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Philosophical and Design Imperatives

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## From Distance Education to e Learning Philosophical and Design Imperatives

The primary focus of this paper is twofold. The advent of the Open Learning philosophy and distance education models in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century spelt a major 'paradigm shift' in the socio cultural and economic connotations of education. At present, the concept 'life long learning' has spawned a variation: 'cost effective', 'just in time' learning opportunities at the workplace through e learning models.

The question is: from the perspective of pedagogy and instructional materials design, what has changed since 'stepping out in the open' from the campus-based instructional model?

Distance education addresses the conceptual framework of 'life long learning' through

- Openness (in terms of access)
- Flexibility (in terms of time, learning pace/style).

In order to achieve this end, a systemic approach to curricular and instructional materials design was adopted resulting in 'self-instructional materials' which provided both the learning content and the intervention of a teacher (as in a classroom) in an integrated package. Media selection and integration issues in design thus became relevant to the efficacy of instructional transactions and the static 'acquisition' model of learning gave way to a complex learning environment where the teacher, the materials and the learners negotiated the 'learning curve' together. The narrative structure, however, was not completely non linear in this context. The popular media mix of this time (print, audio and video forms) does not demand it. More importantly the linear narrative structure is a logical imperative in most instructional situations.

Two questions arise at this point : Is e learning a sub set of the Open Learning philosophy? How does it address the paradox of non-linearity in design and absolute learner autonomy with instructional efficacy? As a corollary, what prompted this change in design principles?

The background to this context lies in the developments in the domain of Information and Communication Technologies in general and the hypertext structure (of the Worldwide Web) in particular. The advent of the Internet has replaced the rule-based logical structure of application design (including most expert systems) with the associative logic of natural human reasoning. This has enabled instructional designers to create information –rich and tool-rich learning environments and the learners to study a problem/concept many times from many angles at varying paces.

As a medium, e learning has already proved a high success rate in implementing problem-based learning in diverse formats – from multi media rich simulations to simple text-based or case based application exercises and game lets.

Another major milestone brought in by the characteristic of the technology comprises the issues of

- Reusability and
- Modularity

While one is an economic imperative, the other is a design principle inherited from the object-oriented approach to application development. In effect, this has resulted in greater non-linearity in the overall design of a resource and granular narrative structures.

In sum, e learning as it is emerging today, is certainly a logical successor to and a derivative of the single mode distance education model. The composite structure of e learning includes the philosophical foundations of Open Learning and the design principles of IT application development.