Leadership and Distance Learning: A Demand for Quality Education

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Abstract

The paper investigates the Leadership qualities and open learning demands for distance educators. This is demanding study of quality Distance Education for the Leaders. This article is related to the open learners changes from nontraditional to a more heterogeneous community of learners, making it more difficult for teachers to use traditional standardized methods of teaching. This article helps in understanding the factors that affect the learning and teaching environment for online learners and how the instructors can adapt to individual learner’s needs.

It is a review study so data and information was collected through literature relevant to distance education, leadership in education and quality education. Data was collected by book reading, net searching.

**Keywords:** distance education, higher education, distance learners, Internet, leaders, leadership, technology,
Objectives:

- Discuss and evaluate scholarly literature related to distance learning and leadership;
- Assess the need of leading quality education for millennium generation.

Introduction

It is known that higher education including open and distance learning, is a tool of community and economic revolution. It is vital source of HRD all over the world. It is hard to specifically choose what constitutes the quality of education. Different people have different perspectives about the quality. There are two aspects of quality in the learning perspective, firstly quality of the system as a whole and secondly quality of what the system offers to the learners.

In relation to formal education quality covers different components of face-to-face teaching like the infrastructure and basic facilities, social & geographical environment, professional aptitude in teaching, administrative and finance staff, suitability and significance of the curriculum, teaching-learning materials, teaching and learning processes, community support to the institution, performance evaluation of the teachers, students and the entire system. though, ODL is different from formal education. The profile of the distance learner has different profil: their main objective of higher education through the distance mode of education os always different from the 17-23 age-group of other formal students.

Quality in Education

Quality is often defined as “embracing effectiveness, efficiency and accountability.

These terms, however, have connotations with terms used in trade, commerce and industry” (www.openpraxis.com). Education has much different every element, in particular, within
“input, process and output”. Education is no more but a pure effort to become “learned”. It is a way to flourish in personal life and acquire higher living values.

It shows needs and desires of the beneficiaries. Therefore excellence in higher education is defined as “fitness for the purpose”. But this is somewhat an elusive criterion. There is group quality in education as a mixture of:

- extraordinary high values
- excellence and uniformity
- strength for idea
- worth for capital, and
- revolutional potentials

Use of Quality in ODL

Open learning removes barriers in access like “admission pre-requisites, physical attendance at a particular place and time, possession of prescribed equipment, books, journals, and so on. Distance learning means that the learners are physically separated in space and time from the teaching institution and its staff” (www.openpraxis.com).

An extraordinary quality of ODL is the application of well-tried ideology of allotment of industry and specialization working more methodically and self consciously, than in the conventional system. The five areas of quality concerns need to be dynamically applied to the following elements of ODL to guarantee that no element lacks the probable degree of quality:

- Curriculum design, content and organization
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student progression and assessment
- Student support and guidance
The quality education has a three approaches, internal quality assurance mechanism; evaluation by peers; and accreditation by an independent and competent organization. A good and serious ODL institution will ensure that the three-pronged approach is adopted to guarantee the best quality in all the aspects of distance learning.

The concept of quality is difficult. But in the ODL system, quality shows achievement of the probable levels of knowledge and skills which are tools for further learning by actual work experience necessary for managing the learner’s personal and social transaction in day-to-day life. This quality is to be attained by all distance learners, in a given time-frame.

It is not easy to define quality in relation to education. There are two aspects of quality in education: Quality of the system as a unit and quality of the system, offers to the learners.

The current development in distance learners has as well led to more articles and documents being written about the leadership of distance education. The International Center for Distance Learning (ICDL) Distance Education Library and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) only control hundreds of such documents. the majority of these documents, though, examine distance education policy, institution management, student support systems and student administration relevant to the first three generations of distance education delivery models [correspondence, multimedia and tele-learning]. Surprisingly, little appears to have been written about the academic leadership associated with distance education. I share the opinion that leadership in distance learning needs to be further examined. I also think that leadership in distance learning is very important.

Beaudoin (2002), in his essay - "Distance education leadership: An essential role for a new century," argues for the research and examination of the specific type of leadership needed in distance education leadership. Beaudoin (2002) states, "a reasonable amount of attention has
been given to the planning and administration of distance education for quite some time (138).” Beaudoin (2002) goes on, however, to state that this might be considered adequate enough without discussing the more esoteric domain of leadership (138).

Lee (2001) agrees, stating,

“although the organizational behavior theorists and researchers have investigated perceived organizational support in many different organizational environments, higher education institutions have rarely been examined. Yet, no studies have investigated the perceptions of faculty with regard to instructional support, and whether their perceived organizational support has a relationship to faculty motivation, commitment, and satisfaction in relation to distance technology” (www.associatedcontent.com).

According to Beaudoin (2002), "leadership is not widely recognized as distance education has been based both on traditional education leadership and business/industry leadership." Pahal (1999) agrees with Beaudoin (2002), stating, "IT leadership requires many of the characteristics common to all leaders, but also requires special abilities and insights into technology's impact."

The lack of specific distance education leadership might be due, as Beaudoin states, to the fact that some do not see distance education as different from traditional education in terms of leadership (138). Beaudoin (2002) disagrees with these "some," as he states on page 135, as traditional and distance education institutions converge, leaders who have been dealing with discreet programs identified with their institutions where proprietary lines between programs and students are merging, and participants shift among multiple formal and informal learning venues. It all argues that bold and creative leadership is required to manage as well as evaluate these emerging new structures, driven in large measure by networking technology.
Pahal also notes the vagueness of what a leader is; "some people see the leader as a motivator, while others define a leader as one having extraordinary vision and decision-making power."

Beaudoin (2002) points out some specific characteristics that distance education leader needs (p. 132), (1) create conditions for innovative change, (2) enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and (3) contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas. While these traits are implicit in transformational leadership, the method of applying and utilizing them is unique for the distance education leader. Leaders do not appear overnight. An effective leader will be able to foster change and be able to move large numbers of staff in the same positive direction. Leaders in traditional academia and online academia share equal responsibility.

However, the distance education leader also needs, according to Beaudoin (2002), to be a situational leader, one who can diagnose the organization at a specific moment and determine the readiness of the organization or its stakeholders for change (p. 140). Pahal (1999) agrees, stating, "The IT leader must be a self-achiever and should be motivated to become a proactive leader and role model. Changes in technology often produce a ‘chaos situation’ where change management in the use of instructional technology in teaching and learning becomes increasingly important. The IT leader must be ready to embrace that change." Human factors require as much or more planning than technical design to enlist user acceptance and create a sustained use of the application.

The introduction of distance learning by an influential person prior to use is important for adoption and successful implementation. By being aware of change, and open to change, the leader in distance education is more likely to (1) recognize a need for change at any given
moment, (2) acknowledge the probable reactions of the constituents towards change, and (3) react appropriately to the responses to the proposed changes.

Table 1  Comparison of Categories and Authors' Descriptions: Examples of categories cited in literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership Categories</th>
<th>American Council on Education</th>
<th>Bates</th>
<th>Kovel Jarboe</th>
<th>Lape and Hart</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Policies incorporate needs of distance education</td>
<td>Leadership, vision and planning (New technology is accompanied by major change). Management (Administrative and academic policies).</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
<td>Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>Factors leading to adoption of distance education &amp; technologies; identify barriers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational and instructional changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation</td>
<td>Overall mission compatible with provider</td>
<td>Curriculum (Use of technology embedded with wider strategy for teaching/learning)</td>
<td>Governance, mission, and programs</td>
<td>Mission and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum issues, changes in teaching/learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Financial and administrative commitment</td>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>Financial Infrastructure</td>
<td>Costs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Administrative and support systems compatible with delivery systems</td>
<td>Faculty support</td>
<td>Student Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Table 2: Distance Education Teacher as a Leader Model*
Additionally, a leader in distance education needs to use systemic leadership. According to Lee, "Leadership also involves creating steppingstones that bridge from a desired future to the current gridlock typical of many American schools. In evolving from its present state to a distant objective, an educational institution must progress stage by stage. Each step of evolution requires a critical mass of resources and must create a stable, desirable situation."

Leadership has been described as the “process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”.( Chemers M. (1997)

Leadership is "organizing a group of people to achieve a common goal". The leader may or may not have any formal authority. Students of leadership have produced theories involving traits,( Locke et al. 1991) situational interaction, function, behavior, power, vision and values, (Richards & Engle, 1986, p.206) charisma, and intelligence, among others.

According to Lance Secretan, Industry Week, 10/12/98 ,“Leadership is not so much about technique and methods as it is about opening the heart. Leadership is about inspiration—of oneself and of others. Great leadership is about human experiences, not processes. Leadership is
not a formula or a program, it is a human activity that comes from the heart and considers the hearts of others. It is an attitude, not a routine”.

Peter F. Drucker explains, “Leadership is not magnetic personality—that can just as well be a glib tongue. It is not "making friends and influencing people"—that is flattery. Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.” whereas John F. Kennedy said, “Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.” and in Manual on military leadership is stated that Good leaders develop through a never-ending process of self-study, education, training, and experience.

New methods and measurements were developed after these influential reviews that would ultimately reestablish the trait theory as a viable approach to the study of leadership. For example, improvements in researchers' use of the round robin research design methodology allowed researchers to see that individuals can and do emerge as leaders across a variety of situations and tasks. (Kenny, D.A. & Zaccaro, S.J. (1983). Additionally, during the 1980s statistical advances allowed researchers to conduct meta-analyses, in which they could quantitatively analyze and summarize the findings from a wide array of studies. This advent allowed trait theorists to create a comprehensive and parsimonious picture of previous leadership research rather than rely on the qualitative reviews of the past. Equipped with new methods, leadership researchers revealed the following:
• Individuals can and do emerge as leaders across a variety of situations and tasks. (Kenny, D.A. & Zaccaro, S.J. (1983))

• Significant relationships exist between leadership and such individual traits as:
  
  o Aptitude
  o Adjustment
  o Extraversion
  o Conscientiousness
  o Openness to experience
  o General self-efficacy

While the trait theory of leadership has certainly regained popularity, its reemergence has not been accompanied by a corresponding increase in sophisticated conceptual frameworks.

Specifically, Zaccaro (2007) noted that trait theories still:

1. “focus on a small set of individual attributes such as Big Five personality traits, to the neglect of cognitive abilities, motives, values, social skills, expertise, and problem-solving skills;

2. fail to consider patterns or integrations of multiple attributes;

3. do not distinguish between those leader attributes that are generally not malleable over time and those that are shaped by, and bound to, situational influences;

4. do not consider how stable leader attributes account for the behavioral diversity necessary for effective leadership”.
As technology-enhanced distance education gains greater acceptance, it will gain stature as a distinct entity that represents high quality education, providing opportunities to students no matter where they are located. Tichy (1986, p. 4) wrote: “Transforming an organization also requires a new vision, new frames for thinking about strategy, structure, and people. While some... can start with a clean slate, transformational leaders must begin with what is already in place.” As they transition from the old leadership paradigm toward a new vision, incorporating newer technologies and creating the structures, policies and other supports for viable distance education programs, this is the role that transformational leaders must play in today’s colleges and universities.

Summary

In summary, the question of what a distance education leader are, the characteristics of such, the requirements of such, and the actions of an effective distance education leader still have not been adequately defined by the current research. There is still a long way to go before an adequate definition of these aspects of an effective distance education leader will be reached. It is hoped, through this case assignment, to bring the insights of various researchers together into one place to help future distance education leaders to best fulfill the still unstated requirements of their positions.
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