

Attitudes towards distance education

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Abstract. *In order to ensure a more holistic view of the problematic of distance education (DE), the view of participant's interest for DE must (also) be addressed. Participant's readiness for incorporation in DE process is heavily influenced by several factors (e.g. participant's skills for working with computers and ICT, preferences about using e-literature, participant's personal values). The main purpose of this paper is to provide an insight into the problematic of participants' readiness for incorporation in DE and to emphasize the influence of participant's personal values in assessing (and determining) participant's attitudes towards DE. A research among Romanian and Slovenian students was done.*

Keywords. Distance education, personal values, participant's readiness for distance education, ICT

1 Introduction

The rapid growth of the Internet and remarkable advancement in information and communication technology (ICT) has enabled a new way to transfer knowledge from learners (e.g. universities) to the learners [16, 23]. This way of learning is known under a common term – distance education (DE).

A simple definition defines DE as any education where educators and learners are not collocated (i.e. same place/same time) and not bound by time or place [3, 9, 18, 34].

DE is not a new phenomenon, since it has been in existence for more than a century [23, 24]. During those years the concept of DE has undergone several radical changes, especially due to the advancement in information and communication technologies (ICT) [17, 19, 23, 25, 27]. With the development of internet and adoption of increasingly sophisticated

communication technologies (i.e. ICT) in DE process, it has increasingly become an area of interest in the academic literature since early 1990s [3, 23, 24, 37].

In the academic literature about DE the most common emphasis is on the technological requirement necessary for delivery of DE (i.e. online courses) demands of DE, acceptance of DE by students and learners, the quality of DE, different methods of delivery, DE in comparison to traditional education processes, a changed participants-teacher relationship, a changed role of participants in DE and the economic impact of providing DE [3, 5, 21, 23, 27, 33, 35].

Technology, which enables DE, is no longer the main issue in discussions about DE [11, 21]. In recent literature about DE issues, there is an evident shift towards discussions dealing with the role of participants in DE, ethics in DE, assessment in DE process [3, 21, 22, 31].

Despite the perceived shift in DE discussion towards more “soft issues” in DE, the subset of research literature dealing with interest and readiness of participants to incorporate in DE is very seldom discussed in any relevant literature [3, 4, 21]. In literature there is no discussion on the role and importance of personal values in DE process.

Behavior of each person is mainly guided and/or determined by this person's personal values [20, 28, 29, 30]. Therefore in the frame of participant's readiness for DE, we are focusing on (selected) participant's personal values, which represent a basis for assessing participant's attitudes towards DE.

Therefore the main purpose of our paper is to make a new suggestion (and proposal) how to assess participant's attitudes towards DE according to their personal values. In this discussion we also compare student's attitudes

towards DE, based on a survey conducted among Slovenian and Romanian undergraduate students.

2 Introduction to DE

DE is not a new concept. During its emergence and development it has undergone several (often radical) changes, especially due to the improvement in ICT. With the advent of Internet and ICT, DE has become mainly ICT supported [8, 16, 23, 36]. There has been an increasing growth in the number of participants in distance education lately [8].

There are several different definitions of DE, which emphasize a selected point of view [3, 25, 35, 37]. The most common and comprehensive definition of DE emphasizes [13]: (1) quasi permanent physical separation of participants in DE process (e.g. teacher and learners); (2) use of modern ICT and media for supporting DE process; (3) the provision of two way communication (e.g. videoconferencing); (4) the influence of an educational organization in providing participant support (e.g. library services) and (5) the quasi permanent absence of learning groups.

Traditional (face-to-face) education, where the teacher and the learners are at the same place at the same time is still the main stream in nowadays education [16]. But on the other hand, changing lifestyles, demanding schedules, the need for lifelong learning, rapidly changing knowledge base and more demanding jobs are forcing more and more students (and also adults) to participate in DE [16].

The evolution and emergence of DE is heavily dependent upon the development of media and technologies which support DE [2, 8, 12, 16]. The technology and/or media used in DE have undergone remarkable changes over the years [2]. Innovations in ICT coupled with the above mentioned reasons for participation in DE lead to the improvements and significant changes in DE (as a concept).

There are different opinions among authors in the literature about the development stages of DE [1, 2, 8, 12, 16, 32, 36]. According to a different proposed model and/or generations of DE, most comprehend enunciation of DE development process characterizes five generations of DE with regard to the delivery technologies available at the time of their prevalence [1, 32]: (1) The correspondence model (e.g. print media and regular mail); (2) The multimedia model (e.g. audio, video tape);

(3) The “telelearning” model (e.g. audio conference, video conference); (4) The flexible learning model (e.g. internet based access to www resources, computer mediated communication); and (5) The Intelligent Flexible learning model (e.g. campus portal access to resources).

At the early beginning of the emergence of DE (i.e. 1950s) the term was exclusively used to apply to participants in remote places which were unable to attend classes. But nowadays it mainly stands for education where face-to-face interaction between educators and learners is removed and replaced with electronic and therefore computer mediated interaction [36].

In that frame we can define several different formats of DE which are supported by modern ICT [11, 13, 21, 23]: (1) Web supported – a DE format which is complementary to traditional learning, where all participants are collocated. A web site (i.e. portal for DE) is provided which contains course materials, assignments, goals, exercises and short tests; (2) Blended (mixed-mode) DE – course is structured so that part of the class sessions are held in a traditional setting (i.e. classroom) and part of them are held with usage of modern ICT over internet (i.e. DE). Thus mixture of face-to-face mode and distance mode has become commonly used in education practice; (3) Fully online DE format – every class session is held in distance mode in comparison to previously mentioned formats, when face-to-face mode is complementary to distance mode.

From the above presented cognitions it is seen that in the early beginning, DE was enabled and delivered through printing press and traditional mail services [19, 24, 25, 36].

The most common possible benefits of DE are [2, 3, 7, 26]:

- Time and place flexibility – no need to relocation.
- Reduced commuting cost and lost time.
- Participants set their own pace of study (e.g. no fix schedules) and can harmonize their obligations (e.g. work-life balance).
- Access to well known international programs and courses.

The most common possible drawbacks of DE are [6, 10, 21, 37]:

- Costly and complex technology need (especially in rural areas).

- Limited support for in DE process (e.g. library services).
- Participant's success depends on its readiness for DE.
- Participants do not like to study with help of multi-media and e-literature.

Despite increasing interest and usage of DE by many universities, there are opposing opinions by different authors about DE as an adequate way (and or alternative) to the traditional (face-to-face) learning [2, 8, 16].

The main difference between the traditional and DE process is the physical distance between participants and the amount of face-to-face contacts among participants [17, 37]. Therefore in traditional education unbounded modes of communication are possible; the ability to perceive non-verbal communication is strong; social interaction is strong and team-working is a common way to do work [2, 16]. On the other hand, some hesitations about the usage of traditional teaching techniques in DE process are often emphasized (e.g. team work, written tests, oral examination) [23].

From the point of view of providers of distance education, it is not enough to have "basic toolkit" (e.g. required technology) in order to compete effectively with other providers of distance education. Providers of distance education must adopt distance education strategies, which can be incredibly expensive in terms of both, resources and money. The distance education strategy must also be in the frame of distance education provider's overall competitive strategy [9].

From the participant's viewpoint it is important that participants are willing to participate in DE. Participant's personal values have a great impact on personal behavior and actions. Therefore in that frame we are focusing on participant's personal values which are basis and/or a starting point for assessment of participant's attitudes towards DE.

3 Values of DE

There are different proposed definitions of the term value by various authors [20, 28, 29, 30]. A simple definition defines a value as something that is regarded as desirable, worthy, right or as a belief [14, 15]. A value is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct and/or end state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct and/or

end-state of existence. Values are organized in the value system [20, 28, 29].

There is no agreement about the influence of personal values on the person's behavior. The leading researchers of values emphasize that behavior of each person is mainly guided and/or determined by this person's personal values [20, 28, 29, 30].

According to above presented cognitions, we can assume that participant's attitudes towards DE are importantly influenced by participant's personal values. Therefore participant's personal values and/or personal value systems represent a basis on which we can assess participant's attitudes towards DE.

For the purpose of our discussion we are taking into consideration only selected personal values (from personal value system), which are important for assessment and/or determination of participants' attitudes towards distance education.

Selected participants' personal values, which represent a starting point and/or the basis for assessing participant's attitudes towards DE, are [3, 31, 37]:

- Self-discipline – Participants set their own pace of study and there is no direct supervision from the teacher. Therefore participants in DE must be very self-disciplined in order to success in DE.
- Responsibility and reliability – since participants set their own pace of study it is also very important that participants are responsible and reliable. Another important requirement is that participants in DE balance their education with other obligations responsibly (e.g. family, job, hobbies).
- Working from home – participants should have very positive attitudes towards working from distance (e.g. home), because DE requires working outside traditional educational areas (e.g. universities).
- Usage of ICT – nowadays DE is supported with modern ICT. Therefore participants must be able (and also will) to use modern ICT. It is also important for the participants to have a sufficient level of skills and knowledge for working with computer and modern ICT.
- Discovering new things – participation in DE is very challenging for participants, since there are no more

traditional face-to-face lectures; the usage of e-literature instead of traditional literature (e.g. hard copy books); lack of face-to-face contacts; less social interaction with peers and teachers; obligatory usage of modern ICT and computers and a different way of doing assignments (e.g. online submission). Since DE is significantly different from traditional education it is important for the participants to be willing to adjust to the changed way of learning. Therefore the participants' willingness to discover new things is important.

According to selected personal values and cognitions about the nature of DE process participants should have very positive attitudes towards each value. Therefore positive attitudes towards selected personal values result in very favorable attitudes towards DE. For the purpose of our discussion, we have conducted a survey among Slovenian and Romanian undergraduate students about DE and their personal values.

4 Case study

The primary aim of our survey was to examine student's personal values. The research was a part of a research in which we assessed participant's readiness for incorporation in DE process. The research was conducted among Slovenian and Romanian undergraduate students. There were 155 Slovenian and 151 Romanian participants. Slovenian participants are students of 2nd and 3rd year of the undergraduate Bologna process study; the average age of Slovenian participants is 21.6 years; and 58.1 % of Slovenian participants are females. On the other hand Romanian participants are mainly students of 1st and 2nd year in undergraduate study program, with average age of 27.52 years. 55 % of Romanian participants in the sample are females.

According to the questions related to information literacy in our research, we can conclude that an average participant in the research is relatively well prepared for working with modern ICT and computers and has a sufficient level of skills for working with computers. We determine information literacy as a construct which is composed of several criterions (e.g. using e-mail, cash dispenser, having a computer at home) [21, 22]. Skills were assessed on Likert's scale from 0 to 5. An

average value for Slovenian participants is 3.66 and for Romanian 3.46 [21, 22].

Romanian students are already incorporated in DE. Fully online DE is now in its early stages at Romanian university. On the other hand Slovenian students are involved in highly developed web-supported DE. This practically means that Romanian students do not have any traditional (face-to-face) lectures and on the other hand Slovenian students have regularly (face-to-face) lectures.

Participants evaluated the importance of a selected value on Likert's scale from 0 (value is not important) to 5 (value is very important).

According to above selected personal values the importance of each value to students in Slovenia (Slo) and Romania (Rom), is presented in tables 1-5. In these tables, values from 0 to 5 are values from Likert scale. In each table, the percentage of respondents is shown, separately for Slovenia and Romania. Findings about personal values and their role in the process of assessment of participants' attitudes towards DE will be discussed in the next chapter.

Table 1. Self-discipline

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Slo	-	3.2 %	5.8 %	21.9 %	49.7 %	19.4 %
Rom	0.7 %	-	2.0 %	16.6 %	37.7 %	43.0 %

Table 2. Responsibility and reliability

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Slo	-	-	1.3 %	10.3 %	40.6 %	47.7 %
Rom	-	2.0 %	0.7 %	9.9 %	25.2 %	62.3 %

Table 3. Working from home

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Slo	5.2 %	5.2 %	16.8 %	41.3 %	24.5 %	7.1 %
Rom	5.3 %	7.3 %	14.7 %	25.3 %	22.0 %	25.3 %

Table 4. Usage of ICT

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Slo	-	-	5.8 %	13.5 %	45.8 %	34.8 %
Rom	0.7 %	2.6 %	5.3 %	14.6 %	28.5 %	48.3 %

Table 5. Discovering new things

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Slo	0.6 %	0.6 %	7.1 %	24.5 %	37.4 %	29.7 %
Rom	-	0.7 %	2.0 %	10.6 %	31.8 %	55.0 %

In table 6 there are values which were the most commonly selected by Slovenian and Romanian students.

Table 6. Average values

Value	Slo	Rom
Self-discipline	3.76	4.20*
Responsibility and reliability	4.35	4.45
Working from home	2.96	3.27*
Usage of ICT	4.10	4.13
Discovering new things	3.86	4.38*

Table 6 shows that there are differences among Slovenian and Romanian students, according to the importance of the selected value to them. Therefore we can conclude that in average, all selected values are more important for Romanian participants.

We also performed independent samples t-tests, for comparing means. Results show that significant differences ($p < 0.05$) exist among Slovenian and Romanian participants. Significant differences exist for values such as self-discipline, discovering new things and working from home (in table 6 marked with *). Differences among values such as the usage of modern ICT and reliability and responsibility are not statistically significant.

According to presented results from the survey among students in discussion, we are focusing on assessment of student's attitudes towards DE according to their personal values.

5 Discussion

The involvement of students in DE process also seems to be determined by their personal values. In this part of the paper, we are making a new suggestion how to assess participant's attitudes towards DE. Participant's personal values are the basis, since personal values importantly influence person's behavior and actions.

We can easily see that Romanian students, who are already involved in DE process and have assumed their role in the process of learning, that of studying by themselves, are statistically (4.20

for Romanian students and only 3.76 for Slovenian ones) more determined and seem to appreciate more values such as self-discipline and responsibility. For being able to handle the individual study, participants have to set their own pace of study, without any direct supervision from the teacher. According to the fact that participants in DE must be very self-disciplined in order to success in DE, it is obvious that students should be able to organize their work alone, without any constraint during the time they are spending each day focusing on their courses, on reading specific literature or continually testing their knowledge.

According to the survey conducted among Slovenian and Romanian students there are also significant differences in the importance regarding the study from home. Romanian ones are statistically more willing to work from home and one of the reasons for this is certainly the fact that they are already used to work from home, as the main percentage of the Romanian students are working adults who don't have the time to take campus courses.

One of the important values for incorporating in the DE process is the willingness to discover new things. As there are no more traditional face-to-face lectures, participation in DE became extremely challenging for participants who are forced to search and discover information on their own. This is another reason for the Romanian students to be more open to search and discover information on their own, as being already used to work in this way.

Also for Slovenian and for Romanian students, the responsibility and the reliability represent an important value according to the conducted survey, as 4.35 % of the Slovenian and 4.45 % (this is mean value) of the Romanian students seems to appreciate these values. Due to the fact that participants in DE process have to set their own pace of study, it is essential that they are responsible and reliable, also for setting down the study, but to be able to balance their education with other obligations such as their job or family.

One of the main characteristics of DE process today represents the usage of ICT. Therefore participants must be able to work with ICT and also to be willing to learn to improve their ICT skills for using ICT in their study or testing (such as usage of e-learning portals, forums, e-literature, online testing, and online submission for home works). According to the

survey we can easily see that both Slovenian and Romanian students highly appreciate the usage of ICT (4.10 of the Slovenian and 4.13 of the Romanian students).

Romanian students seem to appreciate more values like self-discipline and responsibility, since many of them are working adults. Being already involved in the process of DE, but also in the working field, determined the participants to rely more on discipline, more exactly on self-discipline and on responsibility, values achieved in the life of working adult.

All of the selected values (self-discipline, responsibility and reliability, the usage of ICT, the willingness to work from home and the desire to discover new things) represent core values for incorporation of participants in the process of DE.

6 Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper is to provide a suggestion how to assess participant's attitudes towards DE based on their (selected) personal values.

Based on the survey conducted among Slovenian and Romanian students, we concluded that there are differences among their assessment of personal values. The main reason of those differences proved to be the fact that the Romanian participants are already involved in this process and are working adults, thereby they appreciate more values such as self-discipline, working from home and discovering new things as an important percentage of them represents working adults who are enrolling in such a program due to lack of time.

The survey stated that Romanian students, those of the participants already involved in DE process, are assuming their role in this kind of education process, the process that they have chosen deliberately, in the meaning of organizing the study program by themselves (this emerges from the high percentage of the participants appreciating values such as self-discipline and responsibility and reliability), the willingness of studying with the help of ICT and their desire to improve their ICT skills.

The Slovenian students, even though they are not involved in the complete DE process stated to be ready to incorporate in such a process. They highly appreciate values such as responsibility and reliability, self-discipline, usage of ICT and the willingness to discover new

things. Slovenian students didn't prove to be very excited about working from home.

The readiness of participants in the process of DE represents a core factor for the success of DE. We can't expect to have significant positive results from the use of this process, no matter how great ICT support it has, if the participants are not ready or do not want to use ICT in the process of DE. It does not matter how great the courses used within this process would be if the participants were not self-disciplined and responsible to organize their study process by themselves. It also does not matter how useful the information that the participants could discover would be if they were not willing to discover it. This is why we should also rely on the importance of participant's readiness for enrolling in DE process and make efforts to prepare them for this new challenge represented by DE.

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