



Distance Learning: Origin and Development

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A stay at home order was implemented in order to prevent the spread of the Coronavirus by governments and universities, presenting two options: the first was to close schools and universities until the pandemic ends, in order to preserve the quality of education, continuing with the application of the educational system as usual. This option takes into consideration the necessity to decrease the state of fear and nervousness that the students and their families are living with, which would be exacerbated by the additional burden of homeschooling the children. The other option consists of maintaining the educational process and completing the requirements of the academic year with the least possible loss. Under isolation procedures, this choice requires the use of distance learning tools including e-learning. Indeed, the literature review and publications use the terms “distance learning” and “e-learning” synonymously, which requires clarification.

Distance learning is a system of learning with complete geographic separation between the teachers and the students. This system is carried out on a basis of educational content delivery to the learners where they reside or work via the available means of communication such as regular mail, e-mail, and the internet. Learning here is active self-learning based on multiple methods and using e-learning techniques; however, is not connected to it and does not depend on it.

Distance learning arose in response to the needs of many adult learners who were unable to enroll in face-to-face programs due to a number of social or economic reasons, including difficulty in traveling to campus, hardship, long distances, high expenses, and the lack of ability to balance work and studies at the same time. The stages of developing distancing learning can be separated into three, according to the teaching methods used. The first stage, which began in the nineteenth century, is distinguished by the complete separation between the learners and the educational institution, and the transferring of educational content from the educational institution to the learners through correspondence through the mail, in the form of a package containing a study guide, articles, and a set of assignments and tasks. The learners would send back their assignments to be graded, and after they were graded, the professors would return them to the students. Therefore, the term teaching by correspondence was used at this stage as a synonym for distance learning. The University of Chicago was the first to create an independent department for teaching by correspondence in 1892. The rate of granting certificates to graduates through this system was low.

The second stage saw the use of technology in the operation of distance learning, by adding videos to the educational content package as a supporting element. It also saw the beginning of partial communication between the learners and the teachers who had become a supportive, motivating, and guiding role in improving the educational process and level of learners' achievements. Thus, in 1921,

radio shows began to be used to transfer educational content. In 1970, TV, CDs, and videos were used and this multimedia succeeded in furthering distance learning, which British and American universities picked up quickly with telecourses being one of the most successful educational methods. With the development of teaching and assessment methods, learners became subject to review tests and attended final exams at the educational institution at the end of the semester. In this stage, the term open education was used as a synonym for distance learning, open university in the United Kingdom and United States, and the most well-known universities adopted open education. In the Arab world, Beirut Arab University was an example of this.

The third stage of distance learning launched due to the related technological advances with the use of electronic educational tools across the internet and the return of teachers assuming a greater role in organizing the learning environment and offering supportive resources for it, and presenting individual support to the learners during discussion forums. The teachers played the important role of providing opportunities for learners to interact and be creative through developing critical thinking skills and stimulating the transfer and production of knowledge.

In the early 1990s, the beginning of the spread of the internet led to a boom in distance learning. With the fast development of improving computers and internet, and the increased rate of the proliferation of tablets and smart devices, the development of communications systems and educational applications, a number of prestigious academies and universities have emerged using e-learning techniques as a successful method in distance learning. This is accompanied by the spread of free education across YouTube and holding meetings and conferences virtually. The term digital education was used as a synonym for e-learning, and both are used as a synonym for distance learning, which is an error. Harvard University, Stanford University, MIT, and Columbia University are of the most well-known universities that grant certificates for short courses organized remotely through distance learning.

Distance learning is a method supportive of the educational process in which learners communicate with teachers face-to-face (in-person learning) or across the internet (distance learning). No communication happens between the two sides, in instances of purely free, self-learning in which learners navigate the internet in search of knowledge on their own. E-learning depends on the use of technologies and various electronic media in providing educational content to learners in an interactive, stimulating, and flexible manner. These technologies include reading, audio, and visual components such as e-books, audio recordings, and still and moving pictures such as film clips and YouTube videos. These technologies are employed in the organization of short courses, in some programs, and long-form courses. E-learning requires the availability of qualified and trained teachers to use it efficiently, as well as the availability of advanced computers and the internet with stable electricity, in addition to the existence of electronic platforms and powerful networking applications such as Microsoft Teams, GoTo Meeting, Zoom, and WebEx. The types of e-learning can be divided, based on method and type of distance learning, into three: the first is simultaneous e-learning through which educational content is presented live and direct, in which teachers and learners are present at the same time on the network and in front of their computers. The second type is asynchronous e-learning in which educational materials are always available online, giving the learners enough flexibility to log on and use the network in a time that suits them without needing to be online at the same time as the teachers. The third type is supported e-learning in which learners search for educational resources themselves on the internet. This is in addition to a different type of this education, which is face-to-face education with the support of

electronic technologies through which teachers offer the educational materials to learners, in person, using a mix of traditional and electronic teaching aids.

The closure of schools and universities in our country as a result of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, as is the case in most countries in the world, has resulted in the replacement of face-to-face learning with distance learning, relying on simultaneous e-learning to do so. This sudden and rapid transition, not previously planned for, has led to the emergence of many challenges that are still facing the academic departments of educational institutions, faculty members, students, and their families alike. The preparations for this type of education were not ready, and are still not complete, but rather are suffering from many issues. However, everyone is accepting this challenge, despite its shortcomings, as it is the best available option. Certainly, an extensive discussion will emerge from this experience, questioning the feasibility of this style of education during this period that we are enduring, and certainly after passing through this ordeal and returning to school. Therefore, it will not be surprising that changes will have occurred in educational attitudes and policies towards e-learning in the post-Corona era.