



Digital Distance Education: A Rescue for Correspondence Study

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ABSTRACT

To date, democratization of educational opportunities for higher learning, and promoting equal opportunities for all learners, who, for one reason or the other were unable to gain admission to higher institutions to achieve academic or professional qualifications has been the hallmark of every educational planners and policymakers globally. The major aim is to enable second-chance students to pursue their academic or professional studies, which may be due to lack of admission to conventional higher institutions, living in remote areas, age, work or family constraints, and health challenges. Others may be as a result of serving in the army, prison or gender issues. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to discuss the relevance of digital distance/online education by highlighting the merits of digitized distance mode of instruction. Also to be looked into are the forms or types of contemporary distance/online education, and the major challenges confronting its acceptance/adoption and implementation in higher institutions, especially in Nigeria. However, the authors did not overlook the skills required by students for effective participation in modern distance education delivery and learning. Equally discussed are the merits of the contemporary online distance education. In addition, the authors did not overlook the characteristics of the modern day distance education programme, and equally examined the future of contemporary digital education matrix; finally, they as well proffered appropriate recommendations for improving online distance education delivery.

Keywords: hidden curriculum, values, national development, social stratification.

1. Introduction

It has been part of history that before the World War II, the acquisition of higher education was the privilege of a few, who could afford the cost of higher education. This situation has changed by the economic evolution, fuelled by technological breakthrough that followed the same World War II. This technological development has changed the way education is delivered in the 21st Century, whereby analog technology of former centuries were left behind for the digital century, with a new understanding of teaching and learning - non-classroom-based learning (Luskin and Hirsen, 2010).

Demographically, history has it that before the technological advances, undergraduate and graduate students in higher institutions were generally filled with unmarried fulltime students with the ages ranging from 18-23. These technological innovations have made it possible for exponential increase in enrolment in schools with individuals of varying ages, employed and irrespective of financial status. It also enhanced equal and vast opportunity; student diversity, cost-effective course delivery with distinct advantages of location; mobility of education, and also broken barriers of time and space, and total lifelong learning in education process (Luskin and Hirsen, 2010).

In a local palace, it states that a new song usually does not fit the old drum beat. Consequently, as new song emerges, new drum beat is devised, and a corresponding (new) dancing style is equally adopted. This is the case with the contemporary distance education as a method of teaching and learning. Distance education is a method of education adopted to address the problems of educational access (Newby, T. J., Stepich, D. A., Lehman, J. D. and Russell, J. D. (2006). The history of distance education has come a long way, starting for *correspondence* study to the present digital or *online learning/education* technique. Newby et al (2006) concurred to the above statement when the scholars stated that the earliest efforts at distance education involved correspondence study in which individuals used self-study printed materials.

Hmaidan (2001) properly observed that emerging technologies have forced a re-definition of distance education. The new method of instruction delivery gives unlimited self-paced academic opportunities to students or learners, particularly adults and disables, who hadn't the privilege to attain the conventional institutions due to several reasons. It also provides adult learners the opportunity to pursue other responsibilities, such as fulltime jobs, professional development of employees in various workplaces, family concerns and others without much stress.

Online learning/education is a new instructional method of teaching and learning that emerged in the 21st Century, which demands a new pedagogical approach. Being a new method of instructional delivery, many teachers and students are becoming aware of this method of instruction, especially in developing worlds. Even those who are aware of it are yet to familiarize themselves with the instructional strategy or strategies. It becomes paramount to examine the genesis of this instructional delivery method and some lapses or challenges inherent in its adoption or integration into the education process.

The question now is, "How do we create more awareness among stakeholders in order to pace with time?" The Nigerian education system must not remain static, but move with time. On this note, online education demands a lot from all stakeholders - instructional designers, facilitators/instructors, students and administrators/managers. However, for a better comprehensibility of the subject matter, it is pertinent for us to understand some salient concepts. Given a universally accepted definition of any field creates some difficulties, mainly in a subject area like distance education that has gone through some evolutions due to the emergence of new technologies, which has changed its traditional concept. It is on this premise that Garrison (1989), in an attempt to define contemporary "Distance education" stated that one of the most difficult tasks of any field is to define the field with precision without being excessively restrictive. However, let us try to examine some definitions of distance education by scholars.

Concept of Digital Online/Distance Education

Many terms have been used to describe this type of instructional delivery. Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read (2010) affirmed this claim when the scholars stated that one of the difficulties of obtaining a clear sense of the literature on online learning is the multiplicity of terms used to describe the phenomenon." Among these terms are – distributed learning, online learning, computer-mediated learning, and e-learning, online learning, virtual learning, open learning/education, etc. In concord, Talbot (2007) affirmed that distance learning appears – 'open learning', 'flexible learning', 'e-learning', 'online learning', 'web-based education', 'blended learning' and so on.

Distance education nowadays means online education with various instructional delivery models, which may be synchronous, or asynchronous, using Internet or TV (Kim, n.d.). It is an instructional delivery method that takes place between teachers and learners/students that is separated by physical distance via technological media (Hmaidan,

2001) and (Verdun and Clark, 1991) in Ike and Iwu (2001). In the same perspective, Newby et al (1994) defined distance education as an organized instructional program in which the teacher and learners are physically separated by time or by geography. Nonetheless, U.S. Congress for Technology Assessment defined distance education as the linking of a teacher and students in several geographical locations via technology that allows for interaction (Daniel and Stevens, 1998).

Distance education has been severally defined based on scholars' perceptions and time. In order not to be restrictive in its definition, Garrison and Shale (1987) provided a maximum set of criteria to be used, which will include both the structure and the process. Thus, the three criteria characterizing the distance education process are as presented hereunder.

I. Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student occurs non-contiguously.

II. Distance education must involve a two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.

III. Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication.

Distance education has also been defined as a universe of all educational activities in which learners are separated by space, and/or time (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). In the same manner, in order to avoid ambiguity, Moore & Kearsley (1996), Siddiqui (2008) and Hmaidan (2001), etcetera, have outlined the main premise of desistance education thus: -

I. students can have access to more and better learning resources than in the past.

II. people in rural communities can have access to courses even if they are homebound or working adults who need professional skills or specialized training could do so without being away from home or from their jobs.

III. students from one country can learn and collaborate with others in another country.

IV. new learning opportunities and resources are open to learners.

V. there is no course restriction for any learner as opposed to the traditional setup.

VI. there is free access to course materials at any time and place, and at the learners' convenience.

VII. learners' have the freedom to opt out (withdraw) from the programme if they so prefer.

VIII. learners determine when, where, how, and the pace preferred to study. That is, learners have the freedom and more opportunities to manage their own studies.

IX. classroom availability and time scheduling may not be necessary.

X. emphasis is laid on technology than physical structures.

XI. teachers, students and administrators need to be trained for the new technology-based pedagogy.

XII. new admission procedures are adopted (mainly online).

XIII. distance education providers' focuses on subjects that they have greater or greatest advantage.

XIV. distance education requires the services of online instructional designers

XV. Programmes are delivered on courses that you can complete at times convenient to you.

XVI. Several platforms are used to deliver content and also allow teacher interact with students online, such as the following virtual learning environment: i. Moodle, ii. Learn or Blackboard collaborate Wikis iv. Blogs v. discussion

boards and forums vi. video streaming services, e.g. YouTube or Vimeo vii. virtual worlds, e.g. SecondLife (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/postgraduate/degree-guide/online-learning/about>).

Forms of Modern Online Distance Education

Access to modern online distance has several methods. This depends on how the providers intend to carry out the process. Individuals can receive distance education via the following ways: -

Hybrid Online Distance Education

This is also referred to as *blended learning*. It is an instructional approach that includes a combination of online and in-person learning activities. For example, students can complete online self-paced assignments by a certain date and then meet on-site or online for additional face-to-face learning activities. Hybrid distance education therefore, combines the elements of online learning and complemented with face-to-face interactions.

Synchronous Distance Education

This can also be called synchronous learning. Newby et al (2006) defined synchronous distance education as “a situation where a teacher and students meet at the same time but in different places, as in live video broadcast or audio teleconferencing.” Synchronous learning also implies that the student and the trainer interact with each other in real time (simultaneously) Siddiqui (2008). This type of communication occurs or happens at the same time/period. In a synchronous class, students and instructors use such technologies as instructional television or Web-based or text-based chat rooms, Voice-enhanced and video-enhanced technologies to interact simultaneously at different locations. The most common form of asynchronous communication available to both instructors/teachers and students are text-based chat and telephone conversation.

Asynchronous Distance Education

This refers to a method by which two systems are not synchronized (harmonized) and characters are sent or received one at a time by the learners (Geddes and Grosset, 2002). In this mode of communication, course information or learning experiences are passed to the learner through email, web-based pages, web blogs or blog, wikis or through recorded CD-ROM and DVD (Mangal & Mangal, 2009). In this mode of communication, course information or learning experiences are passed to learners are usually delayed. That is to say that the teachers' and learners' do not interact simultaneously (at the same time). Instead, messages, information or reading materials are posted on a forum or web pages, or are sent as email. Replies to the messages are later sent at unspecified time or date.

Furthermore, any follow-up questions are dealt with through additional postings or messages with necessary delays. In addition, where the reading materials are not available in form of recorded CD and DVD, it neither provides any opportunity for the face-to-face dialogue, nor any online direct timely interaction between the teacher and the students/learners. Asynchronous learning allows learners to go through a course at their own pace and on their own schedule. It allows students participate in classes from any part of the globe, and also have unlimited access to learning resources provided they have computers that are Internet ready. It further reduces the physically challenges students encounter when they attend traditional institutions.

Contemporary Online Distance Education

The improvements of digital technologies have given a new direction to distance education process. The new era of distance online education started gaining momentum with the development of digital technologies in the 1990s, such as electronic mail (E-mail), World Wide Web (WWW) and other groupware. The contemporary distance education has become more popular and also reaching out to learners worldwide (Ike and Iwu, 2001). Print materials have gradually been replaced with texts on CDs and other similar formats.

With the dawn of computers and Internet technologies, millions of learners of all ages, sex and race are now enrolling on online distance courses in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions world over. Via these media, learners/students are enriched with e-resources, and most of the distance education programmes are now web-based. The traditional method of education is gradually being replaced or substituted with online education.

Modern Types of Distance Education Delivery System

A modern type of distance education is delivered through several means. This type of education could be delivered through Audio or voice, video and computer packaged software.

Audio: Radio, Audio files/CDs, Audiocassettes, Telephone, Voicemail, Audio-conferences, and Podcasts are some of the numerous means of reaching students/learners.

Computer: Web-based resources, E-mail, Chat, Discussion forums, Videoconferences, CD-ROM, and smartphones are delivered via computers systems.

Video: Videotape/Videocassettes, Broadcast video, DVD, Satellite delivery and Television are also means of reaching learners as well.

As stated earlier, the history of distance education has passed several decades, and the developments took part in different parts of the world. In the same development, various technologies were adopted based on the period under review. It all started with correspondence study that is powered by print media. In the 1970s and 1980s, new technologies, such as fiber optics, cable and satellite communication emerged on the distance education scene.

Later in the 1900s, digital technologies, such as World Wide Web (WWW), groupware and electronic mail were used to deliver instruction over the Internet. Several other media were also used to enhancing distance education delivery, such as, audio materials, which spoken words played a prominent role. Other audio technologies used are – Radio, audio-graphics, audiocassettes, and audio-conferencing, CD-ROM, Web-based programmes and other electronic sources (e-journals, e-books, etc.) which most of them enhance self-regulated learning.

Video materials, such as television, videoconferencing and videocassettes equally played fundamental roles in distance education instructional delivery. As Hmaidan (2001) put it, “Many universities used television in distance learning (for) broadcasting some courses on two major televisions....” These materials have the capability of reaching many people at a time and at remote locations. Besides, it enhances interactive communication whereby the learner and the instructor can see each and rectify vital academic issues.

Finally, a variety of computer applications can be used to enhance distance education process. Amongst them are: Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) or Computer Assisted Training (CAT), Computer Managed Instruction (CMI), and Computer-Mediated Education (CME). These software use computers to perfect their functions.

Firstly, Willis (2001) pointed out that CAI is a packaged software that “uses the computer as a self-contained teaching machine to present individual lessons.” The learner(s) in this case will be interacting with the computer software, which may be in CD-ROM, Flash drives, floppies, and websites/Internet with little or no interaction with other students in the group.

Secondly, CMI, also referred to as synchronous networks (Hmaidan, 2001) performs its functions synchronously by using computers to organize discussion or chatting amongst students in which they long on and communicate with others at the same time (Pallof and Pratt, 1999). In this case, students/learners type questions on the computer keyboard in text format and they receive immediate answers from their peers. In the case of videoconferencing, learners sit on their computer desks instead of the classroom and watch lessons delivered by their instructors through their computer monitors.

Thirdly, in CME, the self-paced and interactive technology is used for information delivery. The technology allows learners or participants to post questions or comments to group software, such as First-Class, and Listserve for discussion at any given time and place. In addition, course management software, such as WEBCT and LearningSpace are also employed (Hmaidan, 2001).

Students’ Skills for Digital Education

Online education is not as easy as people think of it. A lot of skills are required by both the students and the instructors for effective participation in the online environment. Arabsz and Baker (2003) in their contributions to effective use of e-learning, stressed that institutions must adapt pedagogy, enhance the technical know-how of the students and develop a dependable and healthy technological infrastructure that will enable them succeed in any online education. Consequently, before taking part in any online education, the person(s) concerned must first of all take self-assessment skills in order to decide if he/she is ready for the intended study. Consequently, this method of instructional delivery requires two major identifiable skills, such as,

1. Technology Skills
2. Self-Assessment Skills

However, a concise discussion on each of the aforesaid skills will make more meanings to us as we progress on the topic.

1. Technology Skills

The possession of technical or technological skills which is very paramount in an online education. Any learner hoping to engage and be successful in online education must have the basic computer literacy skills. The learner must have the knowledge of basic computer software and hardware components of the computer; manipulate at least the MS Word, Excel and PowerPoint packages, and troubleshoot software and hardware problems. The learner must know how to copy, and paste information, manage files and be able to install basic computer software.

In addition, the knowledge of the Internet is essential; learners should be able to log on to the Internet, use the most common web browsers, such as, Firefox, Explorer and the Netscape in order to effectively navigate the Web. The knowledge or ability to use some notable search engines, such as, Google.com, Bing.com, Yahoo.com, Ask.com, Dogpile.com, WebCrawler.com, and Webopedia.com to perform online researches. Also, the experiences on how to use Internet communicate tools, such as, e-mail, chat, instant messaging, and other discussion forums are very vital. Finally, learners should be able to send and receive attachments, and print needed online documents/course materials.

2. Self-Assessment Skills

Self-assessment skills are the skills that individuals possess that will enable them fit well into the online education. Self-assessment can be discussed under the following five headings, as listed hereunder: -

- i. Communication
- ii. Learning Skills
- iii. Time Management Skills
- iv. Learning Styles
- v. Netiquette

Communication

Face-to-face communication or interaction is quite different from online communication. For a student to succeed in an online course, he/she must have effective communication skills. He/she must communicate very well in writing in the language he/she is engaged with. His/her grammatical construction must be adequate in order to clearly communicate his/her thoughts/ideas and make some vital remarks to both instructors and fellow course mates, which will pave way for quality learning. Online communication encompasses instant messaging, chats, emails, text-based tools, online students communicate through text-based tools, bulletin boards, and discussion forums. The learners and the instructors must be knowledgeable on how to communicate with Internet tools as enumerated above. Learners must have reading skills, the ability to read fast and respond timely to assignments or questions raised by instructors and fellow course-mates, especially when chatting in any of the discussion forums.

Learning Skills

Studying in a traditional classroom setting is quite different from the online environment. It involves a lot of technological challenges. Technological skills are highly needed to support online learning. Students require managerial abilities, self-motivation, self-confidence, self-discipline, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills among others to survive in online environment. In addition, students must have good reading ability and communicate efficiently through writing to express themselves... The ability to speak up by asking questions when confronted with problems is one of the skills of online environment. As a manager of self, your instructor will not know when something is going wrong with you, and if you don't inform your instructors of your difficulties, you will suffer in silence throughout the learning process.

Time Management Skill

Online education offers a lot of freedom to learners. This freedom or flexibility deceives or misleads a lot of students because they feel that they have a lot of time at their disposal to accomplish any given task. This leads them to procrastination. However, online learning demands as much time as the traditional classroom setup. It demands a lot of time management skills to accomplish a task. This is so because no one motivates you to read, or reminds of

the deadline for the submission of a given assignment. The learner should be to manage his/her study time with other social, political and family responsibilities. The learner should be able to balance his time with his job, family and other social engagements. Self-instilled discipline whereby learners will be able to avoid all distractions from friends, relations, and well-wishers is one of the keys of modern online education.

Learning Styles

Learning style is the way in which each individual learner begins to concentrate on, process, absorb and retain new and difficult material (Dunn, n.d.). This learning style demands a lot from individual learners. The learner must have the capability to read his course materials regularly and jot down vital points, which will help retention. The learner must have adequate critical thinking skills that will enable him to analyze issues in the course materials. Self-motivation and discipline are very essential in this type of learning programmes.

Netiquette

This is short for Network etiquette. Every profession or field has its own decorum. Online communication demands different behaviours. Netiquette refers to lay down rules that govern the behaviour of online interactions. Shea (n.d.) refers to it as “the etiquette of cyberspace.” Online environment is a strange culture and a new place for many learners; hence, it requires a lot of carefulness in order not to offend people, and/or people might not misconstrue you and take unintended negative actions/reactions against you. Online environment needs plain language. You do not use words that you wouldn't like others to use for you. Avoid the use of pejorative words (badly chosen words) while communicating online. Avoid the use of uppercases because it indicates shouting. Also, keep away from sending large attachments in online communication unless on request or unavoidable. In addition, keep your messages short, simple and straight to the point.

Characteristics of Contemporary Distance Education Instructional Delivery

The modern distance education demands a lot of skills for both the educators and the learners alike. However, teachers must be technologically sound to meet up with the demands of the native learners/students because most of the traditional methods of instructional delivery have gone moribund. So, let's examine some of the characteristics of modern method of instructional delivery.

- i. Oral communication skill is highly lacking or rarely used.
- ii. Instructors/facilitators must be technologically competent enough to participate in online distance education
- iii. Learning resources can be gotten worldwide via the Internet
- iv. Requires more technical and managerial abilities
- v. Body language is far removed. Learners' are isolated or online presence is highly lacking
- vi. Rely heavily on power. Modern distance education cannot operate successfully without electricity supply
- vii. Learners and instructors/facilitators must possess the skills of the digital education. That is, they must possess the technological competences/skills
- viii. Study centers are sometimes localized
- ix. Learning is highly constructive in nature
- x. Course materials are of high quality and very difficult to produce
- xi. Learners have access to more courses worldwide. They are not confined to one institution
- xii. Technology-based education is learner-centered, because the programme places much responsibility on the learner who must be more disciplined, active and self-directed

- xiii. Students can complete online programs virtually using e-resources and tools without any physical contact.
- xiv. Learners have freedom of study anywhere and anytime and at their own convenience
- xv. Online education requires constant training and re-training for participants, especially the instructors
- xvi. Distance education instructors and students are not bound by geography, age, sex and color
- xvii. Admission is mainly online. In fact, little or no paper work is required
- xviii. People are skeptical about the quality of certificates awarded
- xix. Administrators of distance education are concerned with ensuring that the various resources are brought together for the design and delivery of courses as well as students support
- xx. Teachers and learners collaborate extensively with no geographical limitation
- xxi. Courses are more open to scrutiny
- xxii. There is high quality in distance education course content due to collaborative efforts
- xxiii. There is equality of admission criteria; no quota system is needed as in Nigerian context whereby candidates from less educationally disadvantaged areas are given preferences
- xxiv. Distance education has access to more learners
- xxv. Despite its claim of worldwide coverage, it cannot accommodate all languages
- xxvi. Heavily relies on technologies and expertise.

Merits of Contemporary Online Distance Education

Having listed and discussed major characteristics of correspondence study, it becomes appropriate to examine some of the major merits ascribed to contemporary digital distance education. The slowness and irregular feedback, which characterized the correspondence study paved way for educators to explore better ways of managing and enriching the education process. Garrison (1989) observed that a new range of instructional techniques are now available to support and sustain the educational transaction. Consequently, the adoption of evolving new information and communication technologies (powered by computers) has drastically changed the method of distance education delivery to the adults and even to the younger generation. This method now employs new technologies, such as, audio and video conferencing, and other computer mediated programs, which is one of the departures from the print-based correspondence study.

Again, another wave of improvement was recorded in delivering distance education process. The advent of telephone and satellite services has added more value in distance education process. The above services support immediate two-way communication. For stance, from the perspectives observed by Garrison (1989), the microcomputers have the potential of supporting both real and simulated communication by way of computer messaging and conferencing, as well as by computer assisted learning tutorials. Well, let's discuss the merits in details.

Other benefits ascribed to online learning are as follows: -

- i. It is cost efficient because learners need not travel to the supposed institution to learn.
- ii. No limitation of learners' access to course materials.
- iii. No issue of coming late to class.
- iv. Class distractions are ruled out.
- v. Students can access their course materials at any time and convenience.

- vi. The nature of this education makes it mandatory for learners to acquire computer education/literacy and other technological competences.
- vii. There is no limitation for introvert students to ask desired questions. The issue of intimidation and inferiority complex that is prominent in traditional setting is ruled out.
- viii. There is no late arrivals or distractions to class
- ix. Different learning styles are accommodated due to multiplicity of delivery approaches

Having looked at the pros of distance/online learning, let us examine the demerits.

Major Challenges of Contemporary Distance/Online Education

It is true that the correspondence study, which started with print medium, has progressed and metamorphosed into digital distance/online education/learning via the application of new information and communication technologies. This notwithstanding, there are lots of problems confronting the new instructional change or delivery strategy. Arabsz and Baker (2003) affirmed that while technology offers a wide range of learning possibilities, it also presents lots of challenges. Nevertheless, a brief examination of some of the major challenges inherent in electronic education as outlined by Hdmaidan (2006) and Moore and Kearsley (1996) among others will make for a better understanding of the whole subject matter, and also a guide for those intending to embark on online distance education.

- i. Mishra (2005) observed that in view of the modern distance/online education that teachers (instructors) are forced or challenged to carefully use descriptive language in their written and verbal comments (phone conversation) to students. New instructional delivery system requires new skills. Hence, online/distance learning requires constant training and re-training of personnel to meet the technological trends of modern education delivery.
- ii. Modern distance education is highly capital intensive; lots of costly technological equipment and software and highly skilled personnel are required to start this type of education. In view of the staggering economic situations of most of the developing countries today, particularly Nigeria, there is lack of funds to embark on such capital intensive programme, which constantly require the training and re-training of personnel for efficient instructional delivery.
- iii. It is on record that online learning classroom is devoid of social cues. From the instructor's viewpoint, it will be difficult to observe learner's immediate reactions. This can only be achieved through the use of interactive television, and audio-conferencing, if organized via a structured course session. Absence of face-to-face communication makes learners uncomfortable and unmotivated.
- iv. Highly qualified and diverse personnel are needed; such as, instructional and web designers, and language experts. Online education is very complex and requires experts to plan or design participative, interactive, and multimedia shaped technology (Hdmaidan, 2006).
- v. There is a considerable delay in the flow of communication if asynchronous method of instruction delivery is employed from instructional delivery.
- vi. Effectiveness of teaching is highly dependent on how well instructors can effectively use the available technologies. Moore and Kearsley (1996) stated that you (personnel) must not only understand the limitations and the potential of each of the technology (and in some cases, how to operate it) but also know the teaching techniques associated with successful use of that technology." The inability to efficiently use the available instructional technologies will make the whole learning process ineffective.
- vii. Instructors of distance education need to pay more attention to students' feeling, especially their motivation (Moore and Kearsley, 1996). Motivational support is highly lacking. In many online programs, students don't have the peer support of classmates or the routine of physically ending classes, and this may affect their motivation to learn

- viii. The system requires both learners and instructors to have access to technology (computers and other technological devices).
- ix. It is prone to changes as technology is being improved constantly.
- x. Lots of fund is requires and devoted to developing course materials.
- xi. It has also been argued the electronic machine is threat to the best teaching, which takes place through human interaction (Gueulette, 1988).
- xii. Instructors in distance education courses need to pay much attention to student's feelings, especially their motivation.
- xiii. Finally, Hermann (1988) summarized the disadvantages of distance education thus: "loss of ability for self-expression, increased social isolation, learners' passivity, and the valuation of machines over people are just a few additional arguments that are advanced to encourage the mistrust of the technology."

The Future of Modern Online/Distance Education Programmes

There is no doubt that the advent of the Internet and other computer-powered communication technologies are democratizing education, bringing education to the door-steps of individuals, and also bridging the digital divide that existed for several decades ago. Online/distance education is becoming a valuable tool in the education process. Individuals, corporate bodies and responsible governments are focusing on how to integrate the new communication technologies into teaching and learning process. Closer observers in the education sector will notice a gradual shift from the traditional method of instruction to online/distance education.

Prior to 1970's, students and researchers relied heavily on punch cards, mainframe computers, and libraries that were filled with books, journals and other forms of literary materials. But the situation has changed whereby electronic resources are making information easily accessible to people, who are nowhere near the local library. Information that normally takes days and weeks can now be gotten in seconds on personal computer screens. Again the ease of use of these technological devices by young adults has made electronic information much, much easier and cheaper than ever. These are indicators that electronic education in near future will definitely bypass the conventional method of instructional delivery.

On the future of distance education programme generally, Garrison (1989) expressed optimism and states, "In the near future, distance education learners not only will be able to study when and where they like, but will be able to choose how they wish to learn and how to get all the guidance and support they require or request, thereby acquiring maximum control of the educational transaction." Cohen (2012) further added that the 21st century, which the scholar referred to as the global brain-based economy demands greater levels of education and constant learning to meet the demands of the workforce. Consequently, with the demand of the contemporary society, and with the improvement and the cheapness of the new ICTs, education could be made more available to a greater number of people that desire for it worldwide.

In addition, much awareness on online education is being created, and students, faculty and the general populace are becoming computer literate and more technology-reliant than experienced in the past. In the same manner, since the advent of the Internet, educators' world over has always thought about how they could utilize online communication to promote teaching and learning process. This effort, I think, the educators, policymakers, administrators, and other stakeholders will not relent to integrate the new technological innovation for the betterment of the education process. Bates (2013), while justifying the future of distance education, affirmed that the students spend less using this mode of instruction delivery than through traditional universities, and also stressed that there are not enough places available in the traditional institutions.

Finally, with the advent of the Internet and computer-mediated communication technologies, and the much responsiveness of online/distance education by the present generation and the educational institutions, the government and non-governmental supports, the availability, improvement and the cheapness of the new

technological devices, there is a brighter future for greater integration of distance/online education programmes into education systems worldwide, and Nigeria is not exempted.

Recommendations

To facilitate online learning programmes at all segments of our education system, governments at all levels should introduce computer-based curriculum to schools at all levels to give students hands-on-practice on the use of computers, which is very essential to all modern distance education programmes. In addition, [Kumar and Skrocki \(2016\)](#) observed that some learners register in online programmes without clear direction on the down-to-earth understanding of what it takes to be a successful learner in an online environment. Hence, the authors in addition to self-disciplined, motivation and time management skills recommend an orientation programme which should encompass discussions on the following.

- i. Technical skills
- ii. Understanding of online/hybrid learning environments
- iii. Study skills
- iv. Workload management
- v. Communication
- vi. Resources, including technical help and other campus resources
- vii. Welcoming and personal introductory video of the instructor in a non-academic role
- viii. A library of resources on issues affecting online instruction, such as time management, computer accessibility, willingness to reach out with questions, etc.

Summary

The advent of the Internet and other computer-mediated technologies are playing tremendous roles in all aspects of human endeavour, especial in the educational arena. In view of the constant innovations and the rising technological improvements, most citizens are becoming computer literate and acquiring electronic competencies in all fields in order to remain relevant in the technology-driven society. The use of Internet tools, such as email, World Wide Web and other media services are rapidly expanding the education process. In this write-up, some of the technical or essential terms were highlighted and defined or described. The historical development of contemporary online distance education was concisely discussed. Much effort was made to examine the merits and the challenges of modern online distance education instructional delivery system. The authors further discussed the major forms of online distance education, the generally objectives, and the technological requirements of modern online education. Equally discussed are the students' skills for Digitized education and the characteristics of contemporary distance education instructional delivery. Finally, the future of the contemporary online distance education and recommendations for improvement at all levels of online distance education system among others were briefly discussed as well.

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