
Peer-Reviewed Article

The Genesis of Distance Education

Alan D. Hansen, PhD, MBA, BA
Independence University

Abstract: Distance Education is not a new phenomenon. Current online methodologies to deliver education at a distance began to gain traction in the 1990s, but the premise of formal education at a distance, or from home, has been part of the educational infrastructure for nearly two hundred years. This paper examines the evolution of distance education and the impact, both pro and con, in its early stages. In turn, it presents insights into the institutional opposition that current online education development has, and still faces.

Keywords: distance education, faculty

The concept of higher education has been around for millennia, but the model that is often perceived as traditional higher education in the United States evolved from the European model. The European model of higher education itself made many shifts and turns in its development. But by the time the American colonies were established, European Higher education focused mainly on educating clergy, and the wealthy members of society (Lucas, 1994).

In 1636 the general court of Massachusetts appropriated funds to establish what is now known as Harvard University. The proclaimed purpose of the institution was stated as, “Every one shall consider the main end of his life and studies to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life” (Lucas, p. 104). All eight of the pre-Revolution colleges focused on educating clergy and civic leaders.

The early American Universities exclusive nature extended beyond the career functions of its graduates. A broad view that continued into the twentieth century was that education was not for the masses, but for a select few.

A schism started to form at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1800, Dr. George Birkbeck, a faculty member from the Andersonian University of Glasgow began offering lectures to the working class in mechanical sciences. This soon spread to the French language, astronomy, electricity, and mathematics. This evolved into a confederation of non-traditional educational institutions organized as Mechanics Institutes (Knowles, 1994). The Mechanics Institutes mission was “to meet the need of artisans for technical education at low cost, in leisure hours, and with minimum preparation requirements” (Knowles, p.15). A version of the Mechanics Institute was founded in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as the Franklin Institute.

In 1826, a Yale graduate, Josiah Holbrook founded the American Lyceum movement (Bode, 1965). The intent of the lyceum movement was to expand knowledge and education to the masses without massive cost (Woytanowitz, 1974). Between 1826 and 1832 professional

educators traveled to organized community education series in fifteen states (Watkins, 1991). By 1835 there were 3,000 town lyceums and over 100 county lyceum organizations (Knowles, 1994). The movement gradually disintegrated with the volatile political environment that led to the Civil War.

New technology in the 1830s in Great Britain was the advent of the postage stamp and an organized postal system. A stable postal system created a technology innovation that allowed people to consistently communicate at a low cost through this postal system. In 1837 Issac Pitman, who developed phonograph (shorthand) created a course of study that could be administered through the mail; creating the first known correspondence course. This was repeated in the United States by Issac's brother Ben Pitman in the United States (Public Broadcasting System, 2004).

In 1873, Anna Ticknor initiated a program to educate women through correspondence (Nasseh, 2004). Ticknor became known broadly as the mother of American correspondence study (PBS, 2004), as curricula, guides, and supporting material were developed and shared with nearly 10,000 members over the course of twenty four years.

In 1873, the best known of the traveling education systems in the United States was founded. The Chatauqua movement provided educational programs for the common people across the United States and Canada. According to Clay Schoenfield, "In effect Chatauqua became a folk university and college instructors were called shortly to give courses on college subjects" (1977, p.24).

Dr. William Rainey Harper, who later founded the University of Chicago, was a popular instructor in the Chatauqua programs. He developed a model for correspondence learning in 1881 that became the standard for teaching through correspondence in higher education (Noffsinger, 1926).

Distance education in the form of correspondence-based programs entered the United States Higher Education system in 1873 at Illinois Wesleyan College, when they introduced graduate degree studies through correspondence (Bittner & Mallory, 1933). Faculty opposition to teaching in abstentia was intense (Fallows, 1927). The program grew under the leadership of the presidency of Samuel Fallows but fell into disfavor after he left the institution.

A pattern of correspondence programs being led by a strong leader, and opposed by faculty continued on through the nineteenth century. The most notable failure was at the University of Chicago, where Harper made it a central tenant of his plans for the university at its founding. Ultimately faculty opposition led to correspondence education being relegated to a minor role in the university (Storr, 1966). The one exception was the University of Wisconsin that built a strong distance education model under the advocacy of Frederick Jackson Turner (VanOverbeke, 2003). After Turner left the university the initiative seemed doomed to follow the path of other efforts in other universities, but in 1909 another strong leader, Charles R. Van Hise resurrected the idea, and rebuilt the extension system of distance education with the nomenclature, the "Wisconsin Idea" (Knowles, 1994). The model caught on, and the University of Wisconsin remains a leader in distance education to this day.

In the 1880s Thomas J. Foster developed a correspondence course about coal mining, surveying and machinery. In 1891 he had enrollments in excess of 1,000 students participating in his private venture correspondence programs. This led to the establishment of the International Correspondence Schools of Scranton (ICS). Over the next three decades his programs enrolled more than two million students, dwarfing enrollments at all U.S. colleges and universities combined at that time (PBS, 2004).

Foster's success led to numerous imitators, some scrupulous, others not. In the 1920s all that was required to operate a school was a business license, with no oversight from accrediting or regulatory agencies. The quality of course offerings ranged widely from quality training programs such as those delivered by ICS, to diploma mills that sold degrees at will (Bittner & Mallory, 1933).

Summary

The diploma mills amongst the legitimate privately owned correspondence schools gave traditional university faculty members the ammunition they needed. Extension and correspondence programs were relegated to a status of second class education for the next six decades.

Faculty opposition to distance education, and the poor reputation that remained in place from the 1920s carried over into the late twentieth century when online education, which is a sub-set of distance education began its evolution. Lingering doubts about the integrity of education delivered at a distance were abundant as online education began to surface. Likewise, the even earlier opposition based on who a university should serve remained intact in the culture of many educations of higher education. Online education at the beginning of the twenty first century had many challenges to overcome beyond technology.

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