
CONTINUING EDUCATION AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Abstract

The debate about the relationship of these two areas has intensified in the last years for several reasons. They have been developing separately but there has been recently a clear and natural overlapping. Continuing Education (CE) has increased its importance due to social and cultural evolving attitudes towards education and lifelong learning, thus demanding wider access and flexible learning materials. Distance Education (DE) has been shifting its focus from the technological issues and innovations to the application of its capacities and tools to a general learning environment. This paper tries to analyze recent events that establish connections between these two strands, to establish objective links and to reflect about the possibilities of promising future evolution of joint activities. Some conclusions are drawn proposing measures that could be advantageous to both educational sectors.

CE versus DE - Some Comments

Technology developments have been influencing daily life at an unexpected rate and with tremendous changes in the areas of learning and teaching. The media used in communication are playing an important role changing the format and the quantity of information available for educational purposes. These changes require a series of reflections and thoughts about the future role of learners and teachers in CE. DE uses frequently the electronic environment to make available educational resources to those who would otherwise not have access to them. Therefore teachers, researchers and administrators in a classical educational system, like that of CE, must face this rapid change in education methodologies regarding course profiles, teaching procedures and other institutional issues that are connected with DE practice.

On the other hand the DE teachers are not sometimes concerned with factors considered in CE course design like the maturity and profile of students, the interface friendliness, the interaction with other students and tutors and the flexibility of the learning pace. Another typical characteristic of DE is that it may promote cooperation between learners if a group is set regularly to address joint projects or questions. This is a fundamental change from the vertical structure of classical educational systems and in some cases, such as adult education, may represent an enormous added value to teaching and learning.

One problem for CE teachers is that some materials for the courses are requested by a number of learners with very different educational backgrounds. Therefore the courses have to be prepared with enough flexibility to support a range of different learning demands. The materials need a degree of user friendliness to meet many different attitudes towards the learning medium used, such as people being afraid of using computers or falling asleep watching an educational video.

Another issue is the universality of DE materials have production costs that can only be met if their use is as large as possible, and must therefore be prepared for a mass audience enabling a potential use that guarantees the elimination of geographical frontiers. This means that they must also consider cultural

and educational characteristics inside or outside the country(ies) of production that may represent a barrier to the use of DE materials.

One more question is that new technologies available for DE courses are in some cases the opposite of traditional courses in terms of structure, organization and evaluation. The teaching and learning models adopted have to be innovative and adapted to the media and tools so that courses make use of the full potential of ODL. There is a great need to rethink the teaching models in the design and delivery stages and to create new pedagogical guidelines to achieve proper learning.

Cooperation between on DE and CE sectors have to realize that the production of DE courses and their materials have to be produced in cooperation with other institutions and groups of users, such as industrial and associations of professionals. In this way the product will be guaranteed a certain degree of success in terms of destination group. The industry and other sectors of society have a cooperative role that may improve the quality of the courses and their use. Cooperation between teachers from different institutions is also highly desirable since it will contribute to lower costs and increase the potential target group of the courses.

A further question is that one of the most difficult challenges is to change the teaching role since the motivation of academia to shift their teaching methods is traditionally low. The new activities have to be considered as new tasks for the instructors and not as additional work on top of the existing tasks. When it is an additional task it should be rewarded in accordance. In cases where it is a new type of work for the instructors there must be an adequate training phase where they are also learners of the new learning and teaching technologies.

For the production of DE materials in an CE environment it is required new administrative infrastructures together with equipment facilities for the delivery of this type of courses. The existing system will suffer considerable changes that must be addressed adequately by the administration allowing the DE teaching and tutoring functions to be implemented with the necessary support including proper technicians to manipulate the new equipment and technologies.

A supplementary obstacle to the use of DE by CE providers is the lack of a proper and reliable system of quantifying the learning progress for these materials. Considering the different forms of learning achievements such as skills, knowledge acquisition or understanding, the assessment and evaluation has to be designed to measure the amount of learning achieved by the learner. This evaluation can be done on an open mode but it must address the characteristics of the DE course.

Quality assurance has not been present in most DE courses produced and that has been a major obstacle to the acceptance of this type of learning by the CE teachers and learners. Some of the DE courses have been designed based on the innovative capabilities of the supporting medium instead of the course pedagogical value. The challenge of quality evaluation and learning effectiveness of the DE courses must be a priority in the course design and delivery. Without a generalized quality control of the DE courses the learning achievements will not be guaranteed just by the use of sophisticated media.

Analysis of DE and CE Events

The verification of the possible correlation between these two areas was done analyzing three events of each type in recent years that had relevance in the field and were representative of a significant geographical sector. For CE the conferences chosen were the 6th and 7th World conferences of the IACEE - International Association of Continuing Engineering Education in April of 1995 and May of 1998. It was also analyzed the three year project THENUCE - Thematic Network of University Continuing Education, coordinated by EUCEN - European Universities Continuing Education Network in June of 1999. For DE the conferences chosen were the EDEN - European Distance Education Network conference in June of 1998 and the ICDE- International Council of Distance Education conference in June 1999. Another source that was scrutinized was the publication Base produced by the European Commission - DGXXII with a directory of DE products published in March 1997.

The search was done using keywords or group of words in the titles of the papers or of the projects. For the CE group the words adopted included at least one of continuing (education), lifelong learning or training. The DE set comprised distance, open, flexible, multimedia and technologies connected with education or learning. Of course some of the papers on DE could have connection with CE without the CE words in the title, as well as the reciprocal for DE words, but this is just an indicator that could be obtained through the index of the conferences and of the other events.

For the 6th World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education of IACEE (www.dipoli.iacee.fi) held in Sao Paulo and Brazil from 7 until 12 of May of 1995 had more than four hundred attendants from all over the world. It was dedicated to the cooperation between the university and the industry and had several sponsors from outside the academia. It had a total of 192 papers in the proceedings and the results of the search were

Key words	DE	CE	DE + CE
Number	5	64	6
%	2.6	33	3.1

In the 7th World Conference on Continuing Engineering Education of IACEE that took place in Torino, Italy, from 12 until 15 of May of 1998 had more than five hundred participants from forty-two countries. It had the title "The Knowledge Revolution - The Impact of New Technologies" and was held at the training center of Fiat. The total number of papers and posters was 131 papers in the proceedings and the results of the search were

Key words	DE	CE	DE + CE
Number	13	49	7
%	9.9	37	5.3

The third event related with CE that was analyzed was the Forum of THENUCE - Thematic Network of University Continuing Education (www.fe.up.pt/nuce/) that took place in Reykjavik, Iceland, from the 25 until 28 of June of 1999. THENUCE was a three-year project funded by the European Commission under the program Socrates, it involved 87 universities and the Forum had more than one hundred and fifty participants. The project dedicated the first year to report on the state of the art of CE in 19 European countries and in Europe. The second year was spent researching fourteen issues of CE where only two were related with DE. The amount spent by the project on these two topics was 7% of the total direct costs for that year. The third year of the project was used to produce deliverables and those involving DE cost 14% of the third year budget.

The first case related with DE that was examined was the 1998 EDEN - European Distance Education Network (www.eden.bme.hu) - Annual Conference held in Bologna, Italy, from 23 until 25 of June of 1998. The theme was "Universities in a Digital Era - Transformation, Innovation and Tradition". The conference had more than four hundred participants and 146 papers are registered in the proceedings. The results of the search were

Key words	DE	CE	DE + CE
Number	61	6	6
%	42	4.1	4.1

The 19th ICDE World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education held by ICDE - International Council of Distance Education (www.icde.no) was the second occurrence on DE. It happened in Vienna, Austria, on 20 until 24 of June of 1999 and had the topic of "The New Educational Frontier: Teaching and Learning in a Networked World". This event had more than two thousand participants and among its sessions it held a symposium on Lifelong Learning and New Technologies. The conference had 935 posters and 137 papers and the search provided the following results

Key words	DE	CE	DE + CE
Number	947	3	79
%	88	0.3	7.4

The third example involving DE was BASE, a directory of DE products available commercially or not and was published in March 1997. It was made under a Socrates grant from the European Commission - DG XXII and contained information about 755 products of DE including computer based products, cdroms, cdis, web-based documents, videos and audiotapes. The inspection showed that none of the products included in the title CE, one had education and 11 were related with CE without explicit wording.

Suggestions to Foster CE and DE

It seems clear that from the results of the analysis stated from these six cases that there is a separation between both types of educational areas in terms of terminology and on a strategic deployment. This appears as a consequence of the different origins and histories. Considering that both sectors are complimentary and that cooperation would be advantageous then some practical measures are proposed.

At the level of the networks and of the associations for both sectors it would be useful to promote joint **workshops** to identify the causes of the apparent separation. After knowing the problems then they should adopt measures to facilitate the use of DE materials by the CE sector and the dedication to CE by the DE producers. There is an apparent deficit of practice of the DE staff about market analysis and quality control about their courses that CE people are much aware. On the other hand there may be a lack of understanding from the CE sector about the capacities and techniques of the DE materials.

One concrete measure, done at macro or at micro level, may be **training** for DE and CE staff either face to face or virtual. The content of this measure could be training DE staff on CE issues, like market analysis, learning styles and quality assessment of learning materials, and, on the other hand, training CE staff on DE materials such as capacities, techniques and tutoring for open and distance learning modes. Other contents for these training actions could be chosen as long as mutual knowledge is increased.

Another initiative could be the organization of joint **conferences**, by organizations or networks of both areas, dedicated to issues important to CE and DE. These could be financing, quality, marketing, cooperation or needs analysis. This is important to involve on a larger scale the members of organizations dedicated to CE or to DE since for most, the conferences they attend, is the convenient opportunity for networking and establish projects.

Finally the last proposal is to establish, by the organizations or by the networks, **databases** about effective case studies of CE connected with DE and about products of DE that have been successful. These lists will be useful for sectors of activity since they will work not only as references for best practices and for case studies but also as a directory to be used by DE and CE staff. This is an increasingly important use of these databases by the CE sector especially if the products have some kind of certification either by a commercial exit record or by compliance with quality standards.

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