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Challenges for Distance Education

A cultural analytic perspective on asynchronous online courses in Sweden

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Abstract

Challenges for Distance Education: A Cultural Analytic Perspective on Asynchronous Online Courses in Sweden

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Increasingly popular, distance education has been researched from many angles, but studies done from a cultural analytic perspective are rare. Most studies up to this point have focused on the pedagogical perspective. This thesis aims to investigate challenges faced by different stakeholders in distance education, including online course promoters, teachers, and students, from a cultural analytic perspective. According to empirical materials, I would suggest that various gaps exist in asynchronous online courses which go unnoticed, but which greatly impede student learning performance. These gaps exist in all areas of distance education, including: the sensory experience, online communication, between mind and body as well as the assumptions and expectations for and knowledge of distance education. If these gaps were reduced, distance education would be more effective and appealing.

Keywords: distance education, online courses, learning context, flexibility, online communication, sensory experience

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Computers and the Internet have become an integral part of many aspects of life today. Education is no exception. New media provide new means for people to interact, create dialogues, and share information and have generated new means for learning, including distance education. Distance education has become increasingly appealing in recent years. Many institutions around the world now offer online or a combination of online and offline courses for learners of every age from elementary school students to adults. Having worked for three years for a private company in Taiwan whose major business was online computer and English courses, I have been interested for a long time in how distance education works in different countries and regions. I was not surprised to discover that here in Sweden distance education is popular as well. Sweden offers a variety of web-based courses and study programs. Some are entirely web-based, so learners do not need to attend university physically at all. Some questions, however, formed in my mind. Is distance learning really as good as it sounds? Do learners here face the same problems as their counterparts in Taiwan? To answer my own questions, I decided to take and examine an asynchronous online course in Sweden as a study case and then to explore the challenges of distance education from a cultural analytic perspective.

1.1 Background

This thesis is based on the internship experience employed at Sweden's Lund University. All empirical materials were gathered from participants of a web-based learning and teaching in higher education (LATHE) course. The course was designed for adult learners and all learners were teachers or Ph.D. students at Lund University at the time. In addition, it was a compulsory course for all teachers and potential teachers at Lund University. The LATHE course was offered both on the physical campus and online. Students were free to choose either the classroom-based or web-based LATHE course. The aim of the course is to train participants to be better teachers. Meanwhile, the web-based LATHE course employed a learning management system (LMS) LUVIT platform. Learners had to log on to LUVIT to download and read articles which they were required to discuss in an online forum. They also had to turn in assignments every week. Students were sometimes required to perform peer-reviews as well. All communication in the course was asynchronous. Throughout the

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period of the course, all activities, except two face-to-face meetings required for all the participants, were processed online using LUVIT .

There are three main categories of stakeholders involved in distance education—students, teachers, and online course promoters. Students take the web-based LATHE course. Teachers run the online courses using the LMS LUVIT. Promoters are staff from the Centre for Educational Development (CED) at Lund University. Promoters are not only responsible for providing LATHE courses, but also for issues related to LUVIT. Any teacher at Lund University who wants to use LUVIT to support his/her teaching has to ask for permission from CED. The promoters help students and teachers resolve any issues that arise.

The aim of internship is to determine what participants, especially students, think about LUVIT and the web-based LATHE course. The outcome of the project, as the title of this thesis suggests, is challenges for stakeholders of web-based LATHE course. The conclusion was presented in a 20-minute oral presentation and in a 15-pages written report. This thesis, which is based on the internship experience, focuses on challenges in distance education and will be combined with theories from cultural analytic field to facilitate a deeper analysis.

1.2 A short history and definition of distance education

Distance education might seem to be a product of modern information technology, such as computers and the Internet, however, according to K. C. Harper, K. Chen, and D. C. Yen, the modern version is a reintroduction of an older method of education in a new form, rather than a newly created one (K. C. Harper *et al.*, 2004). The origin of distance education can be traced back to the early 1700s. Correspondence courses were established both in America and Great Britain. Course materials, assignments, notes, tests, and feedback were delivered and exchanged through the postal service. Distance education was integrated with radio and television when these two forms of mass communication were invented at the beginning of the 20th century. Between 1980 and 1990, pre-recorded video and cassette recordings were used heavily in distance education. It was not until the 1990s when computers became less expensive and accessible to large numbers of people and the World Wide Web technology had matured that distance education was transformed into the version with which we are familiar today (K. C. Harper *et al.*, 2004).

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According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, distance education is defined as “the use of specific instructional techniques, resources and media to facilitate learning and teaching between learners and teachers who are separated by time or place” (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/themes/icts/lifelong-learning/open-and-distance-learning/>). In the United States, *the Higher Education Opportunity Act* enacted by Department of Education defines distance education as “the use of one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor, either synchronously or asynchronously” (United States Congress, 2008, p. 21). Both of the definitions stress the physical separation between learner and educator in time and/or space. In other words, in the broadest sense, the term distance education can be used to describe numerous instructional situations (Valentine, 2000).

Obviously, both definitions are still too broad and vague as distance education that employs postal services, radio, television, and the Internet are all marked by different characteristics and the parties involved interact with each other in different ways. In addition, distance education is prevalent not only in colleges, universities, and other academic institutions, it is also used in business to train employees. Distance education is used by individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, in terms of different ages, cultures, educational histories, and social status. Different online courses employed in diverse situations offer the individuals that use them greatly divergent experiences. Furthermore, similar terms, such as virtual learning, e-learning, web-based learning, and online learning, are often used interchangeably without explicit definitions. This casual use of terminology makes it difficult for researchers to conduct cross-studies and build on the research of previous studies (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011).

It is necessary, therefore, that a clear definition of the term “distance education”, as it is used here, be provided. The definition of distance education as described in this thesis is borrowed from Garrison and Anderson’s definition of e-learning and refers to “electronically mediated asynchronous and synchronous communication for the purpose of constructing and confirming knowledge”, and “the technological foundation of e-learning use the Internet and associated communication technologies” (Garrison & Anderson, 2011, p.2). Different terms with similar meanings used in the research of other scholars will also be discussed.

1.3 Methodology

The primary research method used in gathering the materials for this study was semi-structured individual interviews. One focus group interview was also held. If an informant had a computer with an Internet connection nearby, go-alongs were conducted as well, i.e., interviewees were asked to show how they processed learning, teaching, and using LUVIT. More than ten interviews were held. The shortest interview was about 30 minutes long, while the longest took about 80 minutes. Meanwhile, I was also participated the web-based LATHE class as a students. I was able, therefore, to observe how participants interact in online environments.

Although the informants for this study consisted of students, teachers, and online course promoters, more than half of the interviewees were students. This is primarily because first, they make up the majority of individuals involved in the online course and the dropout rate of the web-based LATHE course was higher than that of the classroom-based LATHE course. My internship provider, the director of CED, and the teacher who ran the web-based LATHE course wanted to know why this was the case, so I decided to concentrate on the students. Second, there was only one online course promoter in charge of LUVIT and one teacher responsible for the web-based LATHE course. Compared to teachers and promoters, the composition of learners is much more diverse and their opinions about distance education differed greatly. As a result, it was necessary to focus on understanding how learners perceived the course and what they thought about it.

Moreover, even though distance education is not a sensitive topic and no one would probably get hurt if their identities were revealed, but there was no need to reveal their identities for the purpose of this paper. The research findings would not be influenced by using the informants' real names or backgrounds. As a result, all the names in this thesis are pseudonyms. This choice was made not only to keep things simpler, but also because of 'relational ethics', which "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (Ellis, 2007, p.4). This represents my ethical responsibility towards the individuals in this study as I believe this was the best way to 'do no harm'.

The initial intent of the internship project was to understand how different participants of the web-based LATHE course perceive and construct the virtual classroom, but it is not easy to

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observe how interviewees work in the courses and how they arrange their surroundings for their studies. For instance, interviews usually took place in the interviewee's office, so if the interviewee like to study at home, it was difficult to see his/her learning environment. Also, taking online courses takes time. It cannot be done in ten or fifteen minutes, so you cannot ask interviewees to show how they learn and observe the whole process as they do it. Something else, however, intrigued me. I realized that some challenges have not been examined thoroughly from a cultural analytical perspective, therefore the internship ended up with me focusing on obstacles faced by participants. This thesis, as a more detailed analysis and discussion of previous internship experience, maintains an emphasis on these obstacles and challenges.

1.4 Aim and overview

Distance education has existed for a very long time and has been studied by many researchers from different perspectives, particularly from a pedagogical point of view. However, distance education still has many problems. Educators strive to improve the quality of teaching and online course promoters struggle to enhance distance education, but learning at a distance is still not the learners' first choice. When asked to choose, most students still prefer meeting with a learning group and an instructor in a set place (Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2008). Furthermore, the dropout rate for distance education is higher (Simpson, 2013). The web-based LATHE course is no exception. Many students express a preference for the classroom-based LATHE course in the interviews, while the dropout rate for the web-based LATHE course was higher when compared with the classroom-based LATHE course. The reason for the inefficient learning, teaching, and advancement of distance education, based on my findings, is due to various 'gaps' in distance education.

The term 'gaps' is used here to indicate the connection among students and between students, teachers, and online course promoters, is break. That is to say, network among participants is not connected and reliable as it should be. Some important things are missing in distance education. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a gap can be defined as "a break in continuity" (Gap, 2014). That is to say, learning context is discontinuous in many situations and learners are impeded by the discontinuity caused by these gaps. Furthermore, Bates indicates that "distance is more likely to be psychological or social, rather than geographical, in most cases" (Bates, 2004, p.6). These gaps not only exist in the process of

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intellectual exchange, but also in the affective relationship and many other aspects. In fact, students of a distance education course may be close to each other physically, but detached mentally, emotionally, and cognitively. For example, promoters tend to believe the learning platform is easy to use. But this may not be the case for students and teachers, so there might be a gap between them. They are not on the same track and there is a break in the continuity.

These gaps are the challenges that online course participants face. The gaps are rarely researched, yet they play an important part in distance education. All stakeholders in distance education encounter these gaps, just to different degrees. The gaps must be dealt with. This thesis attempts to bring about a deeper understanding of the gaps from a cultural analytic perspective. Therefore, it focuses on the negative side of distance education. The first aim of this thesis is to reveal the gaps that hinder the learning performance of students in asynchronous online courses. Secondly, it analyzes and discusses how these gaps are formed. Finally, it proposes possible solutions to reduce the gaps.

The next chapter of this thesis concentrates on previous research in distance education. Differences between face-to-face education and distance education – the concept and features of distance education – will also be discussed. The third chapter is based on empirical materials collected during my internship. Different attitudes among various stakeholders will be discussed and concrete examples presented in this section. These examples will then be investigated using theories from a cultural analytical perspective in chapter four. The last chapter consists of the conclusion and suggestions. The gaps mentioned in the thesis will be summed up and suggestions offered.

Chapter 2: Previous research and the concept of distance education

The history of distance education is quite long as described in the first chapter. Nevertheless, most previous research on distance education has been done from a pedagogical perspective. Therefore, this chapter will start with previous discussions about distance education contributed by pedagogical scholars. Then attributes of distance education and challenges faced by participants will be presented and described. The need for cross-discipline research will be explained in this section as well.

2.1 Previous research: an overview

Distance education is distinct from traditional on-campus education. Some scholars claim that the various types of media simply deliver instruction without influencing the learning process, but the purpose of education remains the same. Media and technology are merely vehicles and they do not directly affect learning (Clark, Yates, Early, Moulton, Silber, & Foshay, 2010). What matters is the content and instructional strategy of the learning materials (Schramm, 1977, cited from Ally, 2008).

Other researchers, however, believe that technological innovation has had a great impact on education. Modern technology has transformed the teaching and learning experience (Garrison & Anderson, 2011). Technology has changed what we need to know and how we come to know it (Laurillard, 2008). Just as with the Gutenberg Revolution, the invention of movable type allowed knowledge to be preserved and delivered using written text, rather than just oral means. An interactive computational model offers a new form of knowledge representation different from the mode of writing (Laurillard, 2008). Thus, distance education differs intrinsically from face-to-face education. As Garrison and Anderson argue, “Technology directly affects the display, the interaction, the cost and the design of the educational outcomes” (Garrison & Anderson, 2011, p.32).

Although there are disputes about usefulness of distance education, in general, distance education is perceived positively by faculty and administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2003, cited from Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). If applied correctly, distance education can be a great

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mechanism for offering educational opportunities. It is viewed as a cost-effective way to deliver knowledge, both for students and colleges, universities, and other educational institutions (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008; K.C. Harper *et al.*, 2004). Distance education also improves teacher to student ratios. It also allows students to interact with diverse groups of fellow students and can even offer students opportunities to communicate with experts in the field they are studying (K.C. Harper *et al.*, 2004; Ally, 2008). Distance education has become a major topic in education (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008).

2.2 Attributes of distance education

Flexibility

Compared with classroom-based education, the most obvious attribute of distance education is flexibility. With suitable equipment, learners are able to access course information without time constraints or geographic limitations. Flexibility is usually regarded as the biggest advantage of distance education. The basic idea of distance education is teachers and students are in different places most of time (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). According to Holmberg, the convenience, flexibility, and adaptability of distance courses are the main reasons learners choose this mode of education instead of on-campus courses (Holmberg, 2005). This is especially important for adult learners who choose it so that they can balance family, job, and community responsibilities (Duffy & Kirkley, 2003; Ally, 2008; Smaldino *et al.*, 2008).

Additionally, as Laurillard states, “‘Flexibility’ usually refers to the logistics of study, enabling learners to study where and when is best for them, and to the choice of curriculum, which becomes learner-oriented, rather than provider-led” (Laurillard, 2008, p.7). Flexibility is not only about learning at preferred times and in preferred spaces, but also about learning at one’s own pace. It helps some learners to create deeper learning experiences and enables them to spend less time on information which which they are already familiar, so they can concentrate on what they do not know (Lei & Gupta, 2010; Kirtman, 2009, cited from Brown, 2012).

For teachers, flexibility means preparing course materials when and where it is most convenient for them as well. Teachers can update materials and allow learners to see the changes immediately (Ally, 2008). It is also easier for educators to direct learners to appropriate information on the Internet based on their needs (Ally, 2008). Moreover, with a well-designed learning management system, educators can evaluate learners’ needs and

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current level of expertise and then assign suitable tasks to learners to achieve desired learning outcomes (Ally, 2008).

Learner-centeredness

In contemporary education, a shift toward more learner-centered approaches has emerged. Many distance education researchers are now concentrating on learner-centered approaches in order to meet the needs of the changing world (McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). Garrison and Anderson argue that distance education is no more learner-centered than traditional face-to-face education, because education is the transaction between and among teachers and students, no matter what kind of education it is (Anderson, 2004). Nevertheless, distance education supports a learner-centered learning environment more easily. As Smaldino *et al.* explain, “The student-centered approach to learning fits well into distance education environments. By its very nature, distance education demands that students become engaged in the learning process” (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008, p.185). Since students decide when, where, and at what pace they will learn, they are and have to be more actively engaged in the learning process.

As a result, the efficiency and satisfaction of learning relies heavily on the student himself/herself. Not all students are suited to this type of education. For instance, student knowledge of computers influences their educational experience greatly. Studies suggest a link between higher levels of computer skills and greater enjoyment of online courses (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005, cited from Sahin & Shelley, 2008). On the other hand, inadequate or incomplete computer knowledge and awareness compromises course quality and appropriateness (White, 2005, cited from Sahin & Shelley, 2008). To be successful in online courses, learners need to be equipped with certain abilities and characteristics (Valentine, 2000). They must train themselves consciously to be disciplined in terms of study habits (Moore, 2011).

Moreover, learning achievements in a web-based virtual learning environment are significantly affected by student personality characteristics (Kim & Schniederjans, 2004). Wherry noted that ‘learner-centered’ too often means that course materials are simply made available and it is the student’s task to figure them out (Wherry, 2001, cited from Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). Smaldino *et al.* reviewed previous studies about learner attributes in distance education and concluded that several characteristics affect the success of the learner in the distance education environment. Students who are young and have higher education levels are more likely to

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complete online courses. In addition, motivation and a positive attitude toward the instructor are also essential factors that contribute to the success of distant learners (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008).

The role of the educator

The importance of student autonomy does not mean that educators have less responsibility. There are discrepancies, however, in studies on time spent on online teaching (Brown, 2012). Some researchers indicate that it has caused course preparation time for instructors to increase (Zhang, Zhao, Zhou & Nunamaker Jr, 2004) and instructors have to design and plan courses completely before they start (Caplan & Graham, 2008). Course materials are not simply put online. They have to be arranged in a way suited to all learners. Content presentation needs to be intuitive for the various types of students who may interact with it (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). In distance education, course content might be wrapped in various formats, such as multimedia, video, and text. This gives access to learning content that utilizes all media attributes (Anderson, 2004). Therefore, the instructor needs to take technological elements and their effect on the students into account. Some scholars suggest that creating a high quality online course requires the cooperation between subject-matter experts, media and technology specialists, and instructional designers (Bates, 2003, cited from Smaldino *et al.*, 2008; Moore, 2011). No one individual has all the skills necessary to developing and delivering a distance learning course.

Additionally, not only do teachers have to familiarize themselves with the hardware and LMS needed for the course so as to use them effectively in teaching, they also need to be concerned with technical problems that students will face when connecting to courseware (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). The instructor is the person that learners contact most frequently. If learners have any questions on educational content or technical issues, the instructor is usually the first person that learners seek for assistance. In addition, as education moves away from familiar classroom settings, the online environment often becomes a challenge for instructors (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). Many skills and techniques which were important in face-to face settings are not applicable online and some teachers must to learn new teaching methods as well as unlearn certain old ones (Caplan & Graham, 2008).

For instance, educators often use visual cues such as facial expressions in auditory communication with students after class to evaluate and adjust the instructional approach of a

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course (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004; Lei & Gupta, 2010, cited from Brown; Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). In an online course, all these visual and auditory clues are eliminated and difficult to decipher. Immediate feedback – whether from students or teacher – is also lacking in asynchronous distance education. Thus, students can get pretty far off of the track over the course of their learning process (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). In a text-based environment, teachers have to alter their behavior in response to the new affordances of the medium (Ruhleder, 2004). New challenges show up for the educators. They cannot really control what is posted and how other students respond to it (Ruhleder, 2004).

Communication difficulties in distance education

There are pros and cons to distance education. Due to the inherent nature of web-based courses, opportunities for interaction during online learning activities are likely infrequent and irregular, even though their significance has been emphasized (Barnes & Lowery, 1998, cited from Contreras-Castillo *et al.*, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2001, cited from Hrastinski, 2006).

Flexibility in time, learning style, and pace is allowed, valued, and even encouraged in distance education. The self-study environment, however, seems to be at odds with collaborative efforts. As a result, this kind of education is often perceived and experienced as a lonely way to learn (Anderson, 2008; Duffy & Kirkley, 2004).

Furthermore, student interest can decrease as a result of delays in asynchronous replies which can also foster feelings of frustration and loneliness. Previous research points out that isolation is a major problem in distance education (Contreras-Castillo, Favela, Pérez-Fragoso, & Santamaría-del-Angel, 2004). Moreover, text-based media cannot fully deliver body language and tone of voice (Hrastinski, 2006), and does not allow for easy exchange which is crucial to delivering clear meaning (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). As a result, finding ways to maintain the benefit of maximum student freedom while supporting opportunities for community building and mutual support among individuals in cost-effective ways has become the greatest challenge in distance education community for some researchers (Anderson, 2008).

Another problem in communication in distance education is lack of informal interaction. Informal interaction, defined as “interactions that do not have a defined schedule or place, are spontaneous, not planned and brief, where the topic of the conversation can change during the course of the interaction” (Contreras-Castillo *et al.*, 2004, p.151), is a vital element in building community. Informal interaction can help learners learn from each other and validate own’s

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viewpoints while being exposed to and coming to understand those of others through sharing personal perspectives (Bober & Dennen, 2001; Bowden & Marton, 1998, cited from Hrastinski, 2006). Informal interaction is also reported from learners as valuable components of the total learning experience (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008).

However, students in web-based courses tend to ‘concentrate’ on their own individual learning. It is also confirmed by Duffy and Kirkley, although they view it as an advantage. They believe that in the classroom, discussion time is wasted on talking or doing a project but not thinking about issues or students simply do not participate. Online students can focus more on the topics in a problem-centered discussion and add their relevant personal and professional experience to discussions (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). The resulting lack of meaningful and plentiful communication and interaction makes it more difficult to build community in distance education than in regular education. After all, as Duffy and Kirkley explain, “Being part of a class comes not from sitting in a room together but in talking with each other. It is communication with peers that is seen as central to the distance learning environment” (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004, p.117).

2.3 The need for interdisciplinary research

Distance education is a radical idea. The technologies used in distance education as well as the learning and teaching concepts behind them vary and continue to evolve. Although there have been a great deal of studies performed on distance education from a pedagogical perspective as well as some others from a technological perspective, many of them focus mainly on quantitative research methods. In many cases, questionnaires are used to gather information from a group of interviewees and then data analyzed and presented using statistical technologies. This is not to say that quantitative research methods do not contribute to the knowledge and understanding of distance education, but qualitative research methods are essential and needed as well. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are necessary. Some important information can only be revealed via interviews, participant observation, and other qualitative research methods.

For example, different people answering the same questionnaire might understand the same term differently. It is possible that all interviewees agree that distance education is flexible; however, using a questionnaire, it is not possible to know what flexibility really means to each

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individual. For some, it might only mean that they can learn whenever they want. For others, it might only mean that they can learn wherever they want. And for still others, it might mean that they are free from the cost and time wasted in face-to-face education. What is more, what people claim can differ from what they do. Thus, it is important to carry out more observation and conduct more interviews to analyze contradiction and ambiguity on interviewees' expressions and meanings. However, with qualitative research methods, verbal assertions can be checked by observation and crossing-checking is possible. Field workers can return to the same topic and ask the same questions (Davies, 2008).

Moreover, since use of the Internet is not confined to a specific group of people or location, it is also difficult to take a particular sector of the population as research subjects. In addition, material gathered from the Internet changes as it is updated daily, so it is not easy to analyze and monitor (Sade-Beck, 2004). Traditional means for ethnographers, i.e., interviews and participant observation, are problematic in online environments. It is hard to define what constitutes cyberspace and it is difficult to identify participants, therefore, methodology and ethical issues have become the point of ethnographic Internet research. Very few studies focus on distance education. In view of all the reasons mentioned above, it is necessary to investigate distance education from an applied cultural analysis perspective to bring different insight into the field.

Chapter 3: Findings – gaps in distance education

This chapter will focus on empirical findings during my internship. As the title of this chapter suggests, as a result of my internship project, I found various gaps in distance education, including gaps in sensory experience, time and space, and between people and text content. These gaps will be explained further in the next few sections.

3.1 Introduction to the web-based LATHE course

The LATHE course is part of compulsory qualifying teacher training at Lund University. It is an introductory course to learning and teaching at institutes of higher education for teachers without formal training in pedagogy. (<http://www.ced.lu.se/learning-and-teaching-in-higher-educationwebbased.aspx>) The course is offered in two formats: the classroom-based course and the web-based course. Any student who is unable or unwilling to take the classroom-based LATHE course is welcome to take the online course. Although the LATHE course is part of the compulsory courses and open to the entire faculty at Lund University, learners cannot apply to take the course themselves. They must apply through the secretary of their faculty. All names and information are sent to the secretary of CED and the secretary makes decisions on who can register for the course based on applicants' backgrounds. The goal is to ensure that the composition of students taking the course is heterogeneous in the hope of sparking reflection and discussion.

The course employs LUVIT, a platform designed with Nordic pedagogy and developed at Lund University. Nordic pedagogy emphasizes much more equality between teachers and students when compared with that of other locations. Students are allowed to speak freely and have the same rights as teachers in a course. As some researchers indicate “individualisation has been a theme for a long time in all Nordic countries” (Carlgren, Klette, Mýrdal, Schnack & Simola, 2006, p.319). According to the interviewee, no LMS met the requirement seventeen years ago when the university decided to offer distance education courses. The developers believed that a similar spirit had to be realized in distance education as well. Unlike many other online courses organized by content experts and media specialists (Moore, 2011), teachers who use LUVIT are required to develop their own teaching and learning materials and

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are given authority to modify almost all of the course. As such, course content and structure are entirely under the teacher's control.

The autumn 2013 LATHE course started on September 11 and ended on December 17. The course's 24 students were separated into three groups. Each group was led by a designated teacher, so three teachers were involved in the course. The course structure was developed by a retired teacher, but the current teacher could modify the structure as she saw fit. She also uploaded course materials. Furthermore, she was the course's only contact person, answering all student questions, whether they dealt with course content or technical issues.

The LATHE course structure consisted of eight modules. Students were supposed to finish one module every two weeks. Each course element included Think-, Work-, Discuss-, and Reflect tasks that students were supposed to finish by a set deadline. They were also asked to join a discussion forum and to complete the course, they had to post a certain number of contributions. All written assignments were uploaded to LUVIT, so neither students nor teachers needed to know the personal information of other participants, such as e-mail addresses and phone numbers. They could read, comment, reply, and perform peer reviews via LUVIT. The first assignment for students was to create a personal presentation on the course web to facilitate communication. Students were encouraged to share contact details and information, but it was not compulsory.

3.2 In the virtual classroom

In distance education, teaching and learning activities are primarily conducted using LMS. Students do not need to go to an appointed location to take courses; rather, they "gather" in virtual classrooms. What a virtual classroom looks like depends on the LMS. Different LMS create different virtual classrooms.

Once a student logs onto LUVIT and clicks on the LATHE course, he/she will first see the bulletin board page. The bulletin board, which occupies the center part of the page, displays personal presentation settings and important information, including assignments for the week, contact person information, and course information. On the right side of the page, information about who is online, who updated what, and today's schedule are shown with the click of a button. The left side of the page shows overview, personal, tools, communication, and course content. Course content starts with instructions about this web, how to use certain functions of

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this web, detailed course information, instructions about face-to-face meetings, collective feedback uploaded by teachers, the eight learning modules, course projects proposed by students, and other useful material.

The screenshot shows the Lunds Universitet course portal. The main content area displays a notification that the user's presentation is active. Below this, there is a section for 'Course Information: September 2013 Learning and Teaching'. The information includes a description of the course as part of a compulsory qualifying teacher training program, its start and end dates (2013-09-01 to 2015-09-01), and the contact person, Rachel Maddipati. The right sidebar features a 'Who's online' section showing a user named 'Huang-Yu Wang' logged in at 14:57. Below that, there is a 'Today's schedule' section indicating 'Nothing scheduled' and a 'New documents' section listing various documents with their titles and publication dates.

Figure 1. Bulletin page

The eight modules are the most important options available. Modules are not open to students all the same time. The teacher follows the schedule, opening a new module every one or two weeks. The content of each module is arranged in the order of *Think*-, *Work*-, *Discuss*- and *Reflect* tasks. In other words, students simply need to follow the structure presented. Take module three, the developing teaching role, for example. Students are supposed to click on *Think* and to read a short introduction about the developing teaching role. Secondly, they are asked “What do you mean by teaching?” and they are required to post and discuss their answers on the *Think forum*. The *Work* task page lists readings and tasks on a six-page document. Students then discuss the list of readings on the *Discussion forum*. Finally, the *Reflect* page encourages students to write down their reflections on this topic and submit them to the teacher.



Figure 2. Structure of a module

In distance education, the virtual classroom seems to be objective to everyone, but it is a private space as well that is greatly influenced by individuals. Strate explains from a communication and media studies perspective that cyberspace is heterogeneous and multiple. It is constructed, experienced, and understood by individuals (Strate, 1999). For instance, as mentioned in earlier paragraphs, different levels of computer skills have been linked to different levels of enjoyment by users in online courses (Mitchell *et al.*, 2005, cited from Sahin & Shelley, 2008). Interviews done for this project confirm that statement. One young Ph.D. student found computers and LUVIT a bit difficult for her. She did not know how to change her login password nor could she remember it, so she copied and pasted her password every time she logged in. She cannot and has never contemplated exploring the virtual classroom. Another young Ph.D. student faced a different technical issue. She could not download documents from LUVIT, so she contacted the teacher who sent all the documents to her via e-mail. Both cases indicate that computer skills, technical problems, and attitude toward technology affect student perception of the virtual classroom and learning experience. For students who do not have adequate computer skills and equipment and who are not interested in interacting with computers, the virtual classroom is a strange place. For instance, a student who does not know or is not aware that he/she can click on the screen to bring out a hidden menu on the right side will never know about the additional functions of LUVIT. In other words, some students only visit spots they are familiar with. Thus, even though LUVIT provides a platform that offers a great deal of functions, many options are invisible to students like this. They tend to stay in certain places. Therefore, although virtual classrooms are open to every student equally, the truth is that students with better computer skills and equipment can reap more from the experience. The virtual classroom is not objective and equal to all. Fors,

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Bäckström, and Pink argue that we approach human learning as a multisensory and emplaced practice beyond fixed localities and temporal sequences. “This approach also allows us to understand the environment of which human learning is a part as a place of negotiation, between its different elements (which might be persons, technologies, discourses, materialities, and more)” (Fors, Bäckström, & Pink, 2013, p.174). Students have to negotiate among technology, virtual space, people, and many other factors and their experience varies depending on the outcome of negotiation.

3.3 Stakeholders in the web-based LATHE course

As mentioned in an earlier previous section, three groups of stakeholders are involved in the web-based LATHE course—students, teachers, and online course promoters. Their roles and responsibilities are described in the next section.

Stakeholders in the web-based LATHE course: Online course promoters

Without promoters, there would be no LATHE courses. Promoters are in charge of two primary things. First, promoters are in charge of teacher training. They are responsible for organizing teacher training courses, LATHE courses, and other advanced courses, both in web-based or classroom-based formats. Secondly, they are responsible for running the LUVIT platform and providing services, such as teacher support, student support, server administration and maintenance, and infrastructure management. They know LUVIT best. Promoters offer not only pedagogical training courses, but also LUVIT skill training courses. Even though, however, LUVIT was built in Lund University, it was transferred to a private company several years ago and two to three individuals at CED run LUVIT now. The promoters, regardless of their original backgrounds, are also familiar with pedagogical theories and practices. Therefore, compared to teachers and students, promoters are more homogeneous.

The promoters created LUVIT in 1997 for two reasons. The first one, according to one of the promoters, Olof (pseudonym), is “*Every teacher should be able to build the course himself (herself) and to run the course by himself (herself)*”. This stands in stark contrast to the suggestion of many other researchers that online courses require collaboration between course content experts, media and technology specialists, and instructional designers (Bates, 2003,

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cited from Smaldino *et al.*, 2008; Moore, 2011). These promoters believe that doing so places course content completely under the teacher's control, that the teacher must be familiar with the content, and will be able to conduct the course smoothly as a result. This is about flexibility as well. Olof explained that a teacher should be able to modify his/her materials anytime and anywhere, so that he/she does not need to wait for a technician to do it for him/her. Just like many people, promoters also believe that distance education enhances freedom in time, space, and pace, both for teachers and students. At the same time, promoters do not interfere with how teachers structure their courses, but if a teacher needs help, they are willing to help the teacher design his/her course. Since it is possible to design various learning activities with numerous plug-ins, one of the difficulties that promoters face is how to let teachers know, learn, and apply LUVIT in efficiently.

The second reason for creating LUVIT was the belief of Nordic pedagogy mentioned earlier. "*Nordic pedagogy means students have voice...students should have many ways to ask questions, to discuss*", Olof explained. According to him, Swedish students are generally too shy to express their opinions in class and the online environment is helpful in encouraging students to speak, since they do not have to answer immediately and are 'invisible' in a sense. So students may feel more secure and willing to say something. In addition, Olof pointed out that:

"We don't train students. Students are consumers in the courses... we NEVER train students to use LUVIT. But we train teachers, because they are the producers not the consumers".

His opinion is nothing new. Anderson claims that "The learner-centered lens resonates well with the current trend to commercial education and considers the student a consumer of an educational service" (Anderson, 2004, p.239). LATHE courses are not free for students. Tuition is 7,300 Swedish kronor per student, so it is true that students are consumers in a sense. Teachers do not have to pay an extra fee for using LUVIT or running LATHE courses, so in Olof's mind, teachers are much more like providers than consumers. Moreover, since the course is constructed and run completely by the teacher, Olof believes that the teacher is in charge of everything about the course. Promoters only support the teachers. No matter how many functions LUVIT offers and how possible the course can be structured and presented, the quality of the course depends on how the teacher designs the course and learning activities.

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Stakeholders in the web-based LATHE course: Teachers

Teachers are given almost the same authority as administrators. There are only three things that teachers are not allowed to do: create new virtual classrooms, add new students, and drop students. This is simply because teachers do not necessarily have the computer knowledge and other related skills needed to perform these tasks and incorrect changes to the settings could influence many students, so promoters think it is better to control these three things themselves. That said, teachers only take a three-hour noncompulsory training course to use LUVIT to run courses. Many teachers do not take the training course. For them, LUVIT is merely a tool to facilitate existing lectures. Some teachers believe they do not have to spend time learning how to apply LUVIT. What matters is course content, so not every teacher feels the need to understand LUVIT in great detail.

However, distance education is very different from conventional face-to-face education and teachers must adjust themselves to this new type of education. Many traditional techniques and skills needed in face-to-face settings are not applicable in online courses as Caplan and Graham claim (Caplan & Graham, 2008). For example, it is impossible to gather students together and have them take exams at the same time, so evaluation methods needed to be altered. Teachers have to learn new teaching methods. Jonatan (pseudonym), a teacher who uses LUVIT to teach told me that “*You learn every year how you can design a course*”. He is still searching for better methods to determine just how much a student is engaged in learning activities. “*I don’t know to what extent actually how our students are reliable when they say: ok, we agree to meet online. I don’t even know if they show up*”. Even though he has been an online course teacher for many years, Jonatan admits that there are lots of things about teaching to learn. New technologies continue to emerge, so teachers cannot stay with old approaches. Contrary to promoters’ beliefs, however, he still doesn’t think that he has to be trained. He can learn the software himself and can always find answers in the manual if he does not understand something.

Mahdizadeh, Biemans, and Mulder indicate that personal opinions about computers and the web significantly influence the propensity of lecturers to develop online courses (cited from Holley & Oliver, 2010). Unfortunately, not every teacher is familiar with distance education and related knowledge. Some teachers believe they can set up and run online courses themselves, but this may not be the truth. Furthermore, being familiar with the technology is not enough. Being creative in the use of the technology, so you can teach more effectively is valued in distance education (Caplan & Graham, 2008). Some others are simply not interested

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in learning new skills. As a result, some teachers do not know how to apply LUVIT in a creative and productive way. They do simply upload files for students to view and download. They are using ‘traditional’ ways to present the course. It is possible to create a course combined with various learning activities, such as live chat rooms, streaming video, pre-recorded videos, discussion forums, but some teachers never consider applying these techniques. To them, LUVIT is merely a place for storing and sharing documents. Although distance education is learner-centered, teachers play an extremely important role, so they need to be trained as promoters suggest.

Teachers also have to be more available online to keep students motivated. Emalia, another teacher who uses LUVIT in her teaching discusses her teaching experience in online courses and on-campus courses:

“You try to be more available online than you do when you are teaching in a class. Of course students can send you e-mails. I tried to be more cautious and reply faster... I check my messages constantly, what they’re doing, who is online... You have to be more engaged and available as a teacher”.

She confirms that asynchronous replies might reduce student interest and might increase feelings of frustration and loneliness (Contreras-Castillo, Favela, Pérez-Fragoso, & Santamaría-del-Angel, 2004). Jonatan agrees that communication is limited in distance education since *“compared to in class, you have many more communication genres with students and many more tools”*. At the same time, he thinks distance education brings more freedom to students. Contrary to teachers in online courses, students are freer when it comes to means of communication. His experience supports the idea that it is easier for students to express themselves in web-based courses.

“In a distance course, where you have a great variety of communication channels, students can kind of choose to some extent what they like... Some students prefer discussion forums where they can firstly think about what they contribute, and structure it, and then post it to a forum... This is also something, the possibility to give choice to students”.

In a sense, this advances equality between teachers and students. Teachers are more limited, while students are less restricted.

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Stakeholders in the web-based LATHE course: Students

The situation for students is even more complex. First of all, the LATHE course is mandatory for all professors and potential professors at Lund University. They must take it. The reason that some students choose the LATHE course in the web-based format is not because they prefer distance education, but because they have no alternative. For example, if a student cannot attend learning and teaching courses given by his/her faculty, then he/she must take this course instead. One of the students, Karin (pseudonym), did not even know that she was placed in a web-based LATHE class until the course started. She was in the course simply because the secretary of her faculty placed her there. In addition, students come from various countries and diverse disciplines. Some are experienced teachers, while others are Ph.D. students with very little or no teaching experience. The composition of the web-based LATHE course is highly heterogeneous. Furthermore, only a few of the students had taken online courses before, but those that did took courses with different LMS, so they were unfamiliar with LUVIT. Most of them did not know what they were facing in the web-based LATHE course.

Thus, students' expectations and problem-solving strategies are based on their previous learning experiences. Orlikowski and Gash proposed the concept of 'technological frame', which they defined saying that "To interact with technology, people have to make sense of it; and in the sense-making process, they develop particular assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of the technology, which then serve to shape subsequent actions toward it" (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994, p.175). Students use their own knowledge to understand and interpret LUVIT and the LATHE course and their assumptions and expectations differ greatly. Not surprisingly, this is especially influenced by their original disciplines. "Each discipline or field of study contains a world view that provides often unique ways of understanding and talking about knowledge" (Anderson, 2004, p.37).

Although he has a background in linguistics, Lorenzo (pseudonym), a student who enrolled the web-based LATHE courses sometimes found it difficult to communicate online. He still enjoyed participating in discussions very much. He was used to discussing things with others and the discussions were his favorite part of the LATHE course. In contrast, Darren (pseudonym), a Ph.D. student in the physical chemistry department, told me that he always tried to find the 'answer' or the 'truth' in discussions and that he was kind of disappointed that conclusions arrived at on the discussion forum were not clear enough for him. As such, he did not like to spend too much time on the discussion forum. Other students in the physical

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chemistry department had similar views. Apparently, these different attitudes towards the same activity were influenced by their different educational backgrounds.

This does not mean students from scientific fields did not like to exchange ideas about what they learned in the LATHE course. Nevertheless, most students preferred talking with people around them in person, rather than speaking with classmates online. Even though students in the web-based LATHE courses met once or twice in face-to-face meetings, they knew that they had been put into one group and had to peer-review each other. They still liked discussing things with people they could meet and talk with directly, such as colleagues who had taken the LATHE course before. Darren did not like to join the discussion forum, but he discussed things with his colleagues often. Moreover, when asked to post discussions online, they generally declined. Either they thought their conclusions were too general or too insignificant to share with others or that the conclusions were too specific to be used by participants from other disciplines. Therefore, it was difficult for students to form a cohesive group in the online course. This does not mean diversity among students is less vital in distance education. Diversity is still very important in the LATHE course. Students were interested in knowing what people with different backgrounds think about an issue and they did learn from each other. Nevertheless, benefit of diversity in distance education might be less obvious than it is in a real classroom.

Promoters and teachers also believe that the online environment is helpful in realizing equality among teachers and students. It might also be true that students are less nervous when writing posts compared to speaking in public. Jonatan, one of the teachers, observed that students who were shy and lacked confidence with their language skills were more active and willing to share their opinions on online courses. However, students were also limited in another way, i.e., it was not necessarily an easier and friendlier learning environment for students when compared with on-campus education. First, written text is traceable. All the participants, teachers and students alike, could log onto LUVIT and read texts at any time. Contributions were kept in the forum throughout the course. Students were 'recorded', so they might not be more comfortable and confident in virtual classrooms than in on-campus classrooms. Just like Contreras-Castillo *et al.* indicate, "students may in some cases feel inhibited from contributing in asynchronous discussion boards since contributions can be accessed by all participants including the instructor" (Contreras-Castillo *et al.*, 2004, cited from Hrastinski, 2006, p.118). Students' thoughts are exposed to all participants.

3.4 Sensory experience in the virtual classroom

It has been shown that learning that involves multisensory experience and multisensory training can enhance learning outcome. According to Shams and Seitz, humans live in and have evolved to behave in multisensory environments. Greater and more efficient learning occurs in multisensory settings (Shams & Seitz, 2008). Nevertheless, teaching, learning, and communication in the web-based LATHE course occurred mainly using texts. From the very beginning of web-based LATHE courses, all information and instructions are conveyed in written form. Students have to read more than ten documents about the course and the platform and then they must read other literature, course content, and posts on the discussion forum. Moreover, the texts have no pictures and students only come in contact with their mouses and keyboards. In addition, depending on the physical location of the student, there are seldom any sounds and there is no smell at all in virtual classrooms. With the exception of virtual perception, students of the web-based LATHE courses did not have a shared sensory experience.

This is partly due to the nature of the online environment. In most cases, users can only see and read a webpage. Perhaps some webpages provide background music, but the music is not necessarily related to the content and it is not easy to get information from background music. Therefore, users have to concentrate on the written texts. Cyberspace can be seen as composed of texts, rather than a site for interaction and then using the Internet turns into a process of reading and writing texts (Hine, 2000). However, it also means students have to read much more than when taking a face-to-face course. Information delivered through oral communication cannot be presented in asynchronous online courses easily. In other words, almost the entire course is carried out using written text and the sensory experience is reduced to visual perception, i.e., reading information in black and white. The sensory experience in web-based LATHE courses is very limited.

Not surprisingly, many students get tired of so much reading. *“With the forum and discussion, it takes a lot of time to READ all the contributions”*. Berta (pseudonym) described her feelings about discussion forum. She was not the only one to feel that the reading never seemed to end. Zhang *et al.* had similar observations: “some e-learning systems only present text-based learning materials, which can lead to boredom and disengagement in students and prevent them from gaining a good understanding of a topic” (Zhang *et al.*, 2004, p.76). Although there were

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some video clips in the course, they were not the main part and were not meant to be interactive. Students did not get enough multiple sensory experience. All they did was read.

Chapter 4: Discussion – challenges in distance education

In earlier chapters, the focus was on empirical materials and theories from mainly pedagogical literature. In this chapter, cultural analytic theories are included to discuss phenomena which occur in distance education. This chapter elaborates on flexibility, communication, and bodies in distance education.

4.1 Flexibility in distance education

When asked what the benefits of distance education are, almost all the interviewees, students, teachers, and promoters included, agreed that flexibility is the greatest advantage of distance education. After all, distance education, as the term itself implies, means students and their teacher are often separated. “Separation of the student and the teacher is a fundamental characteristic of distance education” (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008, p.27). Even though most people take flexibility in distance – in time, in location, and in learning rhythm – for granted, this thesis is going to point out that flexibility in distance education is a myth of sorts. That is to say, there is a gap between what the stakeholders believe is made available and the reality. At a bare minimum, flexibility in distance education does not always have positive effects.

Space

I will start the discussion with flexibility in space. Since the student and the teacher do not have to travel to an appointed place, it is said that participants are free from the restrictions of space. Nevertheless, it is impossible for participants to be fully detached from the physical surrounding. Learners are affected by the sounds, sights, and smells around them no matter how hard they try to concentrate on course content.

In addition, the responsibility of creating learning environment in distance education lies on the learners themselves. Thus, students have to find a suitable location to undertake learning activities. Some students choose to study at home, because they are disturbed by activity, sights, and sounds around them in the office. Others tend to study at the office, because the physical environment is more peaceful and quieter when compared with their home space. For example, Lorenzo chose to learn in his office, because “*I have three kids, so it’s better here (in the office),*

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it's quiet here. Sometimes I come here on weekend. Otherwise I have to work into the night (at home)". On the other hand, Berta likes to study at home. She explained that *"in the office I am often distracted by other obligations and people coming and going. I am much more efficient and focus better when I am at home"*.

These interviews suggest that no matter where students choose to undertake online courses, they must be able to control the space. Lorenzo had to compromise with his family at home, so he came to his office even on weekends. Berta could not control people coming and talking to her in the office, so did her learning at home. In other words, not every location meets the requirements. That is to say, the reason they choose to study at home or at the office is not because they prefer that particular environment; rather, it is because other places are less desirable and they have no alternative. Their decisions are not really made out of free choice. Both Lorenzo and Berta agreed that the greatest advantage to distance education is flexibility and flexibility – being able to study anytime, anywhere – is the main reason why Berta decided to take the LATHE course in web-based form instead of classroom-based form. However, they were doing something different from what they thought they would be doing. They seldom undertook learning activities elsewhere. In theory, it is possible for learners to access information without time and location restraints if they have a suitable computer and Internet connection. But research indicates that appropriate equipment and Internet only fulfill the basic requirements for taking distance courses, but do not constitute a satisfactory learning environment.

Time

Time is also an important issue when it comes to flexibility. Time is intertwined with space.

When asked where she studies, Emilia (pseudonym) answered:

"I can study both at home and in the office. I study more at home, however, because I work full time. Actually, I almost always study outside of working hours... It is not about being disturbed. I just don't have the time. I don't have time to do it in the office".

Emilia's study location was determined primarily by time restrictions. Physical surroundings did not matter to her. She was too busy to study at the office, so she studied at home. Time and space must both be considered when creating a suitable learning environment.

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In addition, distance education is meant to provide students opportunities to access the course by overcoming barriers of time and space. When a course is available at any time, “any time” comes to mean “all the time”. Sophie (pseudonym) summed up her learning experience about the web-based LATHE course in one sentence: “*For me, it’s all about time*”. As a diligent student, she worked hard on this course. She printed out everything and read the materials regardless of where she was. She read on the bus ride home, in the office during breaks, and at home in bed before sleeping. Sophie felt that her studies never seemed to end. She was not the only one who felt that way. Sophie made this statement in a focus group interview and all the other participants agreed with her. Identical opinions were expressed in other individual interviews, too. In other words, the more flexible a course is time-wise, the more time students spend on it.

Similar situations have been observed by Goodin, Rice, Bittman, and Saunders. According to their research on time-poverty, i.e., not having enough time to do what one has to do, a great deal of time pressure is actually discretionary and of an individual’s own making. Time pressure is “a consequence of choice rather than necessity” (Goodin *et al.*, 2005, p.45). They point out that people who have the least discretionary time, such as single parents, are under the illusion of having the least time pressure, while people who are supposed to have more free time, such as double-income couples without children, are under the illusion of having the greatest time pressure (Goodin *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, the sense of time pressure is more an illusion rather than a reality.

The case is very similar in distance education. Students feel the need to learn every detail in their course materials, so they ‘choose’ to work more and study more. It is true that students are able to learn whenever they like, but this fact does not always lead to better results. Once they have the power to decide how much time and effort they will put into their learning activities, some students tend to spend as much time as possible on their online courses. In other words, flexible time can be regarded as lack of control over working hours, if the student does not plan his/her schedule well.

The pros and cons of temporal flexibility

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Additionally, once a module is open to learners, students can access course content and the discussion forum whenever they want. That is to say, it is possible for students to participate in discussions about topics from a long time ago and join any discussion at their own learning pace. For example, module two was opened in September, but a post put online on November 26. If anybody replied to a student's contribution, the student had to go back and check what they had to say. Therefore, the pace of study was not completely decided by the students themselves. Surprisingly, this took away from the sense of accomplishment, because learners felt they would never see the end of a module. A sense of accomplishment is a vital element in conversation. Xin and Feenberg indicated that dialogue, whether online or face-to-face, is not merely a cognitive process. It involves the whole person and should be emotionally rewarding (Xin & Feenberg, 2006). They explained it further, saying that the excitement generated from interaction stimulates a high degree of alertness and involvement intrinsically. A sense of accomplishment, the suspense provoked by waiting for responses and the surprise triggered by unexpected interventions are intrinsic motivations in contrast to extrinsic motivations, such as a requirement to participate (Xin & Feenberg, 2006).

This is not the only problem with flexibility in the learning pace of the individual. Many researchers have pointed out that different learning paces and learning strategies are an obstacle to collaborative efforts (Anderson, 2008; Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). Berta described how she felt about the discussions forum: *"This may make the quality of discussion a little bit lower because you read all the contributions before answering them. You are limited in that sense"*. Some students prefer posting their thoughts as soon as a new module is open. Others like to wait until they feel they are fully prepared and the assignment deadline is near. Those who decide to join discussions later have to read more posts and must offer ideas that differ from earlier ones. That is to say, they have to put more effort into the same course.

Discussion is part of the learning activities and joining discussions is mandatory in the LATHE course. However, the self-learning environment is not conducive to discussion. Lorenzo shared his opinion about the discussion forum:

"Sometimes, it is difficult with the course, because you have to wait until people work on the posts. And maybe at a certain moment, I have to teach or have other things to do. So it is difficult to interact if nobody is on the net. There are some people that post immediately, but for most of them, you have to wait until the last moment. It is difficult to discuss, too late to discuss".

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Even though Lorenzo wanted to learn at his own pace, he had to wait for others. To keep abreast of the discussions, he had to log in and check the posts almost every day, because he could not carry out discussions by himself. He was not the only one to say this. Ironically, flexibility in one sense means inflexibility in another. Flexibility is not free. Being free to compose posts and join discussions at any time means delays in response.

Edwards pointed out that “It is in such conceptions that cyberspace too easily becomes a cyber-utopia of openness and democracy – of an uncritical concept of mobility” (Edwards, 2012, p.211). Flexibility is also too readily regarded as an intrinsic part of distance education. When people are asked what they think the greatest advantage of distance education is, all interviewees – students, teachers, and promoters, point out flexibility in time, space, and pace (or rhythm) as their answer. The answer almost seems like a reflex, with interviewees offering the answer almost automatically. Their actions, however, belie their words. The students always studied in certain places, at certain times. Their actions had become routine and did not shift flexibly in any significant way. Moreover, they were not aware that the price of this “flexibility” was time wasted waiting for others to respond and experiencing trouble in collaboration. As such, the idea that “flexibility” is only something good is highly suspect.

4.2 Communication in distance education

It is natural to assume that promoters, teachers, and students are all in the same context. Students take the same course and they engage in discussions on the forum often. The teacher keeps track of student progress during the course and likely understands the students well. The promoters might not join in on classes much, but they are the ones who know the platform and course well. Most importantly, all participants work towards the same goal—making the students better teachers. However, empirical data suggests this is not always the case. The details are explained in the following section.

Gaps between and among different stakeholders

As described in chapter three, stakeholders in distance education have different assignments and face different challenges. In other words, promoters, teachers, and students have their own

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expectations and assumptions about and understanding of distance education. As a consequence, they experience it differently. Bijker mentioned the concept of “interpretive flexibility”. He explained, “For different social groups, the artifact presents itself as essentially different artifacts” (Bijker, 1992, p.76). In addition, cyberspace is an imaginary space. As mentioned in chapter three, participants do not share the same physical surroundings and each has their own sensory experience. Thus, even though they are using the same platform, LUVIT, students, teachers, and promoters treat and think about the virtual classroom differently due to their different experience and different levels of knowledge about computers and LUVIT. Each stakeholder has his/her own background and develop their own expectations, assumptions, and knowledge based on their previous experience. In short, although it seems that all stakeholders are working toward the same goal, they are, in fact, working and staying in their own context.

The students are required to use LUVIT to participate in all learning exercises. They do not have the freedom to choose a platform, nor the activities they want to take part in. Their job is to follow instructions. For teachers, LUVIT is a tool to enhance and support their teaching. They are used to face-to-face education and they have to learn new methods to present and deliver course content and knowledge to students. Finally, promoters are the ones who understand LUVIT and distance education best. They are familiar with theories and practice about education and LUVIT. Their task is to help users, both teachers and students, conduct and experience online courses smoothly. It is not surprising that promoters, teachers, and students have different interpretations of LUVIT, even though they are in the same class. They develop their own contexts and stay in those contexts through their own ‘technological frame’ which was explained in chapter three.

Differences exist among stakeholders in the same category as well. The students are from different backgrounds and each of them has different levels of understanding of and experience with distance education. Differences among teachers are also great. Teachers are encouraged, but not required, to take training courses. Teachers do not have to know LUVIT and distance learning well before using LATHE to support their teaching. Therefore, they do not always use LUVIT as promoters suggest.

Moreover, there is a gap between what one group of stakeholders thinks another group of stakeholders will do and what they actually do. Promoters expect teachers to provide feedback on their experience, so they can improve LUVIT. Promoters compared teachers to producers.

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That is to say, in promoters' minds, teachers are supposed to be part of the chain that provides both educational content and platform. As such, they should actively assist promoters. However, teachers, in fact, regard themselves as consumers. They do not think that they are obligated to help promoters. Jonatan, a teacher who has used LUVIT for several years, stated, "*if software needs a course or a handbook, it can be designed in a better way. Good software should be intuitive*". He thinks LUVIT is a little bit too complicated to use, both for students and teachers. Some functions are hidden, some are not needed. For teachers, it is difficult to copy course materials from one year to the next. The interface is not user-friendly enough. But Jonatan has never thought about providing feedback to the LUVIT providers. He believes that the developers of LUVIT, the promoters, know LUVIT and IT technologies better and that promoters should be able to find a better solution than he.

The situation was similar among students. The importance of student feedback is well known and recognized by many researchers. It can provide insight into the design of the learning experience and help developers and teachers improve lesson design and instruction delivery (Smaldino *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, students tend to blame themselves for every difficulty they face. When Berta was asked what she thought about LUVIT, she told me that the interface was not easy to use, but that it was because she was too clumsy to understand LUVIT. Emilia missed the deadline for submission of an assignment, because she did not notice that two modules were open at the same time. The bulletin board showed the information, but she did not notice it. This might not have been all her fault. How updated information was presented could be made more obvious. However, Emilia believes that it was her fault. Thus, even if there was really a problem with LUVIT, it was possible that no one reported back to the promoters. Both teachers and students regarded themselves as consumers. They were not responsible for making LUVIT a better LMS. That is the promoters' job. LUVIT is not the best platform, but it is acceptable and they were satisfied with it. At the same time, teachers and students were not confident about their opinions—promoters know LUVIT, distance education, and IT technologies far better than they do. If promoters believed it was good, it was probably good. How could they possibly offer advice that the promoters had never thought of before?

Communication inefficiency in distance education

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However, these gaps do not close or merge together as a result of communication between stakeholders during online courses. The nature of online environments makes communication inefficient and the barriers between them are not easy to break down and even hard to notice.

In chapter two, problems concerning online communication were presented, including interaction during online learning activities is likely infrequent and irregular, student interest might decrease because of delays in asynchronous replies, and informal interaction is lacking. But there are other challenges in distance education. First, the presence of a person is weak in web-based courses. Again, this is partly because of lack of sensory experience in distance education. When talking with a person face to face, it is possible to see, hear, and even smell that person. There are abundant cues with which participants form impressions and judgments.

However, the connection between the content of a post and the writer is weak in a text-based environment. Not only can students not see and hear other people during discussions, they usually focus primarily on content. Only when post content is really good or really bad do they become curious about the post contributor. Berta told me that *“I think it is a problem of online system. I don't focus on who the answer comes from. I focus more on the content”*. This might actually be considered an advantage of distance education, however because it ‘helps’ people concentrate on course content as Duffy and Kirkley suggest (Duffy & Kirkley, 2004). Some students, such as Berta, would like to have had more informal interaction. They would like to have known more about the person. Post content was not the only thing students were interested in. They were interested in the context—how the idea was formed and developed in the writer’s mind, as well. To be able to see the context in a short post, the reader has to know the post contributor, to construct images of the person using a series of events and relations between reader and writer. This is difficult to do in an online environment that lasts three months.

This is also a challenge for teachers who need to build their sense of existence. Although teachers do log into LUVIT and comment on the posts frequently, readers focus on the content, but not the contributor, so they do not notice it is the teacher who is commenting. Therefore, it is not easy for teachers to mediate a discussion. As pointed out in chapter three, diversity among students sometimes makes online communication difficult. Students are concerned that their opinions will not be understood by classmates from different disciplines. In a classroom-based LATHE course, it might be also a problem, but there is a teacher to lead the

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discussion most of the time. The teacher can help participants clarify their ideas and points and reflect on their experiences.

Deference and demeanor in discussion forum

“You don’t want to write the first thing that comes to your mind. You try to be a little bit articulate. You want to be cleverer when you answer” said Lorenzo, a student in a LATHE online course.

Another kind of challenge faced by web-based LATHE courses participants has to do with deference and demeanor. Goffman illustrated that rules of conduct influence individuals in two ways: directly as obligations and indirectly as expectations. Obligations are defined as how a person as an actor conducts himself/herself unthinkingly based on his/her inner moral constraints. Expectations indicate how others as recipients are morally bound to react to him/her (Goffman, 1956). Furthermore, all activities carry some ceremonial meaning. Whether a person obeys or breaks the rules, it conveys something. That is to say, as long as any other person is present, an individual must behave as a well demeaned person and his/her demeanor will be accepted, then he/she will be treated by others with deference. It could be said that “the rules of conduct which bind the actor and the recipient together are the bindings of society” (Goffman, 1956, p.496).

Goffman’s theory can be applied to distance education. In web-based LATHE courses, students seldom talked or interacted with others directly. The discussion forum was the main place they communicated with each other and the posts were the major vehicle through which they learned about and judged other participants. In addition, since students had time to structure and compose posts, they were supposed to perform better than they would in face-to-face synchronous discussions. In Goffman’s words, the students have the obligation to produce high quality posts to show that they are good students and that they are willing to join discussions, whether they like them or not. They also expect others to present good posts as well, so that the discussion can proceed smoothly. That is to say, if everyone keeps his/her demeanor, a harmonious atmosphere is formed and the ‘game’ can continue.

Nevertheless, it is not easy to display and perceive demeanor in online environments. First, interaction in asynchronous online courses is inevitably discontinued and fragmental, since participants can join the discussion and post opinions at any time. But Goffman has showed

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that in social activities, sociality does not lie in ideas and discourse, but in a person's movement and response to the movements of others in the immediate environment. For example, in the case of walking down a city street, sociality is in one's step, direction, and pace (Goffman, 1971, cited from Ingold, 2004). However, in online courses, participants cannot act, observe, and respond to others' movements directly and instantly. The demeanor, showed after some delay, is the result of pondering and filtering. It may not reveal a person's true demeanor, so it would seem to be less reliable. Just as Lorenzo wants to be 'cleverer' when he gives answers in the discussion forum. He can pretend to be more brilliant than he usually is in face-to-face occasions.

The second reason also has to do with lack of visual cues and auditory intonation. Body language and tone of voice cannot be delivered through text-based media (Hrastinski, 2006). For example, it is impossible to show agreement during online discussions by simply nodding. Participants must write something down and post it. They have a limited number of tools and clues to show demeanor and it is easy to interpret others' demeanor incorrectly. Therefore, post content is easily misunderstood in online communication and needs to be fully explained. Additionally, the readers of a text cannot easily ask the author what he/she meant and the author cannot answer questions from readers immediately either. Hine points out that "The focus in consuming texts is therefore placed far more on the interpretive work done by readers and less on a shared understanding between authors and readers" (Hine, 2000, p.50). Thus, writers must put more effort into making sure their intention is interpreted and understood accurately.

As a result, both students and teachers have to be extra careful when they write something on the forum. In addition, lack of informal interaction is a common phenomenon in distance education as mentioned in chapter two. A good post is supposed to focus on the topic. There is no room for students to exchange ideas freely and easily. There is no place for them to open up a new topic or make comments that are less relevant to the LATHE course. In other words, participants do not have many opportunities to reverse bad impressions. Students are aware of this and feel it is not always easy to express themselves in online environment. Berta, one of the students said:

"You don't see other people. Maybe sometimes you have to be very careful not to make somebody feel bad when you answer, because somebody may read your

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answer differently than you intended. Sometimes I think twice before send messages”.

Contrary to the assumption of promoters, the online environment is not necessarily a more relaxed place for participants to exchange ideas. While it is true that students feel more secure in terms of language barriers and having adequate time for preparation, it is also true that students have to spend extra time and effort to create a better image of themselves. Maybe this is the reason that web-based courses are more time consuming than on-campus courses: Students not only have to learn the course content and how to use the equipment and LUVIT well, they also have to write and interpret posts attentively.

Not being in the same place (learning context)

Due to the inefficient communication in distance education, conversations between promoters, teachers, and students and conversations among students are unavoidably rare. However, as explained before, different stakeholders have different expectations and assumptions about and understanding of web-based LATHE courses and LUVIT. They are all in different contexts and do not share the surrounding world much. As a result, gaps between different stakeholders cannot be reduced during the teaching and learning process. On the contrary, they are fostered. Moreover, each stakeholder takes his/her context for granted and the gaps are seldom discussed, yet contexts have a great influence on how stakeholders think and act toward web-based LATHE courses and LUVIT. However, according to Xin and Feenberg, “successful educational experience must take account of both the learner’s personal world and the shared surrounding world. Social context greatly affects the process and outcome of learning” (Xin & Feenberg, 2006, p.7). The different contexts are major obstacles both for teaching and learning. These gaps must be dealt with through the collaboration of all stakeholders, so that the benefits of distance learning can be truly realized.

4.3 The absent body in distance education

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The mind is the focus in education. It has long been a tendency to treat the mind and body separately. Dominant discourses in Western society view the body as a physical and biological given and it has been understood as a kind of ‘natural’ phenomenon until recently (Wright, 2000). However, the body does play an important role in education.

First of all, in his research of a more grounded approach to human movement and environmental perception, Ingold pointed out that “cognition should not be *set off* from locomotion, along the lines of a division between head and heels, since walking is itself a form of circumambulatory knowing” (Ingold, 2004, p.331). He explained that we tend to assume things are perceived from a stationary platform, as if we were sitting in a chair observing things without thinking or involving our legs and feet. However, we perceive things not from a single fixed point, but rather walking by and around them in real life. As a result, perception is, in fact, a function of movement and what we perceive depends on how we move.

With his explanation, the difference between the body in distance education and in on-campus education is quite obvious. In a real classroom, where a student sits matters. His/her location influences how he/she perceives the course. Students who sit in front rows perceive the class differently and participate to different degrees from students who sit in the back of the classroom. When sitting at a round table, students in different seats see things from different angles and hear lectures and discussions at different volumes. Students can also move from one place to other places in the classroom and to perceive objects and the atmosphere in the classroom with all their sensory organs. A lecture can be presented and experienced with various parts of the body and senses. All this motion and perception are part of the learning experience and shape the understanding of what is learned in class.

In contrast, once they logged into LUVIT, all the students in the web-based LATHE course saw the same screen on their computers. It did not matter where they sat, how the courses were presented and perceived was not affected by their physical location. Unlike real classrooms where the number of seats is limited and a seat cannot be occupied by two persons. It is always possible for course participants to find a suitable place to learn. Students are in ‘equal position’ all the time. Furthermore, the learning experience in distance education is almost motionless. The only thing participants need to do is click on the mouse and type on the keyboard. Online courses are static and there is no way to observe a lecture from a

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different angle. The body is seldom activated during online learning activities; therefore, cognition developed in distance education is inevitably weaker.

Just as footwear technology, such as skis, running shoes, and flippers, has altered our knowledge of the environment (Ingold, 2004), computer and Internet technology has also changed the way we perceive another environment: cyberspace. In distance education, there is a place and participants are in that place, but it is a space only for the mind. Only the mind can reach the place and it works as if the body does not exist. Thus, it creates and increases the gap between mind and body. Ingold illustrated that the chair enables sitters to think without the use of the lower part of the body at all (Ingold, 2004). With computers and the Internet, this kind of detachment is even greater. As described earlier, only a little hand motion is required when participating in online courses. Users do not even have to activate the rest of their bodies. Moreover, not only is movement not needed, in many cases, senses we expect would be needed for perception are disengaged, because most participants prefer a quiet, distraction-free learning environment, which usually means a minimum of noise and smells.

However, the body is not merely a vehicle for the mind. Knowledge is shaped by our motions and senses. The body and the mind cannot be separated. However, technology today cannot transport the physical body into cyberspace, so the gap between mind and body cannot be closed yet. As a result, distance education is of necessity distinct from what exists in on-campus education. Old practices that we take for granted are no more applicable. All stakeholders have to realize this and strive to create new knowledge and practices better suited to distance education.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and suggestions

In this chapter, the various gaps existent in distance education are categorized and summed up and possible solutions proposed and discussed. Although this thesis concentrates on challenges faced by distance education today, the message is not that distance education is unproductive. On the contrary, I believe that distance education is necessary and the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The benefits of distance education are huge and real. Students who cannot attend regular on-campus courses for whatever reason can now receive educations. However, it is also true that there is room for improvement and research from cultural analytic perspective can help improve distance education.

5.1 Various gaps in distance education

To conclude, there are various gaps in the implementation of distance education. First of all, there is a gap when it comes to sensory experience. For web-based LATHE course participants, the visual sense is the primary sense used. Most participants cannot do others things at the same time, such as listen to music, if they want to concentrate on their reading. Even if they are able to work and listen to music at the same time, their auditory sensations are irrelevant to the course content. Auditory sensations are not related to the course. Users obviously use their sense of touch when they interact through their keyboards, but this is probably experienced as taking place outside the realm of the virtual classroom. The virtual classroom is odorless, tasteless, and almost void of haptic sensations. Therefore, students cannot perceive through a corporeal sensory experience that they are learning in a classroom. All they perceive are texts on screens or printed out on paper and most of the readings are merely texts in black and white. Together with the lack of a sense of accomplishment referred to in chapter three, students might tire of the course easily.

There is also a gap between mind and body. This is mainly due to the restrictions of technology to date, since cyberspace can only be reached and perceived by the mind. However, in a face-to-face classroom, we learn with the whole body, with our all senses. Our knowledge is constructed through movement and sensory experience. They are inseparable parts of the learning experience. Therefore, distance education is unavoidably distinct from traditional on-campus education. Not only do teachers need to learn new skills and

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technology to give lectures online, but also students need to find new methods and approaches to learning.

Another gap is found in communication. This is due partly to the nature of distance education—once again characterized by the lack of sensory experience. Visual cues and voice intonation are difficult to present in an online environment, making it easy to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. In addition, the discussion forum is about the only place where participants can exchange opinions. What is more, participants can only construct a sophisticated image of themselves using written text within the specific designed context of the forum. Thus, both students and teachers have to be extremely careful about what they write. The presence of the person is weak in distance education, because posted content is much more important and noticeable than the contributor behind the post. There is a gap between what a person writes, the appearance of the person, and maybe even who the person is. Therefore, interaction among online courses participants is rare and inefficient and it is difficult for participants to form a coherent group.

At the same time, different groups of stakeholders have different assumptions, expectations, and understanding regarding distance education. Each person has his/her own ideas about the LATHE course based on his/her previous learning experience. This is influenced by his/her computer skills and personality as well. An individual's understanding of the virtual classroom depends on how willing and how good the individual is at controlling LMS LUVIT. Once again, this gap, different expectations, is affected greatly by another gap, difficulty in communication, mentioned earlier. Due to difficulty in communication, stakeholders find it difficult to exchange opinions and shrink these gaps. They are still trapped in their own contexts even though they are all involved in the same course. LUVIT is not like other software environments, such as Facebook, which provide social networking services. Although promoters have tried to incorporate Web 2.0 tools into LUVIT, the attempts have not been very successful. LUVIT is meant for education and most students come only for learning. Teachers might pay attention to who is online, but students seldom hang on LUVIT and follow others.

There is also a gap between participants' image of distance education and their actual practice. This gap can be divided into two types. First, the gap between a person's belief and his/her behavior. Some assumptions are taken for granted and seldom questioned. All interviewees believed that distance education is flexible in time, space, and learning pace, but they almost

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always performed their studies at fixed times and in fixed locations. It turns out that their distance education practices were not as flexible as they believed or at least not as they stated during the interviews. Also, the cost of flexibility is often neglected. Having the flexibility to write posts when you want means that others have the same flexibility in writing posts, resulting in time wasted waiting for replies. Flexibility in learning strategy means difficulty in collaborative efforts. Having the flexibility to discuss a topic when you want means lack of a clear end to modules. Even though participants pointed out these shortcomings themselves, they did not realize that they represent the opposite of flexibility.

Another gap exists between a person's beliefs and another person's behavior. Teachers and promoters believe that the online environment makes it easier for students to express their opinions freely. This is, to a certain extent, correct. Students, however, tend to worry about how they are perceived by others and may feel restricted. In addition, promoters believe that LUVIT is a multi-function platform that can be applied creatively by teachers. However, teachers seem to use LUVIT in routine ways that incorporate little ingenuity. They use LUVIT primarily as a place to store and share documents. For their part, promoters regard teachers as producers that should be responsible for enhancing the quality of LUVIT, but teachers (and students) regard themselves primarily as consumers. They are not confident with their opinions as explained in part three. They are waiting for the promoters to design a better LMS. They do not give feedback or actively assist promoters.

5.2 To bridge these gaps

Even though this paper mainly focuses on the negative side of distance education, there are still advantages to distance education. Many students agree that they learned a great deal from the web-based LATHE course and some stated that they prefer web-based LATHE courses to face-to-face LATHE courses. These students have some characteristics in common. They are self-disciplined and punctual. Most important of all, they know distance education well and understand the challenges they will face and how they should prepare before attending web-based courses. Therefore, the gaps discussed in this thesis are not experienced as much by these students.

However, in order to reduce these gaps, my first suggestion is that teachers and students need to learn more about LUVIT. There is nothing wrong with treating students as customers, but a

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better understanding of LUVIT can lead to a better experience. Furthermore, distance learning is not a free market. Students are not free to choose what they like. They simply follow the teacher's instructions. They cannot ask the teacher to run the course with a specific LMS, nor have the teacher design the course based on their preferences. There are no optional 'products' for them to select from. In addition, not every student is familiar with computers and other relevant skills and not every student is able to explore the virtual classroom by him/herself. They need help to become accustomed to their online surroundings.

Students also need to know what online courses are like beforehand. Many students know nothing about distance education and are surprised to learn that it is much more time consuming and difficult than they anticipated. They have to realize that this is a new form of education and that knowledge and practices that are used in face-to-face classrooms might not be useful anymore. And even if an LMS does offer some flexibility, that does not mean it will be an easy experience. In fact, students must spend much time on it. For instance, all discussion is performed using only written texts, students have to put effort into creating high quality texts, and they must wait for the replies of others as mentioned in an earlier section. Instructions are easily misunderstood, so students have to be more careful about course information. For example, Lorenzo thought it would be a waste of time to look for designated reading materials in the library and borrow them, but in fact all the readings were prepared and shared on LUVIT. The importance of pre-learning activities has been claimed by Ally, "A variety of pre-learning activities can prepare learners for the details of the lesson, and to connect and motivate them to learn the online lesson. A rationale should be provided to inform learners of the importance" (Ally, 2008, p.36).

I would also like to suggest trying to prevent students from comparing the classroom-based LATHE course with the web-based LATHE course. Distance education is so different from on-campus education that they are simply distinct educational systems. No matter how good an online course is, it is impossible it cannot offer rich sensory experience with the technologies available today. The dynamics of interaction in online courses will never be the same as those in face-to-face courses. Several students told me about their disappointment with the course after they compared their experience in the web-based LATHE course with their friend's or colleague's experience in classroom-based LATHE courses. For instance, classroom-based LATHE participants only have to participate in obligatory meetings five times and write something on paper occasionally. In contrast, students in the web-based

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LATHE courses are required to log into LUVIT, post contributions, and complete assignments almost every week. When compared with their colleagues or friends, these students feel that the classroom-based LATHE course is easier and they think that online courses are not as good as before. Therefore, it is better to have students concentrate on the benefits of distance education, rather than on differences.

The benefits of distance education also need to be learned. This reminds me of Becker's research into marijuana use. He pointed out that marijuana users have to learn how to perceive and enjoy the effects. "Marijuana-produced sensations are not automatically or necessarily pleasurable. The taste for such experience is a socially acquired one, not different in kind from acquired tastes for oysters or dry martinis" (Becker, 1966, p.217). Of course, distance education participants are not like marijuana users. Distance education is not a "deviant behavior". But the concept behind it is similar. Participants, both teachers and students, have to learn how to apply the benefits of technologies to their learning and teaching. New technologies do not promise education will automatically be more creative, interactive, and effective.

The importance of the dynamics of interaction is a construct as well. That does not mean that communication is not real or vital in education, but what is considered crucial is established in a specific social setting. As indicated in the first part of this paper, distance education is a re-invented method of education and can be traced back to the early 1700s. In the beginning, distance education was done through the postal system or other modes of communication (Harper, Chen & Yen, 2004). Lack of face-to-face interaction was not regarded as a major problem at that time. Hacking used child abuse as an example, explaining that the behavior or practice of child abuse, the object, is real; yet the concept of child abuse is constructed. That is to say, a specific kind of abuse is separated and classified as child abuse (Hacking, 1999). It is similar in this case. Certain types of interaction are desired and valued in education and communication in distance education is judged as imperfect.

Finally, both teachers and students need to be encouraged to help improve the system. As pointed out in part three, teachers and students were reluctant to share their opinions on LUVIT, even though they had problems or were not satisfied with it. Most people tried to solve the problems themselves and seldom asked for help. With this in mind, promoters and related organizations need to do something to urge stakeholders to provide feedback.

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Furthermore, teachers can learn from each other if they are willing to share their experience and techniques on designing online courses.

In short, the responsibility of promoting quality online courses does not lie solely on a particular group of people. To improve LMS LUVIT, feedback from students and teachers is necessary. It is not enough to place the burden solely on promoters. At the same time, to create high quality online courses, teachers have to learn from promoters and each other. Good cooperation could stimulate the exchange of expertise and knowledge. The online environment is not an objective place for all students. They must be assisted to get to know virtual classroom better and this in turn will allow them to prepare better and to have a better experience. Communication and interaction among promoters, teachers, and students is important. All stakeholders have to cooperate to ensure they are in the same context, so that they are really working towards their common goal—making students better teachers.

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