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The Advantages and Drawbacks of
Highly Industrialized Systems of Learning and Teaching

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As societies become more industrialized, educators apply the practices of industry to the system of teaching and learning. By applying scientific and business principles to distance education, the development of new philosophies and theories occur. Educators like Moore and Peters use terms like mass production, division of labor, and efficiency to describe distance education practices. This paper describes and explores the advantages and drawbacks of highly industrialized systems of teaching and learning.

Advantages of Industrialized Education

By applying business concepts of industry to distance education, several advantages occur. One benefit involves the design phase of a course, where a group of people with specialized skills works on the same course. Peters (2004) describes this procedure as a division of labor. By dividing the responsibility of producing a course into several small tasks, universities and colleges find and employ instructors with the necessary skills. In the online environment, instructors can produce "learning objects" (Caplan & Graham, 2008, p.248) which provide re-usable units of highly specialized learning. For example, the same online tutorial benefits numerous teachers in multiple courses. The division of labor allows instructors to focus on their specialties (Peters, 2001). For example, by employing a web designer, a professor can concentrate on the core subject and not the technical aspects of a course.

Another benefit in using the industrialized approach to education includes standardization of courses. According to Peters (2004) and Simonson, Schlosser, and Hanson (1999), standardization produces scientific control methods and formalization. Scientific controls allow

the examination of courses in an effort to improve courses. By formalizing the steps in design and presentation of a distance education course, measurements and empirical data help isolate defects, therefore improving the quality of the course. Standardization also allows for mass production, which reduces costs (Peters, 2004). By stream lining courses, universities and colleges reproduce materials in mass, cutting down on overhead and increasing profits.

Drawbacks of Industrialized Education

The danger inherent to the process of industrialized education would be the shift in structure. According to Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance (Bernath & Vidal, 2007), a balance between dialogue, structure, and autonomous learning occurs to maintain a learning environment. By allowing too much structure, dialogue decreases and the level of autonomy required of the learner increases (Bernath & Vidal, 2007). When dialogue decreases, the "psychological space of potential misunderstanding" (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p.224) increases and the relationship between the instructor and the student suffers. Because of its importance, Moore listed dialogue in the first place in his list of constitutive concepts of distance education (Peters, 2001). Therefore, the disruption of the dialogue due to too much structure would cause a course to suffer.

The shift in structure also causes a movement in the category of autonomous learning. When structure dominates the educational process, a student's ability to make their own decisions declines (Peters, 2001). This disadvantage to industrialized education would keep the student as a passive learner. The role of the autonomous learners would dissolve as traditional classroom setting once again dominated. By keeping structure in balance, a harmony exists. Randy Garrison claims when the educator aims at an optimum balance, the results "will be socially worthwhile as well as personally meaningful" (Moore & Kearsley, 2005. p. 229).

Conclusion

By looking at the advantages and disadvantages of industrialized education, instructors and students alike can identify the balance needed for an effective and efficient educational environment. Drawbacks include a rigid structure that discourages dialogue and autonomous learning. Advantages comprise standardization and a division of labor, which increases productivity and profits. By recognizing these advantages and disadvantages, instructors can use the concepts of industrialized educational to improve their distance education courses.

References

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