DISTANCE EDUCATION AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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An Interpretive History of
African-American Education
Part II: 1950 to the Present
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1) OVERVIEW

Online education is a steadily growing phenomenon in higher education today; online courses and programs offered by colleges and universities have increased by about 55%, thus distance education and related research has proliferated. It is often advised to "know your audience" before teaching, and this is especially important and critical in online courses to teach more effectively.

Although distance education has been credited with opening doors to educational opportunities for many black students, it is also criticized for significant drop-out rates. The National Commission on Higher Education (1996) reports that the insufficient student support with inaccessible texts supplies and little guidance the students in distance education courses are several reasons which end up with high drop-out rates. In addition, there is not still enough definition of theoretical and practical constructs for teaching Caucasian students online (Rovai, Ponton, and Baker 2008), as well as black students which have different learning style(Watkins 2005).

History of Distance Education

Even though the exact origins of distance education is unknown (Holmberg, 1986), the earliest form of distance education was correspondence courses (Garrison, 1989), which has been known for several generations, especially for adult education. The first correspondence program was established at the University of Chicago, and the delivery of printed materials via mail service was the backbone of the program. Students received course content in the mail, mailed

written responses to questions back to the institution, and received feedback again in the mail. Even though the interaction was slow, it facilitated access to education.

Development and proliferation of radio during World War I and television in the 1950s enabled new forms of distance education (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Institutions set up radio and television programs as new forms of correspondence study (Buckland & Dye, 1991). Development of satellite technology offered more qualified distance education programs. Government funds supported satellite-delivered instruction for further development in distance education (Schlosser & Anderson, 1994). With more advanced technologies, more effective delivery of instruction was possible; this, coupled with the idea of providing access to education led to proliferation of distance education. For example, Open University was established in Britain in 1970. Issues such as teacher shortage in science and math delayed the same developments in the USA (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). There was a dramatic growth of network-based flexible learning in the 1990s, and the establishment of The Bipartisan Web-based Education Commission in 1998 highlighted the use of the internet at all levels of education, from pre-kindergarten to job retraining (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Recently, distance education has become more prevalent and offers more options with online delivery of instruction. Distance education is "moving toward virtual classrooms where instruction from a host site is delivered to distance sites via an integration of live, two-way interactive audio, video, or both and synchronous/asynchronous computer-based interactions that take advantage of local area networks (LANs), wide area networks (WANs), the Internet, and the WWW" (Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999, p.3).

Current State of Distance Education

Rapid development of communication technologies has led to a variety of course formats, where students can learn any time and any place, where the learner and the instructor are physically separated by place (and sometimes by time, in the case of email and discussion board communications). At the same time, offerings of distance courses have increased (Primary Research Group, 2002). In the 2001-2002 school years, more than three million students enrolled to more than 127,000 distance education courses (Waits & Lewis, 2003).

Even though distance education is appealing to many students due to the flexibility and freedom it provides for students, the drop-out rates in distance education are found to be high and problematic. Duffy and Kirkley (2004a) stress differences between distance education and traditional education in terms of constrains, affordances, and goals. Lawless and Kullikowich (1996) maintain that online learning environment can be bewildering as well as flourishing, because separation of instructor and learner can inhibit those who rely on the instructor as a source of feedback, coaching, and motivation (Garrison, 1989). In face-to-face instruction it is easier to regulate the pace, content and activities according to students' progress (Atkinson, 2001), because their paralinguistic cues can provide information about the teaching-learning process. In distance education it is more difficult for instructors to make the necessary adjustment, therefore this responsibility shifts to the learners (Steuer, 1992); however this might be challenging for many learners (Ebersole, 1997; Recker, Ram, Shikano, Li, & Stasko, 1995). Also, increased responsibility to pace their own learning activities and exploit online resources may be a struggle for distance learners.

Distance Education and African- American Students

Education has been used 'historically to reproduce, as well as to resist the societal status quo' (Hlatswayo, 2000, p. 1). Therefore, in order to get insight of what learning means for an African- American learner in the context, it is important to look at the wider context of distance education framework that is influenced by the individual's attitudes towards learning and education.

Distance education is steadily growing field in the USA as well as in the world. Badat(2004) defines as" Distance education was identified as the system that could provide access to people who—because of work commitments, personal and/or social circumstances, geographical distance or poor quality or inadequate prior learning experiences—do not have the opportunity to study full time". Distance education differs from traditional educational sense, because distance learners have more work to do in terms of building and settling their own understanding of the learning regardless of their own communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Distance education is very appealing African American students for several reasons. The first and foremost one is that distance education courses prevents discomfort often attend in campus living at a predominantly white university (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2004). Corey and Bower (2005) claimed that Black students might experience the loss of status whether their ethnic identity is challenged by others in a traditional classroom setting. Corey and Bower (2005) compared the academic success of an African-American student in a traditional face-to-face math class with an online math class. They found that "the Internet and other distance-education technology can provide students with a less culturally foreign environment" (Corey & Bower, 2005, p. 330). The second is that distance education courses offer more affordable compared to living on campus and attending a college in traditional way (Journal of Blacks in

Higher Education, 2004). Distance education provides opportunities for poor students to attend

college, because the fees are lower than university institutions. The third one is that distance

education courses can be completed while working in a full time job (Journal of Blacks in Higher

Education, 2004). Therefore students can also have a bachelor or higher degree; whereas they

can take care of their families. It is also a good opportunity for single parent in terms of

providing opportunity to care the child, earn money and pursue a higher degree in education. The

fourth is that distance education is considered as a new way to resist biases and destroying racist

walls in education (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2004). Since your race is not known,

racism cannot be issue to worry about. The fifth is that online learning creates potential for

expanded academic content and cultural knowledge.

According to higher education theory, different races and cultures have different learning

style. Even though every case does not support this rule, major differences have been observed

(Arrayo, 2010). By considering racial and cultural ways of knowing, it is essential to realize

learning styles of African American students (Watkins 2005). Generally speaking, black students

are inclined to what theorists call "field dependence," in contrast to field independence (Shade

1982; Rovai 2007). Field dependent learners prefer high contact, heavy dialogue (verbal and

non-verbal), deep community, and a sense of social purpose (Arrayo, 2010). Boykin (1983)

comes up with Black *Cultural Learning Styles* (BCLS) to define black students' tendencies.

BCLS is consisting of nine aspects spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect, communalism,

expressive individualism, orality, and social time perspective. A pedagogy which includes those

nine elements flourishes the learning experience of black students. Online courses can fall short

to provide enough connection with the people-oriented field dependency of BCLS. Autonomy,

isolation, competition, standardization, and depersonalization are quite often part of the online

course (Arrayo, 2010). Online courses are designed to be analytical and dualistic, but black learners prefer conceptual and holistic approaches.

Additionally, even though distance education has given the promise of practical options to meet educational needs of students, it has been target of critics for not being responsive to learners' needs regardless of presenting sufficient support to its learners. Since separation of instructor and learner can cause failure for those who rely on the instructor for feedback, coaching and other motivational techniques (Garrison, 1989). Distance education courses might make black students feel insecure and alienated, since they will be working alone. Generally, black students learning experiences are controlled with a teacher, so a majority of the black students have expectations in higher education with their past experience of learning (Makoe, 2006). But it can be challenging for those who got used to be controlled by teachers, because there is no physical presence of other students or lecturers in distance learning. One of the important characteristic of distance learning is that a student should be able to study independently by building his/her academic course content according to his or her needs.

The other issue that black students might feel like manipulated in the discussions, so they might experience the depersonalization. Roberts and Mclnnerney (2007) noted that online classes were unpredictable, since online discussions can be controlled by certain individuals or groups.

Distance Education and Black Colleges

The approach of African- Americans is very enthusiastic to distance education. According to Department of Education about 8.3 percent of all African-American undergraduate students take at least one distance education course. The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (2004) noted that the government figures estimate more than 175,000 black students are taking

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college-level distance education courses while 8.6 percent of all undergraduates white students take distance learning courses.

Furthermore, HBC3 (Historically Black Cyber College Consortium) provide opportunities for historically Black institutions to become more competent in distance education by launching an Internet gateway, or a comprehensive Web site. This website will bring new openings to train for faculty and students at schools that join the consortium. Students, faculty and administrators at member institutions will have access to the HBC3 Web site, and faculty members can get online technical assistance with developing courses online(Black Issues, 2000).

Black colleges also provide opportunities for distance courses and programs. At the undergraduate level, they offer degree programs, such as; agricultural education, business education, electronics technology, etc. also, there are graduate programs. Even though the use of internet is lower than white Americans, African- American students are more likely to take online courses.

According to the JBHE survey determines nation's black colleges and universities which embraced the distance education courses into their curricula; while public HBCUs is more willing to embrace distance education than private HBCUs The JBHE survey revealed that private HBCUs like Spelman College, Morehouse College, Xavier University, Tuskegee University, Fisk University, Dillard University, and Bennett College do not offer distance education courses(Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2004).

Public black colleges and universities are far more willing to offer online courses than their private counterparts in distance education. According to JBHE survey,

- Bowie State University in Maryland has 19 courses in its distance education curriculum. Six of these courses are conducted exclusively over the Internet. More than 2,100 students are enrolled in the distance education program at the university. A bachelor's degree program in business is offered.

- Florida A&M University in Tallahassee offers 31 courses online. Twelve of these courses are in engineering disciplines. Four physics courses, five economics courses, and five computer science courses are offered in the distance education program. In addition, there are two architecture courses, two mathematics courses, and a course on teaching theater that are offered online. Florida A&M also offers a doctoral program in pharmacy through its distance education program.

- Howard University, a private institution that receives extensive public support, offers distance education master's degree programs in environmental engineering and business administration. Howard also has an online nurse practitioner program and a certificate program in social work.

- Morgan State University does not operate a formal distance education program at the present time. Lionel S. Duncan, a professor of education, serves as director of the Center for Distance Education and Learning Technologies. Professor Duncan tells JBHE that the university is "part of an HBCU consortium that provides courses to the eArmy University. We also provide courses on demand through Course Compass, a service by a group of Maryland public television stations."

- Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina offered an online course on the psychology of the exceptional, a required course for students seeking to become teachers, was offered online during a six-week period. The university received a $149,000 grant

from the U.S. Department of Education to establish the distance learning program. Funds were used to send participating faculty to a distance education training seminar and to hire a distance education program coordinator.

CONCLUSION

Distance education is not "old wine in a new bottle". It is very tempting as well as challenging since it is newly constructed field in education. Therefore, distance education has become a steadily growing field. Increased sophisticated technologic development and idea of providing equal access to education have scattered idea of distance education. Black colleges and universities are likely to offer different distance courses as well as white or mixed colleges. Online courses in higher education grant access to black students which are important to bridge the gap achievement. It is not fair to say black children are unsuccessful at schools; schools are failing to fulfill their intellectual competence without providing appropriate environments. Finding and creating new ways of making online courses friendly to the field dependent learner will present better results.

2) **ACTIVITIES**

#ACTIVITY 1

Different books which present distinguishing point of views of African-centered education can be chosen. After reading those books, the students write an 1000- words essay which highlights the important arguments of the both side. Compare- contrast essays will help students to recognize the underlined thoughts.

#ACTIVITY 2

The interview with an online course student can help to apprehend the difference between traditional educational experience and online educational experience.

#ACTIVITY 3

Videos about any kind of subject can be uploaded on the website, then asynchronous discussion can be started, then students can reflect upon their thoughts about the video. Asynchronous and synchronous discussion will hinder the feeling of isolation. People will still be interacting even though they do not see each other face-to face. Also they will feel more comfortable throughout the discussions, because they know that race will not be issue.

#ACTIVITY 4

Each week students can write short reflections about the articles they have read as assignment of the week. Students can make comments for others ideas and understanding of the articles, so asynchronous discussion will be started. It will provide not only deep understanding of the issue, but also it will enhance students' point of view by taking into account their classmates ideas.

#ACTIVITY 5

 Students can create either a blog or webquest as a portfolio. It has been worked on it from the first week to the last week. They can work in a group and combine different materials about the subjects which have been presented in the class. Since people will be working in a group, they can take advantage of each others' ideas.

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