and power to develop on a global scale. Big business in education is unlikely. A trend which is likely to grow further is that

there is everywhere an increasing demand for courses on business studies and information technology at the cost of humanities and languages. Not only do markets drive globalisation, but also the study of markets is very important under globalisation. To paraphrase Calvin Coolidge, the business of the world is business. One trend in the development of non-print material is that there is likely to be a shift from broadcasting and satellite TV technology to web-based and internet based delivery. The former is one-way and didactic. Increasingly, interactivity will grow. Even in synchronous mode, there will be greater use of technology.

The very process of globalisation will change the basic structure and appearance of universities. Competition and collaboration will both characterise the workings of different universities. A related feature would be that there would be greater engagement in discussions over basic questions about pedagogy, the learning process, the role of the teacher, process and methods of quality assessment in education, and so on. This would be an enrichment of the body of knowledge in the theory of education. There would also be joint course development.

There is a fear that globalisation would lead to greater prevalence and adoption of western values, even in education (Edwards, 1995). But paradoxically the process of globalisation itself is the best guarantor against such a process happening and for plural cultural values developing in the world. A very common response to globalisation is segregationism and an accentuating of local and ethnic identities. In education it is to be guarded against, particularly against the development of curricula which go against scientific temper and is reactionary, and the idea that whatever is of importance in any area of knowledge was already present in the hoary and misty past in one's own country. The trend of closing the windows of the mind should not be allowed to take hold.

Conclusion

It would perhaps not be incorrect to say that the globe is placed today at the critical juncture of globalisation. It is hard to say conclusively what consequences this process will have on distance education, and particularly in distance learning. The basic feature of this phase of globalisation, and indeed its very meaning, is that it uses the medium of the markets and relies and is powered by information and communication technology. It was Karl Marx who said that "working [persons] have no country" but globalisation seems to think that the reach of the market is not constrained by the presence and policies of nation states.

Globalisation will probably emerge as a mixed blessing for open and distance learning. On the one hand it will provide access to a larger population, and if the government or others provide the requisite infrastructure, will use information technology to provide state-of-the-art education and knowledge and allow the sharing of experiences. On the other hand it might lead to loss of identity and a change of cultural systems, including in education.

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