The Evaluation of Students' Perceptions of Distance Education

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Abstract

Distance Education provides the technological improvement effect on education. With the developments of high technology and globalization, social, cultural, educational aspects of life become different and get better in terms of time space and communication. In the educational field, classical learning and teaching techniques can not be effective without technology and time, space limitations. Distance Education provides fast, easy education opportunities for everyone without concentrating time, distance, and space limitations.

There are huge tendencies from students for participating in distance education to live the sense of self-development, achievement and responsibility. Whatever there are some kind of problems within distance education, it is good concern to evaluate what students perceptions are toward distance education in our context in order to calculate common interpretations around the world for popular education style as distance education.

Introduction

In order to conclude the perceptions' of students toward distance education, it's necessary to know what distance education is. Distance Education refers interactive, educational process between two people, student and teacher, separated by physical distance (Harry, et al., 1993, p.32). What it means that distance education provides equal opportunities to learner and reduce the distance among communicators for global, competitive learning environments among the countries. Distance education becomes popular among the developed countries. But its applications are so new for developing countries like Turkey and TRNC. In order to create effective distance education system, it should be known what are the perceptions of students and their roles as communicators based on the study of literature reviews.

Distance Education can be done as telecommunicating, audio conferencing, email, and functions. There is a two-way communication between teacher and student as well (Isman, 1999). Through this communication process, students have active role in distance education according to compare with traditional classroom environment. Computer Aided learning, computer managed Instruction and Computer Conferencing are the three applications of distance education. Computer Managed instruction is management that provide administration of learning process and Computer Aided learning includes software applications to make students learn through pre-structured and programmed materials. Computer Conferencing requires electronic network that enables individuals to communicate (Clark, 2001). Through the system organization, distance education provides self-learning, responsibility on learning and achievement. There is a communication between learner and instructor. Through the technological like Internet, Distance Education can be different from classical learning atmosphere and overcame the time, space, distance. Whatever the interactivity is difficult in communication through the distance education, fast, easy, global context without any time, space, and distance difficulty can be carried to education. It's important to define our context's perceptions of students according to gender, demographic, psychographic considerations.

Holmberg (1995) handled guided for didactic conversation between teacher and student as important characteristics of distance education;

1. Those feelings of personal relation between the teaching and learning parties promote study pleasure and motivation.
2. That such feelings can be fostered by well-developed self-instructional material and two-way communication at a distance.
3. That intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favorable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods.
4. That the atmosphere, language and conventions of friendly conversation favor feelings of personal relation.
5. Those messages given and received in conversational forms are comparatively easily understood and remembered.
6. That the conversation concept can be successfully translated, for use by media available, to distance education.

7. That planning and guiding the work, whether provided by the teaching organization or the student, are necessary for organized study, which is characterized by explicit or implicit goal conceptions (Holmberg, 1995, p.47).

Students' perceptions that is main concern to set the roles of the students through knowing interaction of them with teachers. Distance Education requires interaction between teacher and student through their technical, academically, personal roles to implement technology based communication and distance education offers an opportunity for educator to extend their academic offerings to new students and address the issue of equal educational standards. Everyone has also opportunity to consult the uses of this kind of education. Students become more self-realized, responsible on their training and learning. Distance Education is activity that embraces whole of the student activity, responsibility and willingness for getting, asking for the related questions, answers. Distance Learning or Education is both system and a process that connects learners with distributed resources. Educators' role become only just as facilitator while the student involve active learning in the form of constructivism. Distance Education provides opportunity for the student to interact with teacher as soon as he/she encounters need for this interaction. As a learning environment; there is positive correlation between students' perceptions of instructor immediacy of response with students with affective learning. Going distance education for the active learners takes planning and the understanding of available interactive distance learning possibilities (Notar, et al., 2002).

Today's there should be challenge of being traditional classroom and propose virtual classroom. Distance Education use telecommunicating, audio conferencing and asynchronous learning networks. Learners use computers and communications technologies. Interaction among learners also supports the learning process (Rovia, 2002).

Aim of the Research
As it was mentioned before; technology changes the living styles and tendencies of people toward social, communicational, economical, educational aspects. People need to reach information or any resources fast, and easy. In addition to this; they need to exchange and share resources in on informational base. Through the help of technology, today it is very easy to reach information, and share with others with the help of the information technology like Internet connection.

Distance Education is also the useful alternative to educational fields. It can eliminate time, distance and obstacles for opportunities to everyone who have willingness to be educated and develop him or herself. As we know that distance education is the technology based education alternative which provides easy, fast access to resources, eliminate distance and self-responsibility of learning, home atmosphere environment.

It's inevitable that there are some problems like finance, communication and organization. Especially in organization, it's very important to define the technical, educational personnel that facilitate the education environments. Finance of the distance education is also problematic for developing countries that they face with distance education programs. Distance Education environment is the group work without only concentrating gender and receiver communication. It can be done as telecommunicating, audio conferencing or email. It's discussible how effectively receiver or sender do communication, but both of them can be used to deliver information without distance limitation. People who have roles in distance education like students, teacher, designer groups, and directors. Students are main concern which facilitate active role of communication. Teacher has role to guide students. Designer groups are the real establishers of process as technology facilitators. Directors are people who plan and implement education process.

Learner-context interaction, Learner-instructor interaction, Learner-learner instructions are the three types of interaction, students' attitudes and perceptions require the concrete attitudes toward distance education because of being active participant (Harry, et al., 1993). With the effect of constructivist view, students get the major role of learning-teaching process. Technology facilitate to create student-centered, self-responsibility on learning, distance education is the main concern to apply constructivist learning approach to education with providing learner for experiencing reality on owns learning and directing deliver of information according to their needs, interests, and expectations. Distance Education with the effect of constructivist view; change the role of the students and teachers from the classical learning process. The important change or impact is the technology and distance. In addition to this, not requiring immediate feedback is also the advantage to reconstruct personal understanding and reflections through the learning-teaching process in distance education. As it was mentioned, student has active role on learning while instructor becomes only the counselors, facilitators. If the students are the main indicators of learning and distance education, it's important to determine what the students' perceptions are toward distance education for catching effective, global aspects, developments of distance education. The

aim of the research is to define students' perceptions toward distance education for the reflective attributes to the effective distance education.

Importance of Research

It's important to take consideration of communication between communicators and active role of students within distance education. It's very useful to determine what students perceive abut system, barriers and roles, the whole of the process as a livers of the process for attributing the effectiveness of this kind of education.

Distance Education is the process that educators, organizer of technical and administrative level, students actively involve to create meaningful learning teaching like in the comfort of home atmosphere. In the global, competitive world standard, every developed or even developing country competes to bring more educated citizens in their context. With this tendencies of being more educated, distance education become the alternative aspects of education that facilitate elimination of time, space, distance, equal opportunity for all individuals, home atmosphere learning and constructivist reflection on meaningful learning in the base of education.

With all advantages of learning styles, distance education requires some kind of communication, finance and organization barriers different from the classical learning. If the all attention and evaluation turn to the perceptions of students toward distance education, it's inevitable to conclude the reflections about the effectiveness of process. While the teachers are facilitators, students have active role in teaching, learning process with controlling instruction according to their needs, interest and expectations.

Under the constructivist learning approach, students experience the reality; catch the self-developments, understanding within the self-responsibility through the support of technology with distance education. If the main concern is the students and their perceptions there should be the goal of learning learner autonomy to make students as self-directed, motivated and evaluative under the constructivist view. Learner autonomy requires learner participation on their learning objectives, implementation of their programs study and evaluation (Moore, et al., 1996). It's important to determine what student's perceptions are toward distance education in developing countries like our context, in order to provide active reflections, interpretation about distance-learning effectiveness and tendencies to apply e learning. Because students are main indicators that they are active learner which distance education facilitate flexible, student-centered, easy, fast delivering information out of time, distance limitations.

Related Researches

There are some related researches on communication barriers in distance education, some of them are summarized as below:

Ludlow, et al., (1998) examined what distance education is for understanding the interaction between instructor and learner which are the heart of education. According to article; distance education focus on learning as a self-directed, active and collaborative process view the instructor as a facilitator or guide rather than transmitter of knowledge. Distance education provides both instructors and learners with powerful tools for locating resources in digital "schools without walls". These new model of contemporary education require knowing perceptions of active participants in order to develop effective distance education.

Frost (1998) indicated that distance education is gaining in influence throughout the world. With evolving of technology that modern post industrial societies are developing. Distance education is the tremendous need to educate hundreds of millions of students in developing countries in short period of time. It's the part to involve global economy for developing countries. From the difference of traditional, classical learning, course planning refers to be learner-based. In order to make qualified learning atmosphere, there should be flexible, diversity and understanding of learner autonomy through the innovation of distance education.

Borrowdale (2000) handled the online distance education perspectives with the aspects of technology. With the development of high technology, distance education becomes the main concern, opportunity for the participants. Through the different applications of technology like e-mail, bulletin boards, web pages, students can also experience the social, face-to-face learning in distance education as well. There can be the variations of participants to the distance education and also have different perceptions in terms of demographic, gender, physiological differences.

Sankaran (2000) investigated the students' attitudes about web vs. lecture formats. Attitudes toward web along with learning strategies wore measured using a survey and learning performance by test score. Findings suggest that students tend to enroll in the format according to their attitude and learning strategies. Individuals learn

differently even when the content and format is the same. Distance Education become alternative for individualized learning and concern of different learning tendencies.

Schmid (1998) focused on the position or attitudes of student in distance education process. According to some kind of research results and self-experiences, students search for the attention, feedback and valuable information, and social support. In being role of student for distance education create self-direct, adult learner and intrinsic motivation through doing research like with the help of internet in order to catch meaningful learning.

Willis (1992) examined the particular strategies for teaching distance education in order to understand active participants' need, wants and expectations as student. There should be willingness to change from classical learning to contemporary technology based learning environments. In order to create positive tendencies toward distance education, teachers have role as facilitators like make students aware and comfortable, learn students' background and experiences, be sensitive to different communication styles, remember that students must take active role, cope with technological developments, etc.

Schrum (2002) pointed out that interests to the distance education become increased today's educational fields. It should be interactivity and feedback possibilities in distance education to create effective learning environment. Because active participants who are students look for the real education that include active, productive interactivity. With given electronic learning environment to educational field, distance education will continue to expand, evolve and more satiety.

Jeffries (2002) examined that distance education definition and differences from other learning approaches. Distance Education takes emphasis of dialectical relationship between teacher and student under the elimination of distance and time. Distance Education put learners to the mode of self-responsibility on learning as a active participants. In Order to create effective distance education process, there should be positive attitudes and perceptions, which comes from the valuable consciousness.

Rosenthal (2000) pointed out that there should be ideal, concrete relationship and communication health in order to crate effective distance learning environments. There are some indicators that reflect the negative or positive interaction attitudes of students. Like understanding, encouraging from the instructors. Research reported the proportions of non-traditional and traditional students reporting with the significance series of tests.

Levin (2001) examines distance education in post secondary institutions, specifically in community and technical colleges in the United States, as an educational domain where information technologies have a central place. Looks at characterizing features of distance education management through a group of distance education managers and explores their role as professionals to identify what, to them, are critical issues in distance education. It is good reflection to know the management of distance education in particular field or place in order to reflect perceptions from the management influences on the program.

Rockwell, et al. (2000) wrote an article that was about Distance educators participated in a Delphi study to identify and rank future research and evaluation needs/issues. The study focused on planning for distance education; structuring decisions required for distance education; the implementation process; and evaluation needs in documenting outcomes. Four themes emerged: cooperation and collaboration among institutions; designing the educational experience for the distance learner; teacher preparation; and educational outcomes.

Jones (2000) wrote an article which was about the these Australian educators, the ongoing American debate over distance education reported in the daily press, The Chronicle, and Change, is surprising, for several reasons. Most obviously, it's surprising because the essential debate is long over in Australia. Respected Australian universities have been awarding indistinguishable degrees to on-campus and off-campus students for decades. Nearly 14 percent of university students study at a distance. When we look, as Australians still occasionally do, toward Britain, we see Open University degrees recognized as representing a rigorous, thorough British education. And article was so important to see the alternative view on distance educational disciplines and give light to the thesis as references.

Isman (1999) requires constructivist approach on learning for being interactive within teaching-learning instruction. Students should search and design their activities with their self-experience on the subject and the construct all activities under the sense of instruction. Through the role of technology with contemporary education as distance education, students can catch real experience of learning and develop self-developments.

Isman (2002) examined that student role from the sense of constructivist approach. These roles can be fit to the role of student in distance education as well. Student Role in Distance Education based on Constructivist Approach; Student should be interaction between teacher in order to get proper feedback on their self-directed subjects and consult to teacher for correctness and evaluation. Students can be in collaborative learning with their class members through the technological support, Students are self-responsible on their learning. They should decide what they want to learn and make individual study on their subject, Students should come to the solution for problems with data through the research instead of implementing available data. Therefore they should be researcher, Students should be problem solvers. They should implement what they learn on problems and set solutions strategies with using relevance information, Students should be well informed from the technology to not face with communicational barriers because of technology. In addition to this; they should use technology to construct the learning with rich materials, Students should be learners through the life. The students should know how to access and use the information whatever the instruction was finished. They should reach the information immediately if it is necessary.

As a conclusion of the above the article reviews or research, there are a lot of thoughts that go around the concept of the Distance Education. The articles concentrated on the definition of the distance education and high degree relation with the information technology, Internet based access in education. According to these ordered, huge and alternative point of views about the distance education, they give the proper base to search on the concrete roles of students in distance education with selecting base line on the exact reflective roles of the students in the new style of the education whatever there are different management perceptions, models and communicational barriers. These handled articles and research findings reflect the approximate findings and comments on the roles of the students and teachers in Distance Education.

Findings and Results
According to the total reflections of research studies, student perceptions toward distance education varies based on gender, age, educational level as demographic data that researcher handle as the indicators of the perceptions. In order to examine the perceptions of students, there should be well known roles of them to live the healthy communication for successful distance education program or system.

In distance education, teachers should have tendency to facilitate student-centered, constructivist way of learning in teaching process. Therefore; while the teachers are the facilitator, students should be active, self-responsible, feel the sense of home atmosphere, immediate researcher, adult learner in their learning through distance education. There should be healthy communication out of technical, semantically, and psychological barriers between two participants. Most of the non-motivation of the students can be caused because of the lackness on the face-to-face communication. As Nasseh (1997) stated that media and technical developments in distance education carry us not to face with technological obstacles and help to improve the replacement of face-to-face communication side of the program. In addition to this; Nasseh (1997) mentioned that few studies examined students learning experiences, effectiveness of instructional methods, limitations. The research field study reflected that students learn equally well from education delivered by technology as measured by these 218 reports at a distance and face-to-face. Therefore; the applications, atmosphere of the distance education requires the advancement of technology and become the most important variable that effect the learning experiences, perceptions of students towards distance education.

Borrowdale (2000) handled the distance education that student experienced the class through internet. It is mentioned that face-to-face learning experiences become computer mediated learning experiences. Internet, student forums, e-mail, online discussion, bulletin boards and web pages are the tools to facilitate e-learning to students. In order to understand the how system function effectively, there should be the evaluation of perceptions towards distance education. If the students are the main participants with their self-learner, autonomy and responsibility, perceptions of them should be taken account. Borrowdale (2000) give the richness of the study with its relevant example and indicated that differences in learning style, gender, age did not have an impact on the students' level of satisfaction. The main indicator of the student perceptions is their satisfaction. Therefore; there should be feedback and response between participants, lack of communication barriers based on technology or technical, right learning styles, comfort of learning atmosphere, effective understanding and willingness.

As a conclusion of the all reflective findings and results; Isman (1997) examined that the greatest number of relationship was found between students' perceptions and content taught. There are some significant relationships between students' perceptions of distance education courses and age. There are some significant relationship between students' perceptions and educational level. In addition to this study reflect that there are some significant relationships between students' perceptions and the number of the distance education courses

taken. There are fewer significant relationships between students' perception and instructional site and academic major, being either part-time-full-time students. Based on the results of this study, there can be several recommendations with the five areas need additional attention (Isman, 1997);

First, distance education need to pay more attention to content taught because the most significance relationship was found to be the content taught and the student perceptions of content. The results of this study indicate that all content may not be appropriate for distance education. For this reason, distance educators should choose appropriate content for their distance education system.

Second, distance educators should design different distance education classes for different age groups because younger and older students have different learning skills and styles.

Third, distance educators need to pay attention to different educational levels. When the courses are designed, the differences between undergraduate and graduate courses should be considered. There are some learning and teaching differences between graduate and undergraduate students; graduate courses are more complex than the undergraduate courses. Otherwise, the graduate students will be satisfied with their distance education course (s). This may affect the level of academic achievement.

Fourth, universities should pay attention for providing the best-updated telecommunication infrastructure because the qualities of the distance education courses are directly affected by the nature of the telecommunication system. Universities should pay particular attention to difficulties associated with audio and video problems as soon as possible because these problems can affect instructional delivery to remote site classes.

Last, these universities should provide teachers who are unfamiliar with distance education the opportunity to obtain specialized presentation training that would help instructors to interact through a new medium with remote sites, and how they can design remote class discussion and related activities. Universities should never forget that the role of the teachers in distance education classroom is different from the traditional classroom.

Recommendations

Distance Education is the easy way of learning for the technology-advanced environment. It provides loss of time, space and distance through the support of high information technology. Students who are active participants in distance education process should be adult learners, self-responsible and immediate researchers. In order to reflect right perceptions of students, satisfactions on contact, performance, motivation through interaction among participants, learning styles, method, and environment should be well organized. With considering demographic variables effect perceptions towards distance education system, we can come up with concrete recommendations based on that Isman (1997) stated like that very limited research exists on the relationship between students' perceptions and various demographic factors. To take this research further, new distance educational research should focus on the following areas (Isman, 1997):

1. Teacher perceptions about two-way interactive television systems should be investigated. The results of such study might explain how students' perception and teachers' perception about two-way interactive television courses are similar and how they are different from each other.
2. Another trend that needs to be investigated is the relationship between students' perception and grades received from two-way interactive television classes. These results might reveal differences between students who earned high grades and students who earned lower grades from tow-way interactive television classes.
3. A combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis (triangulation) is recommended for this kind of research. Quantitative analysis alone may not be significant to investigate the perceptions of students about two-way interactive television systems. The use of both methods could assist researchers to better understand the distance education system.
4. The last trend that should be investigated is content which can test be taught using distance education because greatest differences were found in content taught. The results of such a study might explain how the teaching methods of teachers are different in terms of content taught.

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