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Industrialized Systems of Learning and Teaching: Advantages and Drawbacks with Special Emphasis on the United Kingdom's Open University

Introduction

Using the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU) as an example of a highly industrialized system of learning and teaching, this paper will examine specific advantages and drawbacks of such systems using scholarly research and some personal experience.

At its simplest; industrialization is a process that introduces "industry into (an area) on a large scale" (Dictionary Reference, n.d.). Distance education (DE), in very generic terms, is uniquely industrial in that it is a system of education 'pioneered by businessmen' and built upon a foundation of objectification making it accessible on a large scale (Peters, 2001, pp. 110 – 111). Teachers became producers of a product and learners became consumers of that product. Using the product is not limited to specific times or a single location, but can be used at a time and place convenient to the product's purchaser.

Advantages

A primary advantage of a highly industrialized system of learning and teaching as evidenced by the United Kingdom's Open University (UKOU) is accessibility. UKOU is an excellent example of this because their "mission is to make university study available to anybody, everywhere and at any time"(Open University, n.d.). This charitable focus is evident in their charter and exemplified in their current Open Learn project, which offers online learning at no cost (Get Started – Learn, n.d.). The Open Learn project epitomizes their humanitarian ethos and eliminates the issue of cost for those who simply want to increase or expand their knowledge.

Another advantage that is uniquely industrial is the focus that UKOU places on research and development. Continuous research keeps a business ahead of their competition. It ensures that the business will keep its finger on the pulse of the consumer and meet the consumer's needs at the moment the consumer realizes the need exists. Peters (2001) description of the problems faced by UKOU and their focus on "continuous assessment" exemplifies the fact that UKOU understands that continually examining their system is required if they are to meet their goal of accessible learning while producing a product that consumers want to buy (p. 70).

Drawbacks

For many people, making a product accessible to the masses is perceived as an area of concern. For example, a verified Rembrandt painting is exclusive and costly and only a limited number of people or businesses can afford to purchase the product. Creating posters that display a scene by Rembrandt will cost less and be available to the masses. For some, availability and low cost lowers the value of the item being offered. An open mind will acknowledge that more research is required before eliminating the opportunity. Understandably, identifying education as industrialized may automatically raise concerns and possibly create barriers and resistance simply on the basis of distance education being different from traditional education.

Student support is another area of concern because lack of interaction is inherent in distance education. Holmberg (2005) emphasizes the importance of supportive and instructive interaction and how it can combat this drawback, but it must be at the forefront of every distance education organization's course teams and tutors (pp.75 – 88). A current comparative study of support services for students of the

established UKOU and the younger Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) further stresses this point. The differences in the areas of student support, obviously a drawback in the minds of the writers, prompted them to conclude that AIOU must rise to the level of support offered at UKOU (Choudhry, Ahmed, & Hafeez, 2008).

Conclusion

Distance education began with businessmen and was made possible by the advent of railroads and the postal service (Peters, 1994; Peters, 2001; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Industrialization did not create education, but it undeniably shaped distance education. There are advantages to an industrialized DE system and UKOU exemplifies one significant advantage, accessibility. In addition to accessibility, there is also an emphasis on research and practice based learning for instructors (Open University, n.d.). And although there are mitigating factors that can be applied to industrialized education's drawbacks, the value of distance education and the importance of interaction must be kept in the forefront of the discussion so that these areas of concern can be dealt with.

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