LEARNING AT A DISTANCE: PROS AND CONS

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Distance learning is a type of education, in most cases college or university level, where students work on their own at home or elsewhere and communicate with faculty and other learners via e-mail, electronic forums, video-conferencing, chat rooms, instant messaging and other forms of computer-based communication. For all those who wish to complete education at a distance most distance learning programs include a computer-based training system and communications tools to arrange for a virtual classroom. This type of “open learning” means that a person studies on his/her own, either at home or wherever it suits the learner—reading , watching or listening to the material supplied, doing activities and assignments with regular support from the tutor. Some universities, Bryant University, for example, have elaborated collaborative learning at a distance courses which incorporate a wide array of communications tools, including internet-based communication, to enable groups of learners to develop the acquisition of knowledge through interaction.

The demand for distance learning education is growing the world over and annually the number of people who would wish to study at a distance is increasing by 30%. It is a challenge for colleges and universities and they have to bring forward something new in this area every academic year so as to compete successfully in the virtual world of learning. Yet education at a distance is coupled with a host of problems and before one enrolls in any distance learning programs it is a must to carefully consider all advantages and disadvantages of this comparatively new type of education.

Distance Learning Advantages:

* Flexibility. All you need is a computer and internet access and you can work from home or from anywhere any time at your convenience with the exception of strictly scheduled sessions when you are to contact your tutor and as long as you manage to complete all the assignments before the deadline. It is common knowledge that different people have different working habits depending on their psychological types and enrolling in a distance learning program a student can choose the time of working and can work at the speed which suits him/her best.
* Lower costs. On-line courses are cheaper than on-campus courses as you do not have to pay for campus accommodation and meals and the provision of the distance learning courses is cheaper for the target university: a good quality of the courses can be achieved with fewer faculty and administrative bodies. Besides a learner can study on-line abroad and get a degree of some prestigious European or North American university and paying a great deal less than the price of on-campus education might be.
* Learning while working. Getting a degree at a distance while working is a challenging possibility which is not very easy with more traditional educational programs. The price of education is growing and many on-campus students have to take part-time jobs to pay for their education; it often happens that they have to take a break in their education to earn enough money to complete the university course-- with on-line education a learner is spared many inconveniences of this kind. Besides there is a growing demand on the part of people who already have a university degree and wish to get another degree to be more compatible, better employable in the tough market competition. Such second degree seekers can study on-line and keep their careers.
* Flexible time management for nursing mothers. Women who have babies and wish to continue their education can study on-line and be ready to face the drastically changing job market after their maternity leave is over. They have enough opportunities to keep up and further their professional skills while their children are growing.
* Opportunities for disabled people. People who have various imparities and who can hardly get a university degree on-campus have ample opportunities to study on-line and prepare themselves to be self-sufficient in life with as little outside support as possible. Getting a proper education for such people is especially important as it raises their self-esteem and makes them socially incorporated.
* No time lost on commuting. If a student who studies off-line does not live on a university campus he/she will have to commute to the university and back home and will lose a lot of time while traveling and getting stuck in numerous traffic jams. An on-line learner is spared this nuisance of modern urban life.
* New challenges for the teacher. Teaching methods have to meet expectations of many different participants and the teacher has to develop an understanding for the capabilities and understanding of the learners without direct personal contact and direct working experience with the participants of the course. It is expected that new approaches to teaching will result in working out new learning materials and eventually all this will further education

Distance Learning Disadvantages:

* Equipment failure. The success of the course depends not only on the course content and good guidance but on the equipment used for learning: if the equipment is inadequate the course can fail.
* Inadequate computer skills of the learner. Insufficient computer skills may make the learner concentrate more on their technological problems instead of focusing on the learning matter and eventually hamper motivation for participation in the course.
* Nat all degree courses can be offered on-line. One can hardly get a university degree in medicine on-line as part of the degree is learning to work directly with patients , it holds water for some other specializations where a considerable part of the course has to be completed offline.
* Prejudiced attitudes to on-line degrees. Not all employers accept on-line degrees considering them lower in quality as compared to degrees obtained from traditional educational courses.
* Lack of traditional learning environment. Students who study on-line may miss a traditional classroom with teachers and peers and the absence of social interaction in real life is a negative point as students will miss peer knowledge sharing and a beneficial effect from socializing directly, face-to-face with university professors.
* Insufficient control of the learners’ performance. Only highly motivated and disciplined on-line learners will complete all the assignments on their own, without resorting to some outside assistance, hence the objectivity of the assessment of their work on-line is at stake.

Considering all the pros and cons of learning at a distance we may conclude that on-line courses are gaining in popularity due to numerous reasons but they may be completed successfully only by those learners who are highly motivated to get a degree and who can rely solely on their grasping power in the absence of the teacher as a guide. A virtual classroom is different from a traditional classroom with its specific atmosphere of peer support and teacher guidance but one cannot deny that with the modern life speed and the development of modern technologies the advantages of learning at a distance will overpower its disadvantages and on-line education, before too long, will become as common for humans as offline education is at present time.