# BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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*Abstract :*

*To a large extent education can be thought of as a communication process among the participants. This article focuses on distance education, which has both the general communication processes that in-person education venues possess, and also communication specific to the technologies that mediate the teaching and learning taking place at a distance. There are various opportunities and barriers to effective communication. An exhaustive review of literature regarding communication barriers to distance education summarizes the technical, psychological, social, cultural, and contextual challenges leading to a significant conclusion: that as technology used for distance education improves so does both the opportunities to overcome many of the barriers to ineffective communication and the complexity of the barriers that are faced by the participants. The hierarchy of this structure isdescribed.*

**Keywords :** Distance education; communication barriers.

**Introduction**

The literature is replete with discussion of the various barriers to distance education. These can be categorized several ways such as psychological, pedagogical, technical, social, cultural and so forth. Despite how they are categorized, to some degree most of these barriers overlap and merge together. Ineffective communication is at least a partial cause of most of these barriers to teaching and learning at a distance. Communication obstacles can arise at all stages of the distance education process: in the design, development, delivery, or implementation of distance education courses. This paper focuses on communication barriers in the context of distance education.

**HIERARCHY OF COMMUNICATION BARRIERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION**

Social media is changing the way we communicate. Facebook, Skype, YouTube, Twitter (among many others) and mobile devices are used in education and business in much the same way as they are used in our daily lives as important, preferred ways to communicate. As academic content moves to podcasts, videocasts, and blogs, and discussions are conducted using smart phones and social media of

all types, certainly some communication among the participants becomes richer and some barriers to communication are significantly reduced. This is true within the distance education environment, too. As in the past, the future of distance education will be determined in large part by the innovations made in communication, and the ability educators have to overcome the communication barriers associated with language, culture, and different   As communication moves through intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, mass, intercultural and contextual venues, there is greater opportunity to resolve challenges; yet at the same time, there is more complexity in the need for overcoming a greater diversity of barriers. During an exhaustive literature review of communication barriers in distance education, I observed that as technologies improve, or expand in capabilities and scope throughout the world, there is also an increased set of complex barriers that emerge. With Internet-capable devices, communication methods have expanded and with that expansion, so has the opportunities for collaboration, access to resources, and context-aware problem solving.

The more communication rich the environment, the greater the potential is to overcome all types of communication barriers to distance education; yet in some ways, too, greater levels of communication anxiety arise. As communication capabilities increase within the distance education environment, the more complex the communication barriers become. Said another way, if the communication method for a distance education course is broadcast television with no interaction among students, there is no opportunity for communication barriers involving cultural attitudes to arise in discussion among studentparticipants.



Above figure states that the hierarchical nature of communication capabilities and the concomitant complex communication barriers within a distance education environment. For instance, at the base level, if there is no access (i.e., no communication possible at all), nothing else really matters as far as education is concerned until access is present. Once access is possible, there needs to be acceptance of distance education by students and teachers before meaningful educational experiences

are possible.

Likewise, as increased communication allows for collaborative activities within the distance education course, more complex communication barriers come into existence, too. This is true as one move up the pyramid through cultural issues and contextual issues. The more affordances allowed by the advances in technology, the greater the complexity is in the communication barriers discussed in the literature.

Note that the figure is not complete at the top, since advances in technology will continue. It is not clear what these affordances will be, nor what they will mean with regard to the complexity of communication challenges and how these will be addressed in the distance educationarena.

## PERSPECTIVE ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education is defined as "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"

Thedifferencebetweendistanceeducationanddistancelearningisimportant.Distance education is the responsibility of the sponsoring educational institution or organization and the instructor; distance learning is what students do, and therefore mainly the students' responsibility. These two concepts are often confused. Education and learning are not the same and it does not help that many authors use these expressions synonymously.

Add to this confusion the many terms that have emerged the past two decades such as E-E-learning,blendedlearning,pervasivelearningandmobilelearning that are really misnomers (most of the time when these terms are used, the speaker or author is talking about both learning and teaching); there is a significant conceptual problem. So, while some shifting of the use of terms such as distance education, online learning, and mobile learning is acknowledged in the sections that follow, it is done because I tried to follow the terminology used by the authors of the literature cited. Moving on, there are many ways to categorize and define barriers in distance education. For the purposes of this paper.

## TYPES OF BARRIER & CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The following are some of the important types of barriers and some characteristics of them that directly or indirectly affectcommunication:

1. **cognitive distance (or epistemological or conceptual understanding)**
   It refers to how homogeneous students are among themselves, or between a student and teacher, with respect to conceptual understanding. The more cognitive distance there is, the more difficult it is for concept development through discussion

2. **contextual distance**
   It is defined here as the difference in learning or problem solving between the abstract situation presented to the student versus that found in an authenticsituation.

3.    culturaldistance(includingdifferencesinethnicity,class,age,genderor religion).    Persons have patterns of thought, action, and values that are distinctive and that characterize members of a social group.

4.    emotional distance

These are personal feelings at the moment regarding the learning experience such as fear, mistrust, andsuspicion.

5.    language distance

It  is expressed in the use of second or third languages for teaching or learning, accent, and the use of dialect, slang, jargon, colloquialisms, acronyms andabbreviation

6.    pedagogical distance

It   involves teachers and studentsmanaging transactional distance during the educational experiences

8.    physical distance (i.e., geographicalspace)

9.    psychological distance

It referred to perceptions (subjective feelings) about the closeness or presence of another person when interacting with thatperson.

10.    social distance (degree of affinity, closeness, or support)

It refers to perceived differences in class and socio-economicstatus

11.    technical distance

It refers to differences in access to technology or technological capabilities across various people throughout the world. It may also refer to different individual competency withtechnology.

12.    temporal distance (i.e., time)

The greater the grown of globalization in distance education, the more time zones that may and often are represented across the participants within a classroom

The difficulties that hinder effective communication may begin with technical issues, but as telecommunication systems improve, many other types of communication obstacles are added

The remainder of this paper discusses the hierarchy of communication barriers (breakdowns, challenges, drawbacks, impairments, impediments, obstacles, pitfalls, problems) as found in the distance education from the past three decades.

## BARRIERS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

1.    Physical, Technical, and Temporal BarriersIn the era of correspondence courses, the main challenges to distance education centered on lack of access to the instructor and lack of timely, two-way communication. Broadcast communication, with television or radio, helped to ameliorate the lack of access to instructors, but did nothing to increase two-waycommunication. Eventually, some two-way communication problems occurring within correspondence courses were ameliorated by using telephone service In general, problems that revolved around low levels of interaction led to a lack of motivation and the lack of enthusiasm for learning, often

causing students to drop out of the distance education course or program.

The Internet resolved many of the challenges experienced by students in correspondence and broadcast media based courses, albeit with the expected, large number of technical issues early on. The early days of the Internet saw a lot of frustration from participants due to such things as instability across the telecommunication systems, difficult user interfaces or navigational issues, and disjointed online communication inability to access needed resources and the existence of a user base with few online skills, combined with a lack of technical support.

2.      Psychological Barriers

Along with the access and technical problems with the delivery systems themselves, there were perceptual issues that were especially acute due to the initial lack of skilled online teachers and the background characteristics of students. Often students reported feeling confused, anxious or frustrated and wanted quicker feedback from the teacher regarding course content, assignments or management of the online class. Too frequently these feelings were met with an instructor who did not perceive the intensity of the students' sense of frustration, or did not adequately resolve the problems if they were perceived in the first place.

3.      Social, Interaction, and Collaboration Barriers

The change from an in-person, classroom venue to online communication is perceived by many students and instructors as a significant loss (of dedicated uninterrupted learning space), and the differences in how social interactions occur online versus in-person is of great concern.

For instance, difficulties communicating with others in online classes can happened because of time zone variations, the absence of a sense of emotional connection with each other, or the lack of the kind of real-time feedback that happens in an in-person classroom

Still, many participants in online distance education find social interaction can be enhanced through technology-mediation.

For most participants, in most cases, it is more difficult to create a similar sense of social presence and to avoid communication problems regarding social interactions online compared with doing so with the same participants in-person ,usually because technologically-mediated delivery systems do not allow the same amount of social-context cues.

4.   Cultural Barriers

As technologies used for distance education have advanced, often the participants' feelings of isolation and physical distance have decreased. At the same time, students from different locales and different cultures have increased, making communication and language barriers more of a problem. To most people collaboration, discussion, and communication generally becomes more difficult with persons perceived as strangers, or instructors from one culture teaching learners from a different culture.

Additionally, further cultural barriers are possible because of the environment known as cyberculture. Cyberculture as "constantly evolving and rapidly mutating characterized by an official

language of English, hyperspecialized vocabulary, and qualities of aggressiveness, competitiveness, as well as Western-style efficiency" .

**5.**      Contextual Barriers

Contextual issues affect problem solving in important ways. Increasing students' authentic problem-solving abilities has been, and will continue to be a critical goal for many instructional applications. While it is often important to simplify the contextual situation to reduce distractions and aid learning, this can lead to transfer problems when the situation becomes more authentic. Therefore, the "difference in context between the learning situation and the application situation can result to poor students' performance either because of their inability to efficiently recall and use relevant knowledge or even because of lack of any knowledge at all which could be of use in the different application context".

Performance support systems attempt to bridge this contextual distance when they provide immediate support for specific tasks in the workplace. Recently, mobile devices have exploded onto the scene for social networking, entertainment, but also for education and training.

IMPROVING COMMUNICATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

In some significant ways, communication in distance education is different from in- person, classroom-based communication. In the face-to-face classroom, there are multiple and instantaneous ways that communication between students and teacher,  and among students can occur. In school or out, participants are practiced throughout their lifetime with in-person communication. There are several design elements that are critical to any course, and moreso in distance education courses where communication opportunities are limited,including:

1.      providing clear statements about the goals of the course and the purpose of online activities andassignments

2.      providing navigation assistance so students know where course activities and resources are located and calendars so students know when, where, and how assignments are to besubmitted.

3.      clearly linking content, activities, and assignments to assessment and the coursegoals

4.      using clear, concise, unambiguous language in assignments, syllabus and postings

5.      using communication channels that students prefer when possible, to reduce cultural and communicationbarriers

6.      provide summaries, additional resources, and feedback to help students evaluate theirlearning.

7.      provide guidance on suitable group processes and appropriate division of labor

8.      Design some elements of the online classroom that promote students gaining some familiarity with one another.

For most students and teachers, anxiety levels are increased when they are involved in distance education, if for no other reason than the unfamiliarity of the delivery systems and changes in communication methods and patterns. It takes extra communication efforts, especially by the teacher, to

reduce the students' concerns that they are missing important information, assignment due dates, or generally misunderstanding expectations of the course.

Many times, what is needed are ways for students to contact the instructor and to receive a response in a timely manner. or opportunities for discussion or collaboration among participants that increases clarification and common understanding.

The relationships among participants are critical for successful online discussion and collaboration. At the same time, as with any educational setting whether online or in-person, each student has his or her own background, culture, and characteristics that affects their behavior and perceptions during the learning process .

The instructor and designers of online education can do all they can to design courses to remove as many potential cultural and communication barriers, but ultimately students will need to realize they too need to take responsibility for multicultural content and classmates so they can work on reducing barriers to their own full participation and performance.

CONCLUSIONS

From a communication perspective, simultaneously distance education offers many affordances and challenges. Technologies are used for distance delivery of education becomes easier, cheaper, globalized and more user-friendly, the more the challenges faced by the participants increase in complexity. These obstacles to education at a distance affect both actual communication and also disrupt how participants  perform and feel about their learning experience .As summarized above, there is a hierarchy to the communication impediments in distance education that have been categorized as technical, psychological, social, cultural, and contextual in nature. Without a doubt, these challenges often overlap one another, and the list promises to grow. Still, researching and diagnosing communication barriers can lead to significant clues to how to design and implement courses that reduce potential communicationproblems.

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