WHICH IS BETTER: CONVENTIONAL EDUCATION OR DISTANCE EDUCATION?

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Abstract
This paper is an attempt at comparing conventional education and distance education as alternative learning methods. The study was motivated by the growing debate among student groups and employers as to whether or not the distance learning approach backed by technology is better than the regular traditional approach. The aim of the paper is to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both learning models in order to better harness them for better student achievement and education attainment. The paper discovers that the conventional education method holds advantage in providing physical contact between the learners and the instructors which allows room for deeper explanation of course content and feedback, student to student interaction and execution of team projects and experiments. However, this method was found to be more expensive and rigid and, in many cases, overstretching the instructors by crowding too many students in a class thereby diminishing the per-capita learning output. The distance learning method was found to be more flexible and less expensive in terms of financial and time costs, offering the learner room for choice of work schedule. Despite their individual differences, the study found that both distance education and conventional education methods share the same goals and ability to produce significant impact in teaching and learning. The paper therefore recommends a national master plan to optimally galvanize the two learning approaches in a way that will allow both models to remain singularly effective and mutually reinforcing in delivering quality learning.
Keywords: Education, Learning, Conventional Education, Distance Education, comparative study

Introduction

Distance learning has become increasingly popular. Improvement in technology coupled with the outbreak of COVID 19 has increased people's fascination with the learning method. More and more people are resorting to distance learning, using electronic means to keep students in touch with teachers and to distribute educational material.[1] Different institutions now utilize available technologies

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such as audio connections, video tapes, and television to deliver instruction at a distance.[2] There is a constant drive to achieve education for all, otherwise known as mass education, and distance learning aided by technology, is seen as a viable means to that.

More recently, distance education has been upgraded with new technologies. Rapid developments in technology have made distance education easy (McBrien et al., 2009). Products by Google can be really useful under such problematic situations; they are (a) Gmail, (b) Google Forms, (c) Calendars, (d) G-Drive, (e) Google Hangouts, (f) Google Jam board and Drawings, (g) Google Classroom, and (h) Open Board Software (not a Google product, helps in recording meetings in the form of files). These tools can successfully be used as alternatives for face-to-face classes (Basilaia et al., 2020).

The increasing popularity of distance learning has however raised the question of how effective and efficient the education model is when compared with the traditional system. What special advantages does its use of technology bring? Are there some aspects that need to be improved upon for distance education to fulfil its promise? When measured against the virtues of the traditional system, where does it stand? Does it offer humanity a better deal as many have claimed?

Conventional Education

Conventional learning, otherwise known as traditional learning, is an age-long educational system which involves physical interactions between students and their teachers within the confines of a school and under the roof of a classroom. In the conventional education, there is face-to-face live interaction between learners and instructors who are physically present in the same place.[3]

Merits of Conventional Education

The advantages of conventional education include the following:

- Active learning: During class, students participate in live lectures and share real-time interactions with their teachers and their classmates. Active learning and participation are beneficial too.
- Interpersonal skills: Conventional learning instils interpersonal relationship and communication skills in the students. It offers students lots of opportunities to relate with their teachers and network with their classmates and even students in other schools and backgrounds.

- Scheduled learning: Schools are well-organized and structured in conventional education system. The routine that comes with conventional schooling brings about punctuality and discipline.
- Greater Concentration and Better Understanding: In the conventional classroom, students concentrate better on their learning because there is less distraction. The students gain greater understanding through the stories and real-world examples from their teachers and their fellow students and have a greater chance of completing their course successfully.

Challenges Facing Conventional Education

●Parental involvement is at an all-time low: there are many new tools available to teachers for connecting to parents, tutors and other educational professionals. The time that is spent in the classroom really is not enough for teachers to explain complex concepts to many of the student. Time spent at home with parents and tutors through review is necessary but unfortunately this hardly comes into play.

●Lack of finance is a major problem with the conventional education method. Nigeria as a case study is dominated by the poor who can barely afford to feed and hence are unable to gain access to good schools. Some schools are shut down by regulatory agencies because of lack of funding needed to maintain the set standards by these agencies. Even the Federal government who owns these regulatory bodies fails woefully to provide adequate learning facilities in public schools which majority of the citizens resort to due to poverty.

●Recognizing diversity and catering to the various needs of the students is a problem in the education system. Understanding students' abilities and making sure that all students have access to the learning resources and tools they require for success should remain a big part of an educator's focus.

Distance Education

Simply defined, distance education is education at a distance with the assistance of technologies. In contrast to the classroom learning system, learners and teachers in distance education are separated in space from each other. Distance education is over 100 years old.[4] In its beginnings, it took the form of correspondence courses in which students and teachers communicated by post. The number of correspondence courses increased significantly after World War II when many veterans hurried to complete the education they had missed while in the service.[5]The establishment of the British Open University (1969) marked a significant development in the delivery of distance education by offering a

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mixed-media approach to distance learning technologies. Learning materials (text, audio & visuals) were sent to students by mail and supplemented by broadcast radio and television.[6]

The course content is now delivered to the recipient through webinars, online streaming, live/recorded video lectures, Learning Management System, or PowerPoint presentations to mention but few. Group discussions and communication between students and teachers take place via emails, text messages and various other forms of messaging platforms.[7]

Merits of Distance Learning System

●*There is Flexibility of schedule*. The top benefit of distance education, its key attraction, is the flexibility it affords in terms of the time, place and pace of learning. Unlike the traditional education that constrains learners to follow a particular schedule of learning, distance learning allows learners the freedom to choose when, where, and how they learn.[8]

●*The Student can Study from Anywhere Any time.* Another great advantage of distance education is the opportunity it gives an individual to learn wherever he or she is. For some reasons, some students lack access to educational facilities. Distance learning gives such students the opportunity to learn and improve themselves in spite of their handicaps. With access to a computer and internet connection, they can take up any course of their choice and join the lesson from any corner of the world.[9]

●*The System Saves Money*. Compared with traditional learning, distance learning can be less expensive at times.[10]The cost of books is alleviated due to the availability of online study material and some institutes offer a discount on their online programmes which is not usually available in the conventional learning system. In line with this, Bijeesh argues that for any given program, the fee of a distance education degree, online or otherwise, maybe much more affordable than the fee of a regular on-campus degree.[11]

●*There is no Commuting*. An added advantage is that it saves one the trouble of commuting in crowded buses and local trains.[12]In traditional learning, however, students must go to school or college for education. There is a fixed time when students have to report for instruction.[13]Because distance learning does not restrict the student to a particular location, there's no time as Bijeesh puts it wasted in going to and fro the college, no time wasted in waiting for a bus or train.[14]

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●**There is *Opportunity to Earn While Studying***. Distance learning can be the best option for people who want to further their studies and improve their résumé without resigning from their jobs. It accommodates learning while working.

Challenges Facing Distance Education

1. *High chances of distraction*: According to Bijeesh,[15] where there is no teacher around for face-to-face interaction and no classmates who can help with constant reminders about pending assignments, the chances of getting distracted and losing track of deadlines are high.[16]

2. *Complicated Technology*: Distance learning is driven by technology. It presupposes the constant availability of resources like computer, webcam, and stable internet connection. This overdependence on technology is a major drawback to distance learning. In case of any software or hardware malfunction, the class session will come to a standstill and this interrupts the learning process. Moreover, the complicated nature of the technology used in distance learning restricts online education to students who are computer and technology savvy.[17]

3. *Lack of Social Interaction and interpersonal skills*: in a conventional classroom, students have the opportunity to meet and interact with people.[18] They can speak their mind, ask questions, make presentations, solve problems with others in groups and acquire social skills. Distance learning, conversely, does not require face to face interaction with classmates or teachers as information is sent by post or posted online. Furthermore, learners often study alone and may feel isolated in the absence of the social physical interaction that comes with the traditional classroom. This lack of physical interaction creates a lot of issues, such as flaming and isolation.[19] Learners have difficulty staying in contact with their instructors. Although learners can send emails to their instructors, they often do not get prompt replies and feedback.[20]

4. *Some Job Markets Do Not Accept Online Degrees*: Some employers still tend to prefer a degree from a regular college over online or distance education. They think that distance education is not a serious form of education. They fear that this could be quite dangerous as one might get a degree that is not going to be recognized by private companies in the job market and the same problem might occur in getting government jobs.

5. *Lack of Student Motivation.* The clear downside to any type of distance education is that without a physical teacher to guide the students, there is the tendency for the students to lose focus. As experience shows, some students at times find distance teaching to be boring and get frustrated by lack of

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feedback from their teachers and difficulty in understanding written instructions given to them. The point is that motivation is a skill that cannot be developed when students are left free to study at their convenience. Motivation comes from constant prodding and discipline provided by one's teachers. It actually takes a well-motivated, disciplined and mature student to successfully complete the course of study. The reader has only to think of the wide and easy room online learning allows for distractions and cheating and he will see the point being made here. If examination malpractice remains a recurrent decimal in our schools even with the presence of supervisors and examiners, what can a lazy student not do in a situation where he is left to write his exams without any physical invigilator?

Evaluation of Their Strengths and Weaknesses

The distance learning method has shown itself as more flexible and less expensive in terms of financial and time costs offering the learner room for choice of work schedule. In distance education, according to Traxler, [20] there is enormous potential for widening access to higher education and increasing the diversity of student populations in online technologies provides opportunities to learn anywhere, anytime from anywhere. New technologies facilitate greater collaboration, both with global partners and at a more local level. Distance learning does, however, require that students have sufficient technical knowledge and access to the tools before resorting to an online mode. In short, distance learning offers equality of opportunity to people, the difficulties and problems associated with it notwithstanding. That is why researchers are busy looking to ways of improving and maximizing its potentials.

The conventional education method holds advantage in providing physical contact between the learners and the instructors which allows room for deeper explanation of course content and feedback, student to student interaction and execution of team projects and experiments. However, this method has proven to be more expensive and rigid and, in many cases, overstretching the instructors by crowding too many students in a class thereby diminishing the per-capita learning output. To facilitate learning, the traditional set-up utilises a variety of factors such as the infrastructure and study material (textbooks, journals). In comparison with distance learning, traditional learning is more organised and can provide a lot of opportunities for social interaction. It is actually the relationships and bonds that are formed that give the learning mode an advantage over distance learning.

Having looked critically (though not exhaustively) at the merits and demerits of both conventional and distance systems, we can see clearly that both systems have their pros and cons. Both are pursuing the same goal although distance education tries to achieve the target through the incorporation of different teaching methodologies.

Educational Implications

All of this has implications for the way learning is planned and conducted. First, it means that before one adopts any model, one has to weigh one's options and make sure that one selects a model that meets one's needs, strengths and career goals. Distance learning is a great choice for students who are incapable of attending the regular classroom lessons because of distance, time or other reasons. For instance, those who have no money to enroll in a traditional institution have no option but to embrace distance learning. That is, if they want to further their education. Those who feel more comfortable and who learn more easily in a familiar, traditional classroom situation should know that distance learning has come to stay and that it can no more be wished away (Liguori & Winkler, 2020). Indeed, in the face of COVID 19, distance learning can no more be regarded as a dispensable option; it has become a necessity.

Students who are looking for economically viable options can go for a distance learning programme. They have only to get a computer with an internet connection and the whole world will be in their bedroom. Students who don't have enough time on their hands can recourse to distance education and pursue their studies from the comfort of their homes. Individuals who are unable to continue their undergraduate, graduate, or postgraduate education, for whatever reason, can change their story through distance learning.

There is no doubt that distance education is valuable, but when it comes to training, and instruction, conventional, face-to-face learning remains vital. Listening to a teacher deliver a lesson with passion and grace is a great source of motivation as pointed out earlier. It ignites passion and interest in a learner and challenges him to aspire to imitate the teacher. In addition to ensuring better understanding and retention, the conventional education promotes social skills. In a typical traditional classroom, there is direct contact between learners and instructors unlike in the conventional, traditional setting. This affords the students the opportunity to directly share their views and obtain clarifications from the teacher. This environment is more suitable for young children,

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teenagers, and young adolescents who still need help and direction in their academic pursuits. Their teacher is able to know them, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses better, mentor them and guide them in their career choices.

When all is said and done, conventional education and distance education are two sides of the same coin. Despite their unique differences, both share the same goals as learning methods. Therefore, in assessing their contributions to teaching and learning, the question should not be about which one is better but how both should be blended for optimal learning.

Concluding Reflection

Digital education may hold out a lot of promises and exciting prospects, but this method of learning is not ideal for everyone. Not all the teachers and students have access to all digital devices and lack of internet connections can cause a lot of trouble. Since both learning models have their strong points despite their inherent shortcomings, choosing between them highly depends on the circumstances and requirements of the learner. Therefore, before enrolling in any learning program, learners have to weigh up their options. On the part of the government, there is need for a national master plan to optimally galvanize both learning approaches in a manner that will allow each to remain singularly effective and mutually reinforcing in delivering quality learning. Efforts should be made to ensure that there is availability and access to the required resources and necessary digital tools for distance learning. This is the way to go in the circumstances. The flexibility of distance education combined with the physical contact of conventional education gives both teachers and students the best of both worlds.

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