

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ „ГОЦЕ ДЕЛЧЕВ“ - ШТИП
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

UDC 81
UDC 82
UDC 008



ISSN: 2545-3998
DOI: 10.46763/palim

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

МЕЃУНАРОДНО СПИСАНИЕ ЗА ЛИНГВИСТИЧКИ,
КНИЖЕВНИ И КУЛТУРОЛОШКИ ИСТРАЖУВАЊА

PALIMPSEST

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR LINGUISTIC,
LITERARY AND CULTURAL RESEARCH

PALMK, VOL 7, NO 13, STIP, 2022

ГОД. VII, БР. 13
ШТИП, 2022

VOL. VII, NO 13
STIP, 2022

ПАЛИМПСЕСТ

**Меѓународно списание за лингвистички, книжевни
и културолошки истражувања**

PALIMPSEST

**International Journal for Linguistic, Literary
and Cultural Research**

**Год. 7, Бр. 13
Штип, 2022**

**Vol. 7, No 13
Stip, 2022**

**PALMK, VOL 7, NO 13, STIP, 2022
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46763/PALIM22713>**

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и културолошки истражувања

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The International Scientific Journal “Palimpsest” is issued twice a year in printed form and online at the following website of the web portal of Goce Delcev University in Stip: <http://js.ugd.edu.mk/index.php/PAL>

Papers can be submitted and published in the following languages: Macedonian, English, German, French, Russian, Turkish and Italian language.

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DISTANCE LEARNING – DEVELOPMENT, TYPES AND TOOLS

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Abstract: What are the key ingredients to learning? What happens when the traditional brick and mortar classroom is no longer an option? Can distance education (DE) replace the traditional one? What is distance education compared to online education? The paper answers the posed questions, defining distance education as happening using electronic media, or the Internet, while teachers and students not being at the same place, but working in the comfort of their home. Historically speaking, the roots of distance education can be traced back to the correspondence study as well as to the technological development. When talking about DE, we can differentiate between synchronous and asynchronous, which differ in one component. Synchronous DE is bound by time, implying that students and teachers work simultaneously and interactively. Asynchronous DE is not bound by time, implying that interaction occurs with a time delay. The paper focuses on the advantages and the disadvantages of these two forms of DE. It additionally considers tools such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Google Meet as the most suitable for synchronous DE as well as Moodle, Blackboard and Google Classroom as the most convenient for asynchronous DE.

Keywords: *remote education; synchronous; asynchronous; video-conferencing; learning platforms.*

Introduction

What is crucial for learning to take place? What happens when the brick and mortar classroom has to be replaced with a virtual classroom? Can we speak about online education or distance education? First of all we should define the terms in order to clarify their meaning as they are sometimes used interchangeably. Oxford

Learner's Dictionary defines distance education as a system of education in which people or the students study at home or the place of their convenience with the help of special internet sites and send or email work to their teachers, which is somewhat synonymous to remote education. Moreover, students and teachers can work simultaneously, which leads to the two forms of distance education. Clearly, students and teachers do not work in the same classroom. On the other hand, Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines online learning or e-learning as a system of learning that uses electronic media, typically over the internet which does not exclude the possibility of students and teachers being in the same classroom and working using electronic media. The same distinction is also proposed by Rigo & Mikus (2021) who speak about this dichotomy in relation to learning English as a foreign language. Having clearly made the distinction, we shall focus our attention on distance or remote education, even if that means not excluding online education entirely. However, distance education or remote education is different from online education because, even though both types entail using the electronic media for the purpose of learning, distance education specifically means that neither the students, nor the teacher are in the same room. According to Cambridge Dictionary, distance learning is a way of studying in which students do not attend a school, college, or university, but study from the place they live in, usually being taught and given work to do over the Internet. It also includes sending the work via mail or over the Internet.

The actual in-person interaction is absent in distance learning, as Riko & Mikus state (2021), while students study online, teachers assign and grade the work digitally. Having the learning group geographically separated, distance education is still a formal education, where interactive telecommunications are here to connect learners, resources and instructors (Nilles, 2002). No matter how it is defined, distance education is a virtual education, not bound to space and if the time variable is added, it is further divided into synchronous or asynchronous distance education.

1. History of distance education

Several issues are considered when we speak about the history of distance education, but its current form and presence are due to various factors. The first thing is the actual history of remote education that started by sending learning material to students living far away. The second thing is the technological development that enabled the spread of distance education or to be precise, its massive expansion.

1.1. History of remote or distance education

When we speak about the roots of distance education, there are different years to be considered regarding American and British history. Speaking about American history, it is the year 1892 when the actual roots of distance education can be traced back to when the so-called correspondence study was developed

state at Pennsylvania State University (Banas & Emory, 1998). The reason was to give an opportunity for higher education to those living in distant rural areas of the United States. As time went by, the basic print-based correspondence courses changed to web-based courses. What is more, the purpose of the courses was shifted from serving the students to serving the state by reducing capital expenditures for dormitories, classrooms, and faculty offices while providing education not bound in time and place. The beginnings of web-based courses were hard, there were numerous issues, such as lack of information, thus putting distance learning students at a disadvantage. These issues are no longer problematic. Other issues such as technological costs as well as special staff training are not problems nowadays, since the whole 21st century life is based on electronic devices and media. Hence, we cannot find any obstacles for practicing distance learning as a viable mode of education delivery.

Clause (2001) mentions that the first institution to authorize degrees through correspondence studies was Chautauqua Institute in the state of New York in 1883. The same author also suggests that the first person to coin the term distance learning was Otto Peters who coined the term from the German word: *Fernunterricht* and the technological development led to its wide expansion nowadays.

On the other hand, when we take the British history into consideration, the roots of distance education can be traced back much earlier. In fact, as Dela Cruz (2020) puts it: “Sir Isaac Pittman founded Sir Isaac Pitman’s Correspondence Colleges in England in the mid-1840s” (p. 1). Course materials were delivered by mail to the students who lived in rural areas and they worked on their own. Afterwards, many other countries on different continents developed correspondence courses as well. According to Matthews (1999), with the establishment of correspondence teaching at the University of Chicago and the introduction of the Department of External Studies at the University of Queensland before 1969, distance teaching was developed as an important sector of higher education in many countries.

Moreover, Matthews (1999) adds that the foundation of United Kingdom’s Open University (OU) in 1969 and its mixed—media approach are marks of the second phase in distance education. Namely, learning materials, composed of carefully constructed text with audio and video materials were sent via mail to students. The materials were supplemented with radio and television broadcast as well. A tutor was assigned to students to communicate over telephone or in group evening sessions. Finally, what traditional universities failed in, the ability to offer seats to all students, was successfully dealt by Distance University that offered opportunities to learn.

The final step in the development is the massive expansion of distance learning worldwide, which encompasses students of every age and gender. Distance education nowadays is comprised of full-time and part-time students, adult learners, especially mothers with children, who realized that this type of education is suitable and convenient for learning in their conditions and circumstances.

Finally, Dela Cruz (2020) speaks about the existence of three types of Universities from the present point of view such as: Brick Universities that are traditional residential institutions, new virtual universities or Click Universities and a combination of traditional and virtual universities called Brick and Click Universities. Therefore, considering the history of distance education, a shift from the traditional brick and mortar classroom to a brick and click classroom is noticeable.

1.2. History of technological development

The world nowadays is dependent upon technology. It is everywhere in our surroundings, it is the new normal. Technology has affected every aspect of our life, professionally and privately speaking. Education also relies on technological support and there is no way of avoiding its influence, especially in the higher education.

We established that distance education is not new to the world. However, the technological growth is responsible for the massive expansion of distance learning. The rapidly changing technology, as Sumner (2000) suggests, is creating educational opportunities for millions or billions of students enrolled worldwide. He takes into consideration the three generations of technological development i.e. production, distribution and communication technologies, and divides the history of distance education to three periods. What is more, distance education technologies are divided into one-way communication such as radio, television, or videotapes and two-way communication such as videoconferencing, telephone tutoring, e-mail, computer conferencing, etc. We can conclude that the first two generations of distance education included one-way communication, which led to individualized learning, while the third generation is related to two-way communication that led to a greater interactivity. It is then that the social interaction took place in the learning process.

What additionally symbolized the third generation of distance education, as Dela Cruz (2020) puts it, are the multiple technologies such as computers and computer networking. Speaking about the fourth generation of distance education technologies, we cannot forget the high-bandwidth computer technologies with the combination of previously mentioned media. On top of it, each new generation of technologies is an opportunity for a better student-student, student-teacher and student-faculty interaction.

Finally, the first Internet appeared in the late 60s from experimental networks in the United States. With the massive widespread of the Internet, the life of each individual is no longer the same. It has affected everything we do, including learning. Even greater impact was made by the introduction of Web 2.0 applications. In Web.1.0, there was a clear distinction between authors-creators and consumers-accessors. On the other hand, the Web 2.0 applications enabled consumers to create, evaluate, change and add to their own content. It enabled self-expression. This development enabled teachers to create their own content

as well as students to participate and show their creativity, thus learning was inevitably improved.

2. Types of distance education

When defining distance education we mentioned that it is the education which does not happen in actual classrooms, but in virtual ones. Therefore, it is not bound by place and depending on the education, it might not be bound by time as well. The permanent thing in any form of education is the teacher. Students can learn on their own, at their own pace, but only under the guidance of the teacher or the tutor. That role is irreplaceable in any kind of education. For the purpose of this paper, we will go through the two major types of distance education that the 21st century teacher needs to be familiar with.

2.1. Synchronous distance education

As its name suggests, this type of distance education is bound by time. Students work in synchronization with other students and the teacher at the same time, which enables them to ask questions and receive answers on the spot. Nilles (2002) points out that in synchronous DE there is real time instruction and communication between students and instructors without any or small time delay. The information flow is dependent on continuous communication of two or more participants in different locations, in an environment that does not interrupt the flow. Therefore, there are two components of the synchronous DE: time and interaction.

One of the main advantages of synchronous distance learning are that learners can enjoy the comfort of their own home or another place, but still actively take part in the lesson organized through some video-chatting platform such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Meet, etc. This form of communication enables more dynamic exploration of ideas, concepts and topics because the participants interact regularly in face-to-face discussions and in-depth instruction (Rigo & Mikus, 2021). On the other hand, Internet connection troubles or inconvenient work schedule for those who work and try to attend regular lectures can be seen as some of the disadvantages of this form of distance learning. However, considering the traditional education, those who work while studying have the status of part-time students who always work on their own and never have any interaction with the other students. But, synchronous education provides them with the option, while still being part-time students, to participate in some of the lessons together with the full-time students, if their work schedule allows it. What is more, distance learning leaves the option for teachers to organize teaching in a way that it can fit both, full-time and part-time students. Therefore, synchronous DE is an additional benefit to part-time students as they are enabled to interact with the group for the first time.

Synchronous and asynchronous forms of DE were actually discussed two decades ago by Branon & Essex (2001). Their research suggests that some of the

reasons for using the synchronous form of DE is to hold virtual office hours, to make decisions in teams, to build the sense of community, to brainstorm ideas and many other reasons. However, they also speak about the difficulties with this form of education that arise in the inability to get students online at the same time due to slower internet connection at that time or lack of reflection time for students.

Talking about the advantages of synchronous DE, Perveen (2016) points out that lessons can be recorded and saved in the e-library and they can later be replayed by the students to master the material. The author further states that synchronous sessions are even better than face-to-face interaction because travelling is avoided, and there is instant feedback on problems and motivation by the teacher. Moreover, what can contribute to human feel is facial expressions and tone of voices. Technical problems with the connection can be seen as the only disadvantage of this education.

What Lyn & Gao (2020) consider positive about synchronous distance education is the interaction, the classroom environment and the course quality. It is the interaction that was considered as the most important thing in synchronous DE, because it contributes significantly to the sense of community in an online course, a place for sharing ideas and resources as well as an opportunity for immediate feedback. Moreover, this is regarded as a good resemblance to classroom environment with the benefit of not rushing to catch a good spot. Being able to clearly see and hear the teacher along with the teaching material is the reason that course quality was considered as one of the benefits of synchronous DE. One of the disadvantages is the distraction, as some students refuse not to turn they microphone off and others may discuss unrelated topics which distracts students from learning.

Having into consideration the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous DE, we can conclude that it bears resemblance to real classrooms and it carries the sense of belonging to a group. This significantly contributes not to lose the connections with the peers as well as the group. These issues are important in one's education as the ties formed during studies are sometime lifelong.

2.1.1. Tools for synchronous distance education

Synchronous distance education needs to satisfy two basic components in order to function, as discussed previously. Time and interaction must come together while the space is not important. It's the closest form of face-to-face or traditional classroom. There are a lot of applications that satisfy these criteria of video conferencing such as Skype, Viber etc. Teachers have several options for educational purposes, depending on several factors such as preferences, technical requirements, availability or the decision of the educational institution to use a unified communication tool for all distance learning lessons. Therefore, we will further describe some of these tools and their functions.

Microsoft Teams

This tool was launched 2017, but it was in 2020 that its massive use began for educational purposes. Pal & Vanijja (2020) state that the convenience of Microsoft Teams is the easy installation on desktop or laptop computers with Windows operation system as well as mobile phones of Android and iOS versions.

Microsoft Teams provides a good integrated teaching - learning space with a lot of features comparable with Moodle, or even better (Pal & Vanijja, 2020). Multiple users can be present at the meeting together with the teacher, in the role of organizer. The meeting can be previously scheduled or started at the moment. Scheduled meetings can happen once or on a regular basis. What resembles a real classroom is the option for students to raise their hands when they know the answer or want to ask a question. The break-out rooms option is a useful tool for the teacher to explore different forms of work, as students can work in pairs or groups. Teachers can join any room to assist learners while they work.

What is more, the option of file-sharing is also very beneficial. Teachers can upload all sorts of files from word to pdf documents as well as power point presentations or video lectures. Sometimes teachers opt for sharing their desktop so anything they work on can be seen by the students. This works the other way round as well. Students can share their screen or upload files when asked to present or do some sort of activity.

Therefore, Microsoft Teams simulates virtual learning environment and clearly meets the needs of the mission “online only”. As pointed out by Van Roussett (2021), Microsoft Teams is a new and exciting education space offered by Microsoft 365.

Zoom

The Zoom application was created a decade ago, in the year 2011. However, the peak of its usage was reached due to the recent events beginning two years ago. According to Kohnke & Moorhouse (2020), Zoom is one of the most utilized tools for synchronous online education, especially by those who teach second languages and were unable to perform their work face-to-face as the communicative approach to language teaching suggests.

Its easy-to-use features such as collaboration of two or many participants, including chat, annotation tool, whiteboards as well as breakout rooms is what makes Zoom attractive to educators worldwide. What is more, the teacher can opt for sharing the whole desktop or individual application with the learners. It also enables scheduling meetings, recording etc. Zoom is suitable for larger meetings, like conferences with up to 500 interactive participants. Regarding mobile devices, this application can also be installed for iOS and Android operation systems.

Moreover, Kohnke & Moorhouse (2020) further suggest that there are some cues in the application that aid student communication and comprehension such as non-verbal icons used for asking questions, showing agreement, indicating that the teachers needs to slow down or speed up. There are non-verbal functions

as well that allow the teacher to make corrective feedback or icons that allow individual shy students to write privately. This is especially important for students that feel insecure when speaking in front of a larger audience. The polls and surveys that teachers can conduct using this application is another useful feature which contributes to engaging learners and increasing their motivation (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020).

The only negative aspect regarding Zoom, besides those that are common to all synchronous online teaching tools, is the limitation to 40 minutes for the free version of the application. This leads to the need of an upgraded Zoom version, as in reality lessons last longer, and higher education lectures even more. Finally, security options and password protection entries sometimes make the use of this application harder.

Google Meet

Google Meet application, the same as Microsoft Teams, was launched in 2017. When it firstly appeared, it was intended for only 30 participants. Since then the number has increased together with the number of features. Nowadays, the use of the free application allows for 100 to 250 participants in the meeting at once.

As Al-Marooof et al. (2020) point out in their research, the success of Google Meet as an online teaching platform is the availability of the application on Google play and Apple store, which means that it can be downloaded on mobile devices using iOS or Android operative systems, similar to the previous two mentioned applications. According to them, Google Meet is an application mostly chosen because it is useful and easy to use. The advantages of this application are similar to the other two, it can be used on smartphones as well as laptops. Moreover, links that are provided during class time can be used several times during the day and students feel confident in using this application.

What Rigo & Mikus (2021) state is the fact that users need to log into their google account in order to start the calls with Google Meet. This provides a high level of security. We can mention some of the features of this application as follows: video calls of high resolution for two or many participants, low-light mode for video (similar to Zoom, while users of Microsoft Teams have the option to choose or download a background), screen sharing to present different forms of documents, the ability of the teacher to deny entries or remove users during a meeting, the option to raise or lower hand etc. As it is constantly being updated, new features are added such as attendance reports for teachers, blocking anonymous users, casting Google Meet on television, filtering noises etc. As we can see, most of the features are similar to other synchronous teaching tools.

Google Classroom was the initial application used in education. However, as Pal & Vanijja (2020) indicate, Google Classroom does not support video-conferencing as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. Hence, Google Meet is installed for that purpose, unlike Microsoft Teams that functions as a learning platform that integrates the video-conferencing option. This seems to be the only disadvantage.

All in all, all synchronous teaching applications are similar and easy to use. The preference is based on the institutional decision and the agreements that institutions have with service providers. When it comes to learners, there is no significant difference as to whether they are taught with one or the other application.

2.2. Asynchronous distance education

Considering the name, the prefix “a” of the adjective synchronous implies that it is something opposite of synchronous. Having said that, our assumption is that this education is not bound by time, it does not require the participants to work together in real time with the teacher. Cambridge Dictionary defines asynchronous as not happening or done at the same time or speed and regarding education, it involves students working separately at different times, therefore the interaction between the students and the teacher occurs intermittently with a time delay.

Students can enjoy not only the comfort of their own home, but also the comfort of their own time and schedule to complete the assignments that are usually posted on some platform such as Moodle, which is one of the benefits of this form of education. Flexibility, pacing and affordability, i.e. learners free access to materials and the option to read them at their own convenience within set deadlines are the main advantages of asynchronous DE (Rigo & Mikus, 2021). Hence, it enables independent learners to self-manage their learning time and if they combine it with suitable mobile applications, the relevant materials can be at their disposal anytime. However, the lack of personal interaction and opportunities to discuss and work with peers are some of the disadvantages of this form of DE. This might impose an additional issue for language learners as we are aware that it is best learned in communication with others. The lack of real-time interaction and visual contact with the teacher or the peers and the insufficient or non-existent opportunities to practice oral production involves the risk of learner’s apathy. As Nilles (2002) says, in asynchronous DE, the instruction and communication between students and instructor does not happen in real time. It actually happens in different time usually at the convenience of the user.

What asynchronous form of DE is convenient for, according to Branon & Essex (2001), is encouraging in-depth, more thoughtful discussion forums, holding ongoing discussions where archiving is required and allowing all students to respond to certain topic. However, they speak about some disadvantages regarding asynchronous form of DE as well, such as the lack of immediate feedback, students that do not check in very often, more time required for a discussion to mature and the sense of social disconnection by the students.

Perveen (2016) indicates that asynchronous DE is good for providing students with readily available material in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and power point presentations via some of the Learning Management Systems. Therefore, learners are not bound by time, they can respond at their leisure. Thus, they can employ some of their higher order learning skills as they

keep thinking about certain problem for an extended period of time. What is more, shyness is reduced to minimum, due to the distance mode and this way the fear of the teacher is diminished. As a result of the minimalized pressure of real time encounter, the affective filter is low, which leads to learners responding innovatively and creatively.

The study of Lyn & Gao (2020) suggests two advantages of asynchronous form of DE: self-controlled learning and self-directed learning. Asynchronous form enable students to study anytime and anywhere according to their own schedule, to repeatedly watch course videos and to express themselves more flexibly and efficiently. What is more, the authors point out that this form leads to deeper learning as students are more concentrated. The ability to pause and search for resources whenever they feel confused is listed as an additional benefit of asynchronous form of DE. On the other hand, the research states this form faces some challenges such as social isolation of students and lack of interaction. Moreover, the course load is an additional issue, since students sometimes feel overwhelmed with the great amount of learning content and assignments that have to be mastered on their own.

Having the advantages and disadvantages of asynchronous DE into consideration, we can conclude that it does no harm to education. Although social isolation is pointed as a drawback of this form of DE, we would like to concentrate on the positive sides. It is actually a virtual library containing all courses and course materials that are available anytime and anywhere.

2.2.1. Tools for asynchronous distance education

We already explained that asynchronous distance education is not bound by time. Hence, interaction at the moment of speaking is not required in this form of education. Learners learn on their own, regardless of the time and space. This makes video-conferencing not obligatory as a feature of the tools used for this purpose. Therefore, the choice of teachers are usually platforms that are easily accessible by students, where they upload the literature as well as additional materials for the given course. They can also include power point presentation and anything else they consider necessary for the students to learn on their own. We will review some of the available tools for asynchronous distance education.

Moodle

The solution for online learning to hundreds of thousands of educational institutions worldwide is Moodle. Translated to nearly every language across the globe, its first version was launched nearly two decades ago, in 2002. The name is an acronym standing for “modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment”.

Beatty & Ulasewicz (2006) point out the fact that Moodle is a course management system (CMS), a free open source software package with the purpose to assist educators in creating online communities. It can serve a single teacher

as well as large universities of up to 40000 students. Mehrabi & Abtahi (2012) speak about the Internet changing the education model from closed and teacher-centered to more open and student-centered, and Moodle played a huge role in that perspective. As an e-learning platform, Moodle contains everything that enables distance learning such as flexibility, accessibility, focusing on students, interactivity etc.

It is a website where students log in and their teachers, authorized by the IT administrators, create virtual courses. Therefore, there are three levels of use: IT administrator (the manager of the platform), teacher (lecturer, facilitator, trainer) and student (learner, participant). The content of these courses is available to students anywhere in the world, faster than any conventional method of distance education. Teachers can choose if the access to their courses is free or it is password protected. Numerous options are available to the teacher that creates the course as setting up end date for availability of the course or dividing the course to the number of lessons per semester. In customizing the course, the teacher can post the mandatory and additional literature for students to download. Power-point presentations for each lesson can also be uploaded in the appropriate field. Enrolled students can receive announcements. The teacher can create assignment folder with the expiration date and the Moodle platform also allows grading. Students can upload Word documents, Power-point presentations or PDF documents. What is more, quizzes can be designed with different types of questions, for the purpose of lesson motivation or final assessment. In the end, there is a chat option with online users as well as forum discussions that support the asynchronous form of education.

Finally, Mehrabi & Abtahi (2012) emphasize that one of the advantages of this free web application is allowing the user to adapt and modify the environment according to the needs at no cost. There are neither maintenance costs nor limitation to the number of users. Hence, it is a worldwide used platform by universities, communities, schools and teachers. It is not complicated and it satisfies the educational needs.

Blackboard

Even though the initial product as a course management system was firstly introduced in 1997, it was in 2014 when its software was purchased by thousands of schools and organizations. Like Moodle, Blackboard is another course management system (CMS).

Chen et al. (2013) investigated the integration of mobile phones into the curricula, considering that smartphones are inseparable part of today's generation. They tested the Blackboard Mobile Learn application. According to them, it allows students to easily access courses from mobile phone and to complete certain tasks such as reading and creating announcements, posting on discussion boards, blogs and journals, reading course content and checking grades, assignments, and assessments. Its accessibility on iPhone, iPad, Android, Blackberry and other mobile devices is listed as one of the advantages.

Blackboard app is available in 30 languages. The course content can be downloaded and students can go through it even offline, making it suitable for distance learning at any place and any time. Another positive aspect is that there are timely reminders of announcements, new tests, due dates, new content as well as new courses. What is more, there are journals created by the instructor that allow students to interact with him/her privately, to share their ideas, opinion etc. Moreover, there is a cloud storage where students can upload files in assignments and discussions.

In sum, this is another useful asynchronous distance education tool. The working principles are similar to other tools. It is up to the institution as to which service it is going to choose to offer education for those that are unable to attend regular classes.

Google Classroom

Google Classroom is another solution as an asynchronous teaching tool. Unlike Moodle and Blackboard, it is not a Learning Management System, but a set of online tools that enable teachers to set assignments and students to return it. The initial purpose for its creation was to avoid paperwork.

What contributed to developing this tool, as Cristiano & Triana (2019) state, is the number of dropouts in the first semester of studies and the initiative to develop an online platform for the students to advance independently. The smartphone use of modern students was used as an opportunity to mediate the teaching-learning process. Google Classroom is divided into three tabs: stream, people and information. The email accounts of the students are used for sending invitations to join courses. Their information is stored in the people tab. The information tab consists of the initial guidelines, tutorials, activation dates, report delivery dates, instructions, worksheets as well as research projects. The questionnaires, developed on google forms, are published in the stream tab.

Google Classroom can function on iOS and Android as well as on all desktop operative systems and most of the work can be done offline. It works free of charge as well. It is convenient for distance learning. Each student receives an email notification for an assignment, hence teachers do not need to contact students repeatedly. After the student sends the assignment, teachers can grade it. What is more, announcements can be sent to the whole class via home screen or email at a specific time to all members or individual users.

Finally, it is a useful asynchronous tool for distance education as it makes timely and convenient engagement of students in different parts of the world, who can work at their own pace, but within set up schedule and time limit.

Conclusion

Distance education is the new normal we live in. Having busy lives and not being able to be in two places at the same time while striving for academic progress is the reason to further develop this type of education. The development

of technology nowadays offers a choice to opt for education determined by specific time or education not restricted to time and space. Having the best interest of the future generations in our minds, we are obliged to offer solutions to all included in the process of education.

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of the synchronous and asynchronous form of DE together with the features of the tools at the disposal of students and teachers for both forms, we hope to provide a clearer view of distance education. This short review will assist students and teachers to explore more on the topic that probably refers to the future of education in general.

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ГОД. VII
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ПАЛИМПЕСТ

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VOL. VII
NO 13