

## Distance in Economics Education: A Study of Factors

Hadi Ghaffari<sup>1</sup>, Ali Younessi<sup>2</sup>

1. Dept. of Social & Economic Sciences, Payame Noor University, Arak, Iran  
Email: [hghaffari2000@yahoo.com](mailto:hghaffari2000@yahoo.com)
2. Dept. of Social & Economic Sciences, Payame Noor University, Shazand, Iran.  
Email: [ali\\_younessi7@yahoo.com](mailto:ali_younessi7@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** In conventional face to face education, as far as teaching approaches are concerned everything is left up to the teacher concerned. Though the infrastructure is available the problem lies in its proper communication. In order to gauge the distance perceived across various aspects in the educational system, the researcher conducted the present study. After consulting the literature, nineteen factors were identified and an opinionnaire was accordingly prepared for teachers of Economics from the conventional face to face education. The nineteen factors and the teachers' opinion show how conventional educational system has not taken into consideration the communication aspects which would hamper overall performance of teachers as well as students. It has taken for granted that no communication distance can be present because of physical proximity between teacher and students and institution. Therefore there is a need to reconstruct the conventional curriculum taking into consideration the factors and compensate for them. To compensate for this distance, one can look towards the distance education mechanisms. The face-to-face education has thus a number of lessons to learn from distance education. In distance education, distance is presumed and attempts are made to create devices to compensate for it. As this study has showed, there is no reason to believe that the face-to-face education does not have any communication distance. It is a rather serious matter that most of the teachers in the face-to-face system perceive a communication distance.

[Hadi Ghaffari, Ali Younessi. Distance in Economics Education: A Study of Factors. Journal of American Science 2011;7(6):272-276]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.americanscience.org>.

**Keywords:** Economics, Distance Education, Conventional Education, Communication Distance.

### 1. Introduction

As a teacher for the last 15 years in conventional face to face education the researcher realized that the students failed to do the given homework. Even after face to face teaching sessions the percentage of failure is high (Meyer, 2003). During oral examinations it is found that students are not able to analyse or synthesise the prescribed text material (Twigg, 2003). Also there is system present which will give guidelines as to how to carry on evaluation. Also the system of feedback is not present in conventional educational system. As far as teaching approaches are concerned everything is left up to the teacher concerned. Though the infrastructure is available the problem lies in its proper communication (Johnson et al. 2002). In order to gauge the distance perceived across various aspects in the educational system, the researcher conducted the present study. Distance education (DE) theory and practices are based on the principles of how to achieve communication in an otherwise physically distanced learner (Reiboldt, 2001). Hence help was sought from DE discipline to locate the factors which could be leading to communication distance in face to face education (Aycock et al. 2002).

### Techniques of Distance Education System

Distance Education System is a non traditional system of education. It imparts education through innovative and modern techniques. Self instructional material, radio, television, audio and video cassettes, computer and satellite are some of the means through which distance education is imparted. Teleconferencing, radio paging, satellite communication and group telephone tutorials are new watchwords for interactive communication.

### Differences between Face-to-Face and Distance Education Systems

There are many merits of distance education system which are reflected in the growth and diversification of the system. These are as follows:

1. It provides a second chance to those who have missed the opportunities of higher education, in their early years due to some reason or the other;
2. It helps in extending education to people at large and in equalizing educational opportunities;
3. It can provide instruction to those living in remote areas where formal education opportunities are scarce;
4. It offers a vast scope for innovations in teaching methods, provides scope for variety of subjects and inter-disciplinary options;

5. It is highly economical compared to formal system;
6. It is flexible and enables the learner to learn at his own place, pace and time;
7. It enables the workers to acquire knowledge, skills and capabilities without drawing them from work place i.e. it facilitates professional competence and earning while learning;
8. The institutions can ensure proper organization of instruction and motivate learners to evolve a careful study programme;
9. It involves all media of technology such as the radio, TV, audio cassettes and video tapes to supplement the print media;
10. It helps the individuals to utilize their leisure time for educational purposes;
11. It helps those who are interested in pursuing advanced studies in the subject of their interest;
12. It provides education for all irrespective of disparities-social, cultural and economic;
13. It is accessible to potential students regardless of their formal qualifications; and
14. It overcomes the disadvantages of private study where no instruction is available to the students.

## 2. Materials and Methods

After consulting Holmberg (1981), Moore (1973), Wedemeyer (1977), Thorpe (1989) and Ramiszowski (1984); nineteen factors were identified and an opinionnaire was accordingly prepared for teachers of Economics from the conventional face to face education (Appendix 1). The prepared opinionnaire was initially given to five experts from conventional and open education, to pretest if the opinionnaire was transparent enough for expressing opinions. After incorporating necessary changes, a pilot study was carried out to validate the opinionnaire. A three point scale was used. While preparing the opinionnaire statements due care was taken to ensure that a casual and less serious respondent did not provide misleading data. Thus only statements which needed careful rendering and reading were included.

Teachers of economics are choose from the universities in the provinces of Tehran, Isfahan, Fars, Markazi, Hamedan and Semnan including: Tehran University, Payame Noor University, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan University, Shiraz University, Boo Ali Sina University and Shahrood University of Technology.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The main point of interest in the study is to find out which factors contribute to the communication distance. The opinions of the teachers were therefore grouped into the 19 factors pre-defined from a survey of DE literature. We now discuss the impact of each

of these factors on the perceived communication distance. Before giving the results for each factor, an explanation of the factors, has been given, as understood by the DE theoreticians and practitioners.

### 1. Document Clarity

Documents provided by the university to the teachers and the students are limited to syllabus statements. Syllabus has inherent lacunae such as it is unclear, ambiguous, vague and provides insufficient information. These documents do not provide aims and objectives of study in terms interpretable by the teachers and learners. So there remains a vast scope for misunderstanding and misinterpretation. The view with which the syllabus makers have prepared the document should be clearly communicated to the students. The channel for this communication is the documents. Therefore document clarity is of utmost importance to achieve this transparency.

More than 50% of teachers did not find syllabus statements sufficiently clear to tell them what to teach.

### 2. Time Frame

It is generally wrongly assumed that face to face education offers ample amount of time for face to face contact. In actuality however, the time is generally limited to forty hours of teaching for each prescribed course. While deciding that this time is optimum, only administrative criterion has been applied. It is clear that this time is insufficient, since many teachers are seen engaged in taking 'extra' classes.

Only 15% teachers found that the time frame given by the university to complete the syllabus to be enough. About 50% of them have to conduct extra classes to complete the portion. However, almost all of them found the time given for the practical to be sufficient.

### 3. Statement of Objectives

In the conventional system of Economics education, it is assumed that objectives are generally known to all those who are part of the system. It is also assumed that a student need not really know the objectives, since it is the responsibility of teachers to take the necessary steps to achieve learning.

Both these assumptions are dangerous. This lack of direction directly hampers their progress of learning. Because of the lack of a clear statement of objectives, an Economics teacher is not able to perceive the course as a whole, but sees it in bits and pieces. Such type of lack of continuity creates a feeling of distance in the mind of the Economics teacher.

### 4. Self-Study

Economics teachers do give homework to students as was revealed in their responses to the opinionnaire. However how to go about it is generally not described. There is no study guide incorporating how to develop study skills.

Almost all the teachers expected their students to do any homework.

### **5. Textbook**

The textbooks which are recommended by the Economics teacher to the students are generally those which are written in accordance with the syllabus prepared by the university. There is no prescription of books directly from the Board of Economics Studies of the university. The prescribed textbooks generally do not provide study aims, lack proper organisation and structure.

About 25% of the teachers did not find the language used in the textbook student friendly. 75% of them realized the need to present textbooks in different manner. About half of them felt that students are not able to understand from the textbook to a certain extent and they felt that the textbook is not correct for the level of students. Nobody agreed that the textbook is rich in content and is significant.

### **6. Learner Autonomy**

Here we mean that the learner has to have a wide variety of subjects to choose from. It has been found that most undergraduate Economics colleges offer a typical Economics-Management-Accounting-Mathematics-Statistics subject combination and later specialisation in one of the subjects. A few colleges offer Economic Development and Econometrics as specialization. Even if a student wants a slightly different combination, it is generally not available for administrative reasons. This may create a feeling of distance in students as his individuality is not recognized.

There was unanimous dissatisfaction among the teachers regarding the lack of variety of subjects for the students to choose from.

### **7. Layout**

This factor is associated with most of the teaching colleges. Layout aspects do lead to disturbance and can lead to communication distance despite the physical proximity between the learner and the teacher.

About 50% of teachers had problems with the layout of the class.

### **8. Teacher Personality**

Despite the presence or absence of the above factors, the type of teacher personality will affect the

communication in the classroom. A teacher with a certain type of personality can either greatly reduce or increase the communication distance in the setting.

About 50% of the teachers felt that students' understanding depends on the type of teacher personality.

### **9. Language**

Most of the school Economics education is done through verbal medium. Language thus plays an important role in creating or reducing the communication distance. The fact of English being the medium of science education at undergraduate level is thought about too often. The crux of the problem could actually lie in the use of a comprehensible language.

Half of the sample felt that the language of communication does create a communication gap as far as students are concerned.

### **10. Interaction**

The classrooms generally follow the lecture method, sometimes leaving some scope for occasional questioning and seeking clarifications from the students. This lack of interaction adds to the communication distance.

Owing to the individuality of the students 15% of the teachers did not find the problem of academic communication among students. About 75% were not satisfied regarding the amount of academic interaction among the students. Everybody wanted an increased amount of interaction between teacher and students in classroom. 75% of them felt that the system does not provide sufficient time for teacher-student contact.

### **11. Student Pace**

A teacher generally tries to complete the course in the given forty hours of time. On very few occasions he has time to match the student's pace learning. Changing the mode and method of teaching according to the feedback received in the classroom is very necessary to reduce the communication distance. However, around 60% of teachers admitted that they do not accommodate any such change in their teaching behavior.

### **12. Teacher Accessibility**

It is very well known that in the conventional system of education the teachers' vacations frequently coincide with the examinations of the students. At these crucial times, therefore, the teacher's time is not available to the students.

In case of 60% of teachers the time required to be spent by the teacher on extra-curricular activities affected the teaching schedule.

### 13. Student Individuality

Student personalities differ and they definitely affect the communication distance present in the educational setting.

80% of the teachers found that the number of students working on a computer was a bit too large, while 70% of them found that the number of students in the class was too large.

### 14. Facilities

Learners need reading rooms, private space in libraries, discussion rooms and a resource centre. It is however questionable how many institutions really plan to build such resources.

For about 50% of teachers facilities were not available as and when needed.

### 15. Library

The textbooks and reference books available are not present in the required numbers. One reason could also be the lack of space. For 80% of teachers audio-videos are not readily available for teaching activity. 60% voiced the opinion that references books are not available in sufficient number for the students.

### 16. Examination System

Confidentiality in this system generally takes over the academic and instructional principles. Very little thought has been given to techniques like Open Book Examinations which encourage more creative and evaluative thinking on the part of the students.

75% of the teachers felt that the weightage given to the final examination is inadequate. However, 50% of them were of the opinion that the examination system is in contradiction with the aims and objectives of teaching science.

### 17. Question Papers

The format of the question papers is seldom communicated to the students. The students as well as the teachers are therefore generally not aware of the behaviors and skills expected of the learner during the examinations. The question papers themselves are never communicative. Culturally, it is generally believed that a question paper has to be written in minimum words and should be as terse as possible. The paper setters generally shy away from giving explanations and necessary help in the question paper itself. A student therefore may perform poorly not for want of knowledge or skills, but for his misunderstanding of the question. Instructions given to the students at the beginning of the question paper are also vague, unclear and written in a difficult language.

More than half the sample were not sure of the validity of questions posed in the examination.

### 18. Evaluation Methods and Techniques

The way a process or content is evaluated will affect the way teaching is conducted. If the evaluation systems demand less communication and more recall of facts, this will affect the teaching-learning processes and these processes will not give much importance to communication.

More than 90% of teachers agreed that when teachers evaluate answer sheets he does not have guidelines for it. Therefore marks given by two teachers may not match.

### 19. Feedback Comments

There is no system to provide feedback to the students from the university. Similarly, there is a need to provide a corrective, constructive and meaningful feedback to the learner when the teacher assessed their written work. It is however generally found that the feedback comments consist of marks on the work of the learner, that seldom make any sense to him.

Almost all of them agreed to that there is no corrective feedback after examination, and students do not realize where they had gone wrong.

### 4. Conclusion

The nineteen factors discussed above and the teachers' opinion show how conventional educational system has not taken into consideration the communication aspects which would hamper overall performance of teachers as well as students. It has taken for granted that no communication distance can be present because of physical proximity between teacher and students and institution. Therefore there is a need to reconstruct the conventional curriculum taking into consideration the above factors and compensate for them.

To compensate for this distance, one can look towards the distance education mechanisms. The face-to-face education has thus a number of lessons to learn from distance education. In distance education, distance is presumed and attempts are made to create devices to compensate for it. As this study has showed, there is no reason to believe that the face-to-face education does not have any communication distance. It is a rather serious matter that most of the teachers in the face-to-face system perceive a communication distance.

### Corresponding Author:

Dr. Hadi Ghaffari  
Department of Social & Economic Sciences,  
Payame Noor University,

P.O. Box 38135-1136, Arak, Iran  
E-mail: [hghaffari2000@yahoo.com](mailto:hghaffari2000@yahoo.com)

### References

1. Aycock A, Garnham C and Kaleta R (2002). Lessons Learned from the Hybrid Course Project. *Teaching with Technology Today* 8(6). Retrieved October 3, 2006, from <http://www.uwsa.edu/ttt/articles/granham2.htm>.
2. Holmberg B (1981). *Status and Trends of Distance Education*. London: Kogan Page.
3. Johnson D, Burnett M and Rolling P (2002). Comparison of Internet and Traditional Classroom Instruction in a Consumer Economics Course. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences Education* 20(2): 20-28.
4. Meyer KA (2003). Face-to-Face Versus Threaded Discussions: the role of time and higher-order thinking. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. 7(3): 55-65.
5. Moore MG (1973). *Towards a Theory of Independent Learning and Teaching*. *Journal of Higher Education*. 44 (3): 661-679.
6. Reiboldt W (2001). Distance Education: A Place for Family and Consumer Sciences. *Journal of Family & Consumer Sciences Education* 19(1): 15-22.
7. Romiszowski AJ (1984). *Producing Instructional Systems*. London: Kogan Page.
8. Thorpe M (1989). *Evaluating Open and Distance Learning*. London: Longman.
9. Twigg CA (2003). Program in Course Redesign. National Centre for Academic Transformation. Retrieved October 3, 2006, from <http://thencat.org/PCR.htm>.
10. Wedemeyer CA (1977). 'Independent study' in A.S. Knowles (Ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education*. Boston: CIHED5: 2114-2132.

Submission Date: 13 May 2011