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OMDE 601 Section 9040  
15 June 2012  
Assignment 1: A definition of distance education (final version)

### A definition of distance education

Several definitions of the concept distance education can be found in scientific literature on the subject. The purpose of this short essay is to identify a definition in the scholarly literature that most closely matches my own ideas on what the concept entails. I will also elaborate upon the reasons for choosing the identified definition as the most suitable. The definition I found that most closely matches my own ideas is as follows: "Distance education is teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization" (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 2).

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Firstly, this definition highlights that distance education encompasses both learning and teaching, although I think that learning and teaching within a distance education context must not be seen as mutually exclusive concepts – it is quite possible that roles can be (and even need to be) reversed. Students can also become teachers as they gain more autonomy in their learning experience. This symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship (also among students from diverse backgrounds) relates to "the possibility of interaction among a group of students (i.e., collaboration)" (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010, p.16). One must keep in mind that the target audiences served by distance education are often characterized by heterogeneity regarding age, gender, educational background, ethnicity and language where everyone plays a part. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2010) also view this "collaborative responsibility" between different role players as a distinctive marker of the post-industrial perspective on distance education.

Furthermore, the definition indicates that distance learning is a planned activity that takes time, effort, dedication and energy. Successful distance learning is not created in a vacuum but through the joint efforts of different role players like academics, course developers, graphic designers and curriculum specialists which form part of a distance education system comprising of different subsystems (Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Secondly, (Thirdly,) the definition focuses on the asynchronous nature of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). The fact that teaching and learning do not take place at the same time and in the same place is one of the distinctive features of distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). It presents teachers and learners with unique challenges to overcome geographical and pedagogical distances but also offers dynamic and flexible opportunities for learners to become more self-reliant and to take greater responsibility for their learning.

Comment [c1]: Hence videoconferencing would, in your books, not qualify as DE?

Thirdly, the definition stresses the importance of communication in the distance education process. The communication that occurs between teacher and learner in distance education settings is made easier by various technological advances that are constantly changing. In this regard technology plays an emancipating role in facilitating teaching and learning, although each technological element must have an integrated and specific function to make the experience of distance education more accessible and inviting.

Lastly, the definition clearly states that distance education occurs within a particular institutional context. The success of distance education institutions largely depends on different support services, good management practices and proper quality control. These activities form part

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of the overall institutional philosophy of the institution. At Unisa for example the institutional philosophy is focused on African centeredness – “Towards the African University in the service of humanity”.

In my opinion the chosen definition includes the key elements of distance education – teaching, learning, planning, geographical distance, communication, technology and a specific institutional context. It offers a general and broad perspective that is applicable to most distance education settings.

A

Very good: Well chosen definition and appropriate explication. Also formal requirement (such as APA) well met.

Comment [c2]: ???

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#### REFERENCES

Cleveland-Innes, M.F., and Garrison, D.R. (2010). *An introduction to distance education: Understanding teaching and learning in a new era*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Moore, M.G., & Kearsley, G. (2012). *Distance education: A systems view of online learning* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) USA: Wadsworth-Cengage Learning.