

### Understanding the Concept of Distance Education

Although distance education has been equated with online learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Holmberg, 2005), correspondence education (Gatewood, 2014; Haughey, 2010), and open learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Garrison, 2009), these concepts are elements of the distance education spectrum, and not distance education per se. This is because the approach, pedagogy, practice, and elements of distance education varies between contexts, applications, and eras of development, which makes having a single definition of distance education a challenge (Bates, 2017; Gatewood, 2014; Garrison, 2009; King, Young, Driver-Richmond, & Schrader, 2001). Nonetheless, despite the varying debates around defining distance education, Moore and Kearsley (2012) provide a definition that closely encapsulates the various features of *variability* applicable to distance education: "Distance education is the interplay between people who are teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of being separate from one another" (p. 209 ).

The discussions in this paper, therefore, focus on the multifaceted concept of distance education within the framework of Moore and Kearsley's (2009) definition, by focusing on the concepts of 'interplay', 'environments', and 'separation' contained therein. Furthermore, the notion of *variability* refers to a teaching strategy that ranges from being totally offline to being fully online, consisting of both synchronous and asynchronous elements, and utilising a strategic mix of various mediums and channels of instruction (Bates, 2017; Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Holmberg, 2005; Peters, 2004).

Firstly, the terms 'interplay', 'environments', and 'separation' encapsulate the fundamental feature of distance education, which is the geographical separation between instructors and

students (Bates, 2017; Gatewood, 2014; Peters, 2004). Although digital technology is a viable medium to overcome the physical distance between providers and receivers of knowledge in the educational transaction, it is not the only medium that facilitates interaction and collaboration, thereby highlighting the difference between online learning and distance education (Bates, 2017; Gatewood, 2014; King, et al., 2001).

Of the many reasons for this distinction, inadequate infrastructure development in developing countries is one of the barriers to online learning (Reshef, 2011). Moreover, the different models of distance education, ranging from fully online universities that utilize various media strategies and structures to facilitate distance education, to bimodal models of instruction that feature aspects of both typical residential universities and distance learning, also lead to different approaches to distance education (Peters, 2004).

These different approaches also encapsulate the *variability* in the relationship and collaboration between instructors and students, highlighting the complex ‘interplay’ evident in the distance education spectrum (Haughey, 2010; Holmberg, 2005). These relationships could be one-way (from the instructor to the student), two-way (encapsulating a feedback loop between students and instructors), or three-way (student-student-instructor collaboration), encompassing vertical and horizontal flows of communication between them (Gatewood, 2014; Garrison, 2009; Peters, 2004).

In summary, distance education is a multifaceted concept and approach to education that aims to bridge the gap between geographically dispersed seekers and providers of education and utilizes various means, modes, strategies, and techniques for collaboration and interaction. Therefore, there is no universal definition of distance education in the field to date.

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