A critique of anthropological principles of post-modern distance education

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Abstract

Although distance education is a newly introduced learning method, it has drawn many criticisms due to its failure in e-learning projects. The definitions of distance education focus on the distance between learners and the instructor as well as the way in which they interact. Thus, the individual and the process whereby he learns are one of the principal issues discussed in post-modern societies. In the context of post-modern education system, then individual is considered to be a product of discourse (Dialogue) and society influenced by nature and society. Such a view of individuals leads one to pose the following questions in the post-modern context: Is the concept of human's learning adopted by post-modern distance education different from that adopted by traditional system? Is distance education consistent with anthropological principles of post-modern society?

Few studies have been conducted on human's learning process in distance education system and on the negative impact of machine- human interaction on cognitive factors involved in human's learning process in post-modern societies. Thus, this study seeks to analyze the same issue through examining the anthropological principles of post-modern society as well as to criticizing them.

Keywords: Distance Education, Post-modern Human, Post-modern Communities, Traditional Education System.
Problem Statement

Obviously, education system as well as learning and teaching system play an important role in the development and prosperity of countries. In the 21st century, all countries do their best to have the biggest contribution to the latest developments and advances in learning-teaching methods. Universally, the traditional structure of current education system can't meet the increasing demand for education and other issues industries cerate for the learners.

Post-modern education system was proposed as a solution to these problems. All definitions of distance education focus on the distance between learner and instructor as two elements of education. In addition to habits, dispositions and skills, humans develop science, philosophy, and art gradually through examining the phenomena, thereby getting access to new data in these fields. Similarly, humans learn the way in which people conceive of various affairs as well as their life styles.

What matters is how human learns these affairs. Moreover, under what circumstances can an educational method be useful and lead to fundamental changes in man's behavior? Human's personality consists of many aspects enumerated by psychologists as follows:
1-Rational aspect
2-Social aspect
3-Emotional aspect
4-Physical aspect

Examining human's behavior, one can identify faith-related, social and affective aspects. Physical aspect is the most tangible aspect of human's personality, connected to other aspects through neural networks and brain. Does distance education influence different aspects of human's personality? Can distance education lead to fundamental changes in human's behaviors? Undoubtedly, response to these questions on the basis of analysis paves the way for the acceptance of distance education. Thus, the impact distance education has on learner and human in general is deemed as a topic which helps us to effectively implement the distance education. It also persuades us that distance education is at least as efficient as traditional methods and hence a suitable alternative for the latter.

Main Research Questions

1-Can distance education lead to changes in all aspects of post-modern human as its main leading objectives?
2-What are the weaknesses of distance education with regard to its impact on post-modern in comparison with traditional education system?
3-Is the concept of distance education adopted by the post-modern communities different from that adopted by traditional systems?
4-What are the anthropological principles of distance education in post-modern communities?

This study aims to
1-contribute to knowledge-building in distance education.
2- pave the way for the society's acceptance of distance education as an educational method.

Methodology

This study uses an analytical-descriptive method, seeking to answer the research questions through examining psychological and philosophical principles. Given the descriptive nature of topic, an attempt has been made to answer the questions through examining the available sources.

Research Background
No study under the same title has been conducted yet.

Introduction

Education Methods have undergone many changes during recent years. Governments and post-modern communities are adopting distance education due to the increasing pace of population growth and increasing demand for education as well as for purpose of going beyond geographical and environmental boundaries. Distance education has undergone many changes in both learning and teaching. This is because of the knowledge Commercialization and the conditions which are not limited temporally-spatially.

Thus, many organizations have created and implemented different e-learning courses that not only are accessible everywhere and at anytime but also enjoy diversity and simplicity. Despite these changes as well as aspirations for improving the learning and teaching processes, distance education and teaching has not been able to produce better learning than traditional methods do (Pena & Stra, 2007).

In all definitions of distance education, the distance between instructor and the learner as well as how they interact are considered to be the main characteristics of distance education. Learners should interact with softwares and hardwares so as to get access to materials. This type of media shouldn’t impose overload on the learner. Instead, it should facilitate the transference of data to visual memory and finally to long-term memory for processing.

Undoubtedly, human is the main focus of distance education. This poses a question: Can distance education lead to changes in various aspects of human?
Does the post-modern distance education turn a blind eye to the physical aspect of human? Are the post-modern concepts of learning as well as psychological concepts of human learning the same as traditional ones? These questions entail a deep study of anthropological-philosophical principles of distance education for purpose of establishing a philosophical grounding. To this end, this study aims to provide the grounding for logical development and expansion of distance education through challenging the anthropological principles of distance education in post-modern communities.

Humans in Post-modern Society

As its prefix suggests, post-modernism is an event after the modernism (Whether to consider it as counter-modernism position or as a follow-up of modernism or as a phenomenon beyond the modernism). However, in all, post–modernism represents the following: values and morality relativism, being skeptical about truth and reality, and being uncertain about human's fate.

When it comes to the anthropological positions of postmodernism, one is reminded of different orientations and paradigms such as post-modern anthropology, reflexive anthropology, post-structuralism anthropology and cybernetic anthropology. They all conceive of nature rather human as the locus. Unlike modernists, postmodernists question the centrality of human as opposed to nature.

For post-modernists, the identity is based on dialogue, manifesting itself only through undergoing the discourse process and linguistic interaction than through gender, race, or class. That is why post-modernists consider identity as fluid, personal, and relative. Consequently, the educational processes which try to define and properly materialize the identity of women should involve the women in interactional processes of discourse. This is because post modernism takes a discourse approach to identity /constructivism.

Postmodernism/constructivism focuses on the plausibility of knowledge claim versus credit. Theoreticians and authors seek to unravel what and how human understands. Post-modernism/constructivism highlights human’s participation in constructing knowledge: this is an observation-based perspective with the objective of observation considered as indivisible; the sense of nature is relative; the phenomena are based on background and the knowledge is social, inductive, interpretive and qualitative. Post-modernism disregards the recognition ability of human which has been highlighted by Decart, Kant and Hegel. That is, it doesn’t hold that human is an agent able to figure out the facts and to recognize the representation of these facts.

Human is an independent and wise creature with a single and constant identity. His identities will change through discourse games and interactions.
As an advocate of post-modernism, Foker doesn’t accept the cognition and human’s mind as articulated by modernists, considering them as the invention of modern discourse. He believes that discourse circumstances make rationalism meaningful; human that is considered meaningful in a discourse context is not the subject of discourse. He declared human as mortal, noting that human is the product of discourse in his own age (Ali Sjadi, 2007, pp. 153).

Generally, post-modernism considers all individuals important, with the proper education of all as the main purpose. Thus, education should be based on individuals’ needs and interests. A multi-cultural education is the most prominent manifestation of post-modernism in educational system. This is because post-modernism values diversity, ethnic and racial minorities. This type of education paves the way for planning, selection of objectives, content, method and the structuring appropriate for traditions and micro cultures language through decentralization and limiting the government involvement in educational structures (Pakseresht, Najarian, sfaimoghadam, 2001, pp100).

As another advantage, post-modernism pays special attention to critique and criticism, manifested in education. It encourages criticism and supports critical education. In this kind of education, attempts are made to identify and deal with unfair conditions and to bring up courageous and active citizens.

According to Baudrilard, the corollary derived out of the world entertained by post-modernists can be found in the concepts such as “internal explosion” and “meta facts”. In the view of Baudrilard, internal explosion amounts to the disappearance of borders. The fields such as economy, politics, race and gender which gave meaning to the world based on production and work have merged. Kelner (2005) maintains that the classic social theory interprets societies as having distinct characteristics while the post-modernism societies are interpreted as uniform, with no distinction. In this context, the distinction of individuals and groups fade away through variable learning. Baudrilard proposes meta-fact as the second corollary of post-modern vision. By meta-fact, Baudrilard means that media provides for experiences that are more intense and factual. In this way, symbols, codes, models, and images are observed discontinuously by people and hence making them perplexed. Kelner(2005) says eloquently: in post-modern world, people stay away from “facts desert” for purpose of relishing and reaching the passion of met-facts as well as the new domain of computer, media and technology experience. Abstracts are vague and discontinuous in this world, leading to new experiences. (Remetolla 2008, pp141-142).

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Although, the changes in distance learning and teaching were expected to yield better results than traditional education contexts, distance education failed to achieve these intended purposes. Many factors were involved in distance education’s failure including the lack of knowledge in complex interactions between cognitive factors as well as the peculiar
nature of computer-human interactions between post-modern societies. This study will challenge them:

1-Human is seen as an entity derived out of societies.

In such a system, the modern society’s rationalism is challenged, amounting to anti-rationalism. That is, human’s intelligence is considered important and human is seen as a passive entity. Moreover, the conditions and the discourse structure of societies determine the role of human.

Since discourse comes into focus and mind is underestimated, the truth is lost. Thus, there are versions of meaning systems. The mind is not to represent the facts, but it should recreate the symbols and combine them regardless of their relevance to the underlying truth.

Distance education is appealing to the anti-rationalism and anti-humanism society of post-modern

2-Pluralism

Pluralism represents a system controlled by several centers of power and legal authority with decision-making distributed in such a way that all interest parties play a part in decision-making (Mehrmohammadi, 2004, pp 288). Post-modernism is closely linked with cultural diversity, with educational programs being planning regionally and locally. Since distance education is flexible, the needs, contributions and interests of all learners should be taken into account. Undoubtedly, paying attention to individual differences in education system is an advantage of education.

But how can post-modern distance education recognize the needs and interests of learning given the lack of face to face interaction between the instructor and learners. Warning of the use of computer. Bayler and Snowhuman(1993) believe successful education depends on how well an instructor can create an affective setting. That is, he should be able to encourage interest, to induce expectations and to excite the learners, to direct the actions and reactions of students and to perceive their verbal and non-verbal communication (Saif, 2001, pp 484). Moreover, post-modernism puts too much emphasis on individual differences. This prevents one from discerning the commonalities among the learners and renders the formation of universal rules impossible. Post-modernism scholars look at all narratives, stories and ideas, turning a blind eye to meta-narratives. This society is a multi-voice one in which though all perspectives are seen, none is considered to be superior over others.

3-Emphasis on language and disregarding other aspects of human

In post-modern society, human is recognized on the basis of the linguistic power, that is, the analysis of terms and words. In this society, mind gives way to discourse and the human’s intelligence is interpreted in terms of discourse. Thus, in post-modern distance
education, the importance of intelligence aspects of human is reduced to discourse while other affective, physical and even social aspects are underestimated. All education aspects experts agree that learning should make changes in various aspects of human. For example, the affective aspect of human is important because 1- this aspect is very complex, having a physiological aspect and closely linked with rational and social aspects.

2- As strong motivators, emotions drive individuals to work 3- The history of human’s life shows that human is most influenced by emotions than by mind and rationality (Shariatmadari, 2000, pp 56). A question is posed as what is the status of this important aspect of human in post-modern distance education; and how does it contribute to the emotional development of learners?

4- Unstable Identity

In post modern society, human lacks a definite identity. He lacks the power to choose his own identity, either. Selecting the discourse options, he is conditioned by the role determined by the phrases. Human takes on new identities as he enters a new context of discourse. Learners suffer from a lack of identity in post-modern discourse education, leading to confusion and conflict. The identities will vary in various contexts and cultures, subject to strong influence of discourse (Fani, 2004, p.69). Put it other way, human is not an independent and intelligent entity, but he is seen as an actor taking on different identities in various games.

5- Considering students’ and instructor’s knowledge as the same

Students’ experiences are seen as important as teachers’ experiences. In actuality, this is not the case. On the other hand, replacing instructor with the data banks, post modernism considers both student and instructor as passive. As moor maintains, adult learners tend to set learning objectives themselves, achieve them on their own. He proposes 2 types of independence: emotional and instruments. The instrumental independence is the ability to do an activity including learning without the help of others. Emotional independence is the ability to follow up an activity without being encouraged or approved by others (Saba, 2007, p.7).

6- Disregarding the transference of culture and previous knowledge structures

Unlike modern society, post-modernism opposes the transference of cultures which is believed to pave the way for hegemony and autocracy. Thus, distance education doesn’t value the heritage and experience of past generations.

In one respect, education represents the transference of cultural heritage as well as evaluation and development of cultural heritage (Shariatmadari, 2005, pp 47). Given the important role, education system and its obligation play with respect to culture, a question is
posed as follows; what is the status of cultural heritage in post-modern distance education. According to John Dewey: the principle of continuity implies that new experiences draw on the past, influenced by the previous experiences which in turn influence the future experiences and shape them (Dewey, 1938. p 37). Consequently, the learner’s previous experiences play an important role in learning new materials.

7- Emphasis on learning process rather than learning outcomes.

Several lessons can be learned through examining the history of distance education, the most important one is that in learning contexts, the focus should be on basic mechanism and learning processes.(Tinjala,2005,p330).

In post-modern, outcome is disregarded to highlight process. This is a unidirectional movement. By learning process, we mean empowering learning through technology to achieve learning objectives. Curriculum is outcome-oriented, whereas learning is process-oriented. According to Hall, the criticisms may be justified since learning may seem informal, unstructured, unplanned or purposeless( Nicholes,2003,p 9).

In post-modern education, learning tends to produce a kind of sellable knowledge, with instructor acting as a supplier and students as a consumer. In this context, knowledge is learned with respect to the situation defined for the learner. Knowledge is not innately considered as a desirable theme, anymore. That is, knowledge is a goal by itself (Marshal & Petres,1994).

8- Disregarding the mental-Kinetic aspects of humans

Kinetic aspect involves the human’s behaviors which are characterized by movement and practice, portraying the skills students have in physical activities (Vakilian,2007,p.32). What approach does post-modern distance education take to kinetic aspect?

Unfortunately, the physical aspect has not been included in post-modern distance education so that the learner can't learn these skills in virtual contexts as learned in face to face interaction. For example, is it possible to learn how to use chemicals; how to master driving; how to master the sports games in virtual settings?

9-Learner Isolation

As another disadvantage, the post-modern distance education results in the learner isolation. That is, the learners take on the role of a machined creature that interacts only with computers. Thus, the Meta -physics, values and traditions have no part to play. As a result, the humanistic characteristics fade away and mechanism, mental illnesses, depression, etc dominate the society.
Conclusion

Post-modernism considers the human as a verbal, anti-rational entity influenced by society and nature. Unlike traditional education, post-modern distance education disregards the emotional, social and mental-kinetic aspects. Post-modernism doesn’t contribute to these aspects of learning, resulting in the isolation of learner and the lack of transference of cultural heritage. Thus, this study recommends that changes be made in the design and structure of distance education models so that all aspects of human are considered. Otherwise, distance education can’t meet its objectives.
References


