

INTERNATIONAL DISTANCE LEARNING: INTERNET COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

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The new knowledge society is based largely on Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs). New ICTs are everywhere making our lives more complicated, but they also bring to us boundless opportunities. In education ICTs have provided possibilities to distribute electronic books and other texts throughout the world and to teach students online. In the public sphere the ICTs let people communicate via forums and social networks to quickly exchange information regardless of the geographical distance. Students in a virtual classroom are divided by physical space, but they are symbolically connected by being involved in the same practical activities, learning the same material and discussing it in an open manner. Unlike the traditional class, a virtual class allows the students to log in and out any time, 24-7, still maintaining a feeling that they are united in a common, shared enterprise through cyberspace.

Usually, internet tools in the sphere of education are broadly used for traditional aims to teach students where to find useful information, how to use it properly, how to research efficiently, etc. In the case of distance education, especially in the social sciences, electronic online tools facilitate students' active involvement in their studies even while not necessarily being very close physically to a single college or each other, in contrast to a traditional university classroom situation. Distance learning is a way to teach students from different cities, villages, regions and even countries all together as if they were enrolled in one physically unique class. Therefore, a virtual classroom is invisible, but very real. In it, participants encourage one another by keeping in intellectual contact, debating the issues, exchanging opinions, completing joint tasks and the like. In both cases traditional classrooms and new ones created by ICTs the students and teachers participate in knowledge construction. In the new ICT-facilitated classroom, students feel attached to the learning process, they can contribute their own ideas to it and, therefore, their knowledge becomes personal or, rather, interpersonal (inter-subjective): they produce it not only from the books they read, but from communication with each other through online interaction. As they do not see the instructor nearby, they feel more independent in their outlooks and often express themselves more freely

An advantage of the new ICTs applied to higher education is the possibility to create collaborative, online, international learning environments of globally networked students and professors. In a virtual class students from different countries can study a subject together while communicating with each other through internet technologies. In a distance class the students are encouraged to participate in a dialogue as long as they wish to. They also complete assignments and submit them through the selected learning management system. The workload in an international distance class, both for students and professors, is rather heavy, but the motivation for students to participate includes the exercise of freedom to work at their own pace, personal responsibility for their learning outcomes and the excitement of learning about and from student colleagues in other countries. For professors, helping their students to learn with and from their peers from abroad is a most satisfying reward. On-line dialogue is one of many assignments, but perhaps the most interesting one to students as citizens of an evolving knowledge-based global society. It gives the student the opportunity to contact each other on the topics of their interest, discuss the news, and learn technologies as well as the subject and social communication.

In the distance classes on sociology in which students from BSU were enrolled, they communicated with young people from the USA, Australia, and Russia. Overall, this kind of communication gave all of them an excellent opportunity to learn cultural context of the international communication, where education and sociology were important parts, but everyday interpersonal contacts prevailed. Our students learned how to perform written assignments on the basis of assigned readings, analyze Internet articles, and finally get grades for these activities. They actively participated in a student-led discussion which emphasized students asking each other questions, discussing common topics raised by the readings, and current events in the world. This kind of online communication helped them to understand foreign cultures, historical backgrounds, and the variety of traditions in social control around the world. In the end the students from all the countries confirmed they learned a lot from the books and, especially their online, personal contacts.

Overall, our international distance classes proved the high importance of the online communication as a useful modern educational technology.