



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

GLOBAL DISTANCE LEARNING: LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Global Distance Learning: Linguistic and Cultural Considerations

Synopsis:

Distance learning increases access to educational opportunity. However, global delivery of distance learning programs must consider linguistic and cultural factors. This paper identifies course design and instructional strategies to address these issues and enable learner success.

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Many nations are widening access to higher education (e.g., see Corver, 2010; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009; Trow, 2005) to benefit the lives of their citizens and expand their competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. Individuals are seeking higher education opportunities in unprecedented numbers to experience the benefits in terms of employment opportunity, sustained employment, socioeconomic status, civic engagement, and healthy lifestyles (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). As such, worldwide higher education enrollments have increased by 53% (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009).

This global demand for higher education presents compelling evidence of the need for distance education. Nations are creating international partnerships and establishing online higher education programs and institutions to realize the benefits of an educated citizenry (e.g., Hamdin Bin Mohammed Smart University in Dubai, Saudi Electronic University in Saudi Arabia, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain). Distance education can provide potential learners of any age and circumstance with greater access in terms of admission, cost, and scheduling. It has a long history of addressing issues of social equity and expanding access to diverse learners (White, 2003). It removes barriers and opens doors of opportunity.

These factors are resulting in distance education becoming part of the mainstream as attested to by the fact that in 2012, 33.5% of all students in higher educational institutions in the United States were enrolled in a distance course compared to 9.6% in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Higher education institutions wanting to extend learning opportunities beyond their regions must consider a variety of factors such as mission, capacity, and quality. They must explore how to expand, to which regions and countries, and with what programs. Infrastructure and systems must be in place to support learners and ensure quality.

As much educational content is delivered in English, even by institutions outside of English-speaking countries, the English language proficiency and cultures of targeted learners must be considered. Ensuring adequate English language proficiency is critical to learner success. Moreover, because learners have differing educational backgrounds and approaches to learning, cultural factors must be addressed within the course design. This presentation focuses on identifying issues related to global distance learning opportunities, particularly the role of online English language courses, the distinct considerations for their development, and the integration of cultural adjustment strategies in order to support learner success.

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