DISTANCE LEARNING - VISIONS, CHALLENGES AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT:

With distance education in many disciplines increasingly moving from the 'experimental and fringe' stages towards a more established existence as a mainstream option in the mix of educational offerings available to students, the author discusses experiences from the worldwide UNIGIS program, from EU-sponsored joint curriculum development programs and from various outreach initiatives addressing very diverse student audiences.

While (nearly) pervasive access to online learning opportunities is greatly improving the accessibility of education, several critical factors will be addressed in this presentation:

(1) Differentiate target groups: distance education is of particular importance to non-traditional target groups like in-service professionals, expatriates and mobile learners etc., but also students of institutions in peripheral locations. Prior knowledge, learning cultures etc compound the variety of educational situations distance teachers are confronted with.
(2) Establish online learning environments: learning platforms today offer a wide range of content management and access as well as communication facilities. Matching these with pedagogical paradigms, learning strategies and the target group's constraints is mandatory.
(3) Develop a communication strategy: learning should be considered a social activity, it is helpful for most learner types when the 'social fabric' of a class is re-created online. As a challenge to ourselves: 'communication is more important than content' - ?
(4) Schedule for success: particularly in part-time distance education, completion rates sometimes leave much to be desired. Supporting students in their balance of job, family, social live and learning is a critical factor for reaching graduation.
(5) Virtual universities for real-life qualifications: the traditional model of distance learning originated from a highly centralized framework, and currently is evolving towards a distributed model challenging the management of educational institutions.
(6) International education: students' expectations, backgrounds, prior skills and knowledge, emphasis on education, teacher-student relationship and many other factors differ substantially worldwide. International distance learning programs thus face particular challenges.
(7) Quality management: especially when reaching out to international audiences, traditional institutional educational QA needs to be enhanced by measures addressing the operational and management characteristics of distributed education.

Like in many other areas, it seems that in education the only constant is change as well. Transferring experiences, assumptions, organizations and mindsets from a centuries-old academic education framework towards a fully connected information and knowledge society requires some innovative thinking, courageous experimentation, and a lot of learning by all teachers.