A Conceptual Analysis
Of Distance Educational Functions and Perspectives in Sociology

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ABSTRACT

In the following study, some literature is reviewing on the sociology of education. Sociological perspectives are discussed, and then some hypotheses are assumed that taken for granted in this paper. Those analyses have been developed and dealt with them as a sociological problem in distance education such as group structure, social control in society and technological effects on social change. In conclusion, the distance education is examined as a factor that determines social structure. It has primary contribution to social structure. Thanks to distance education methods, necessary knowledge is to diffuse to the person at the forest rank of social structure, and to draw them rapidly to higher ranks. These conclusions are considering that distance education based on technology modifies social reality. However, during this rapid evaluation, the balances in social structure are being loosed, and therefore many social problems arise. Then, new developments of distance education bring up solutions for those problems. Sociological researches in the field of distance education will give some light for the reconstruction of social balances in this circle.

INTRODUCTION

The distance education is analyzed as a problematic conception in social reality. Because of the educational facts, it has been realized many radical changes in modern era that could be rated as revaluation. New technologies develop continuously distance education models, so it must be expected new revolutions become reality. However, rapid change in social reality causes to lose structural balances and to prevent benefits of distance education.

Since social facts are the subject of sociology, and distance education with its new technologies is being observed in social reality as a very important factor that affects social structure and social change, there shall be a sociological analysis for distance education. In this essay, the phrases of "distance" and "education" are going to be inspected by applying the concepts of social structure and social change as named sociology. At this point, a basic question arises: How does distance education function and change in a given society, if it is taken as a social phenomenon? To make an analysis for the question in this limited work, I am going to use the content analysis and observation methods to examine the terms of distance and education effected by technology with the aspects of social structure and social change. For this aim and as a part of methodology, a point of view must be constructed in order to discuss the distance education with some sociological perspectives and concepts.

In the following parts of this study, some literature is reviewing on the sociology of education. Sociological perspectives are discussed, and then some hypotheses are assumed that taken for granted in this paper. Those analyses have been developed and dealt with them as a sociological problem in distance education such as group structure, social control in society and technological effects on social change. In conclusion, the distance education is examined as a factor that determines social structure. It has primary contribution to social structure. Thanks to distance education methods, necessary knowledge is to diffuse to the person at the forest rank of social structure, and to draw them rapidly to higher ranks. These conclusions are considering that distance education based on technology modifies social reality. However, during this rapid evaluation, the balances in social structure are being

loosed, and therefore many social problems arise. Then, new developments of distance education bring up solutions for those problems. Sociological researches in the field of distance education will give some light for the reconstruction of social balances in this circle.

SOCIOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Sociology
Social structure and social change are two proper concepts in the field of sociology to begin any sociological analysis as starting points for sociologists. Therefore, we shall handle distance education with those concepts. Society, as a whole construction, has two aspects that composed of different constituent to function separately and to work together. The concept of "social structure" explains one aspect of society; the components of society and the relationships between each other to construct society together. The "social change" is another aspect of society; at the same time, mean that the society is enrolled in a changing process for a time. We do not encounter any unchanging or fixed society in the history. All institutions, values or social functions are changing at various speeds and ways; they are getting new meanings that are examined by the concept of social change. Every certain form of a social construction or a change in society has influential reasons that are created by them such as social events or scientific discoveries of new educational ways. Therefore, distance education shall be analyzed in the frame of social structural and social change concepts.

Generally, sociology is to examine people's social behavior. Its main idea relating to our subject (the distance education) is that the behaviors are formed by interactions among individuals. In another word, a person's thoughts or acts are effected by his groups. These interactions may go beyond time and space boundaries. The people who live in different time or place are interacting with each other via technology and educational systems. Cultural components spread out distant places and time. The cultural components are transferred by technology to new generations or distant place. A new component may be seen in more than one society at the same time. Similar social facts may be seen in different social groups that are no direct relationships established. The transformation of social values to new generation is also one of them. Different societies have found same set of solutions to organize their needs and to rule their order. Main institutions (such as education, religion, and family) that are created through time can be seen everywhere. Historical observations lead us to the findings that interactions among people have common results. Shortly, continuity of society has been obtained with this interaction, and distance education is one of the tools of society.

Sociology of Education
Some educational researches already have being done by the sociology of education. Essentially, the educational sociology, a sociological field considering distance education in general, and as a branch of applied sociology in particular, has examined educational facts, since at the beginning of this century. Its guiding assumption has been that education is another name for socialization in the broadest sense and should yield rational educational aims and methods and a body of techniques for society. Sociology of education is the application of sociological theories, perspectives and research methods to analyze educational processes and practices (Jary, 1991, p. 472-3). The process of education, on the other hand, has been understood as a contribution to the promotion and maintenance of the social order. Especially, Durkheim and Mannheim's works have been done with the view of functionalism and to regard education as a means of solving problems and removing social antagonisms.

Early studies of this field explain their aim cited from J. Floud (Floud, 1967, p. 228) that "educational sociology is interested in the impact of the total cultural milieu in which and through which experience is acquired and organized. Educational sociology is particularly interested in with finding out how to manipulate the educational process (social control) to achieve better personality development" (Brown, 1947, p. 36).

It has also been remarked of that "educational sociology included anything in the field of sociology which could be related to the learning or socializing process and anything in education that was subject to sociological analysis" (Brookover, 1949, p. 407). Since then "the sociology of education is concerned with any instruction or training of individuals for which social provision is made, whether or not it is concentrated in the early years of life, undertaken through the agency of specialized institutions, directed generally to the promotion of consensus and integration through the inculcation of attitudes and values or the formation of personality, or specifically to vocational training. In shortly, its subject-matter is the assimilation of the individuals into a cultural tradition" (Floud, 1967, p. 228).

In early studies of distance education is not taken as an important subject in the field of sociology of education. It is observed that the importance of the subject has been increased by using technological tools. Today, it is defined as the most industrialized form of teaching and learning and as such also as a typical product of industrial society. Therefore, it seems an educational way of the future.

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

There are two main perspectives in sociology to examine social facts. Those are macro-structural and micro-interpretive perspectives. Other perspectives may be included into one of those. Macro perspective assumes that the reasons of variables lie under social structure of social system. Micro perspective stresses more likely social psychological explanations. Both of their dependent variables are the same (Goldenberg, 1987, p. 6-15). Distance education should be examined separately according to those perspectives. To make a sociological analysis we have to clarify and narrow down our perspectives, and suppose assumptions used in this chaper.

More specifically, social researches in sociology should attempt to explain how social groups are formed and shape individuals in the case of distance education. How this process goes on and how is effected by distance education must be questioned in order to begin the explanations. The clearest answer for this question is social mobility. People may exceed time and space, and may not only go easily into any group via educational technology but also create them. Thus, social mobility increases speedily. Depending on this, social reality is changing rapidly, too.

Distance education and technology are contributing to this general fact. Interactions between people and society make education institutionalized and develop technology. The most important factor in new knowledge society is to use new technologies in education. It speeds up the process of social mobility, and condenses socialization. In conclusion, researches in the field of distance education should cover all social units in which socialization is in question.

Distance education is based on technology, so the two main concepts that must be examined are education and technology. Therefore, the first perspective is the relationship between education and technology. In this frame, new problems arise that depend on them. They must be evaluated while we practice them, and the analysis to be done concerning distance education in this paper must be critical. The second perspective is an interaction between individual and society. Furthermore, separated discussions must be done from the angle of individual and society. It must be questioned how distance education is effected from these factors, and what the reasons are for them, and what the direction of change is. Looking for answer for those questions is to frame a perspective.

In this paper, some variables are assumed. The distance education had been granted as explanatory (independent) variable and evaluated its effects on education (therefore social structure) "negativistic" and "skeptically". It means to be the best critic we can be and not

accept a particular conclusion until we have examined every possible alternative and been able to discount or discredit them all as much as possible.

However, it cannot be expected to examine deeply every aspect of the distance education in this limited spaces, but we do not phrase our claim in such a way as to make it non falsifiable.

In this frame, our first assumption is that a direct relationship has been constructed with technology and distance education; the changes in social reality are speeded up due to distance education technologies. The effect of "speeding up gradually" is the main premise we shall take into consideration. Therefore, we should not limit the analysis of given methods of distance education. The meanings of distance educational concept will change as technology develops.

Another assumption is that distance education occurs in the remote places through technology. Furthermore, diffusion of knowledge has been gotten under control by using same technological tools. Although, technology makes easy to attain the knowledge, it provides to control the knowledge.

SOCIOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Sociology of Education

In particular, some matters of distance education should be evaluated with stressing interaction between individual, society, and technology. Those subjects could be classified the group as a unit of social analysis, the control of society as a function of education, and the technology as a determinant both of them.

The first matter in this analysis we evaluate is that the participants of distance education constitute a social group. They are gathering round certain aims. Being together is enough condition for talking about group concept in sociology. However, it should be discussed what kind of groups and groups' effects we are talking about. Distance education is usually defined as not a face-to-face educational way; but this is quite old definition. New technologies give opportunity to people to see their faces even they are not in the same room. Not all members of the group share same actual residence. Students and teachers are not in same place. Their group is imaginary, therefore it has different construction. Direct communication is not supplied. The communication has been established by way of technological tools. Then, many components never have been produced or transferred since the limitation of technology. Some behaviors of people's in-groups are limited. In reality, participants are alone in this kind of group. Whereas, some researches in social psychology show those together actions are more advantageous than single action. The members of face to face group actions encourage each other just because of being same place (Stang, 1981, p. 302-306). The performance of individual is increased if any person watches him. However, it is possible for individual to be discouraged by being under group pressure. The free will and capabilities of individual can not be reflected to his behavior because of group effects. Any natural surroundings created by himself should be the best place to act freely.

The second matter is that educational control has not been constructed formally yet. The problem of not being together in the same residence makes very hard to control the people. Therefore, separated behaviors and attitudes may be developed. For example, there would be no formal clothes to signalize political thoughts (it is very important matter in Turkey nowadays).

On the other hand, it largely would not be possible to classify people according to their attitudes and to transform them some information. Emphasizing an institutional ideology is disappeared in this case. It is possible to think the contrary of this case. Such as the national education of European Turkish population could be achieved by using distance education models.

The disappearing of distance gives some opportunities to people in order to choose any cultural norms according to their will. This very important factor provides democracy to spread out. "In distance education it has always been necessary that learners take over responsibilities for their own learning a function which in other circumstances rests with the teacher or the teaching. The learner, therefore, is given the opportunity to develop self-determination, self-direction and self-control to a high degree. They determine where, when, and how long they want to engage themselves in the learning process. If distance education also comprises contract learning the student is also able to determine or to determine what he or she wishes to learn and how to control and evaluate the results of his learning" (Peters, 1993, p. 237). In conclusion, it is possible to realize socialization based on larger cultural foundation.

The third matter is that the distance education is based on technology. Technological changes determine directly the educational effects on social structure. It not only affects social institutions, but also regulates, and reorganizes their functions. For example, spreading out information networks increases the educated population in the whole world and cumulative amounts of knowledge in varieties. In other words, the crowd of people and the knowledge has increased. The interaction circle between people and knowledge speeds up technological developments, and draws new dimensions in education. For this reason, educational system explanations in social reality vary in bodily structure or function.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

Above, we had talked about diffusion of social factors through time and space. Social reality is composed by these accumulated components as a meaningful unit. Due to distance educational technology, social reality is changing rapidly. This speed causes many problems, especially in developing countries. New classes or ranks emerge, and society has been faced with new problems like urbanization or industrialization.

How distance education changes social reality is clearly shown by Gouldner's works. He points out the big change in which transformation of knowledge delivers to distance people, in written forms. Structural changes in education create a new class. The distance educational system becomes a major cosmopolitanizing influence on its participants, with a corresponding distancing from localistic interest and values. This development (Gouldner named it as 'situation-freeness') is heightened by the 'communications revolution' in general, and by the development of printing technology, in particular (Gouldner, 1979, p. 3). "With the spread of printed materials, definitions of social reality available to intellectuals may now derive increasingly from distant persons, from groups geographically, culturally, and historically distant and even from dead persons, and may therefore diverge greatly from any local environment in which they are received. Definitions of social reality made by local élites may now be invidiously contrasted (by intellectuals) with definitions made in other places and times," (Gouldner, 1979, p. 3-4). Thus, social reality will develop without the lack of negative effects of given structure. Gouldner sees the factor of distance as one of the basic changes in social structure. Currently, the concept of distance in this meaning has been changed greatly. Well then, anybody reaches immediately any kind of knowledge or sends it anywhere in the world. Time and space boundaries to reach knowledge disappear because of the technology. On the other hand, distance education removes the negative effects of remoteness, too. Losing time, negative controls on the behavior and attitude, expenses, and some handicaps of education are becoming decreased. In conclusion, if we take the knowledge as a component of social reality, we may conclude that the production and diffusion of knowledge (independent variable) effect directly social structure (dependent variable).

At this point, the question of "what kind of knowledge is spreading out?" becomes important, because social structure is changing according to cultures transformed from anywhere. Some people, who catch the information sources by themselves, determine the sort of knowledge to transfer. We are facing more clearly with the problem, which is going

to be dealt ahead. An educational system, which is constructed according to the knowledge resources, provides to continue or develop given structure. Therefore some negative components also continue or new problems arise in social reality. Nevertheless, human factor is most efficient components; it should be to take into accounts to solve problems.

SOME FUNCTIONS OF EDUCATION

The function of education, in general, obtains social mobility as independently from social origins. Educational fact is a kind of relationship between individual and his aim. The goals of individual or society are realizing via education. This relationship is examined by using three explanation systems. Those are determinist, demystifying, and voluntarist explanations (Pateman, 1993, p. 189-190). If distance educational models are accepted as models that transfer and transform society, then it must be evaluated with those explanatory systems.

Determinist explanations have two assumptions or two separate determinants, which effect individuals. First, determinist explanation assumes that people are differed from each other intelligently; therefore, the aims are differentiated too. In this case, the distance educational system should be organized according to private peculiarities (Pateman, 1993, p. 188). Distance educational technology provides us a big rank of possibilities choosing best tools and fitting for any kind of personal peculiarities. All abilities can be classified more easily and knowledge transfer can be delivered in the way that is more suitable. The second determinant is the society itself. People's social classes or statues determine the goals. The successfulness or unsuccessfulness depends completely on personal peculiarities. In this case, the social groups (or class, which individuals belong to it) are more powerful than educational institutions. Some kind of social conditions such as educational tools are social determinants.

Therefore, achievements of people depend on given social conditions. The distance education as a developed model may break those negatively determined conditions of society.

Demystifying explanations assumes that the educational institutes are not independent places, and social determinants affect them (Pateman, 1993, p. 189). In this case, all peculiarities of group are absorbed by distance educational institutions. Therefore, the institutional qualifications reflect people's professions. In other words, some class characters can be observed in people's professions. An individual who reaches to the end of education is shaped according to his groups' differences. "In general, says demystifying sociologist, schools are not 'neutral' social locations, helpless in the face of 'external' social determinations. Their own institutionally embedded practices shape outcomes differentiated by class, gender and other irrelevant discriminators, such as ethnicity" (Pateman, 1993, p. 189). Let us remember distance educational opportunities.

Moreover, we can say that it will be very productive for our society if new educational models could remove social determinants. Voluntary explanations differ from the other systems. This system assumes that a person builds up and prefers his future actively and individually, while others emphasize people's passivity (Pateman, 1993, p. 190). People are influenced by their social rank, but their perceptions in occupational preferences are more effectual. He may accept or reject the set of values offered in educational institutions.

These attitudes depend on his free will and his social orientation. The distance education may increase his alternatives. It can be offered to him some sets of value system including his own. It depends on his private selections. His social origins are not so much important any more. On the other hand, it would be easier to realize them if he prefers a value system suitable to his origin.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the distance education seems very important factor to affect social reality. It is an educational model of the future created by social reality. Social reality is also effected by fast changing technology. Every society has its unique social structure, and therefore effects of distance education depend on those structural components. Building up new structures determines new educational models to transfer given culture to all social ranks and new generations. Consequently, sociological researches about distance education based on cultural (or structural) differences should be done, because it may be seen reflections of social reality. Distance education could attract people who wish to improve their vocational or professional status as well as their income, sacrificing their leisure time for gratification often delayed for many years.

On the other hands, the traditional models of distance teaching will no longer satisfy the new needs of new types of person with their particular expectations and values which are in many cases even the opposites them. In near future, it is going to be designed new models of distance education. "They will probably be combinations of intensified and sustained group work highly sophisticated ways of acquiring the necessary information for self-study and increased telecommunication between the participants. They will have different sets of goals and objectives. And they will have to rely on self-directing and self-controlling that is, on becoming autonomous students" (Peters, 1993, p. 237).

This is an optimistic point of view. But we should see another site of reality. The problem we are going to face is that social balances are going to be loosed because of very fast social change caused by distance education. Needed structural and institutional conditions are not provided due to speed of technology.

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