

# THE DISTANCE MBA: A NEED FOR GUIDING PHILOSOPHY AND THEORIES

Vanthanh Phan  
Texas Tech University  
vathanh.phan@ttu.edu

J. Duane Hoover  
Texas Tech University  
duane.hoover@ttu.edu

## ABSTRACT

*Online MBA programs have become ubiquitous, as they have been meeting the huge demand of pursuing MBA degrees by students who cannot or choose not to access traditional brick and mortar MBA classes. The literature about distance MBA programs has focused on practical advice on how to teach online MBA courses. The need for more of a focus on philosophy and theory is called for to fill potential theoretical gaps. A trial and error approach to distance MBA education with little consideration being given to theoretical framework would be a fragile construct. In this paper, we review theories that add productive frameworks to the philosophy and practice of distance MBA programs. We start with reviewing learning theories such as objectivism, constructivism, behavioral theory, cognitive theory, social learning theory, and vicarious experiential learning, which indicate MBA courses can be taught effectively from a distance. Next we present and critique distance education theories including theory of independent study, theory of transactional distance, theory of interaction and communication, andragogy, and equivalency theory, noting applications to distance MBA courses. We conclude with recommendations for implementing the theories examined into useful conceptual frameworks, as well as giving insights into the limitation of those theories for further application and research purposes.*

## INTRODUCTION

The workplace is demanding a higher skill level for its workers. Prospective MBA students want to get the MBA degree, but they do not want to interrupt their employment to be full-time MBA students. Learners from a wide variety of disciplines desire to pursue MBA degrees. Innovations in information technology provide new means and modalities for distance education, allowing maximum interaction and collaboration either asynchronously or synchronously at a distance. Asynchronous online

communication tools allow learners to interact with instructional materials, teachers, and peers at different times. Examples of asynchronous communication tools are blogs, wikis, forums, video tubes, and the like. On the other hand, in synchronous communication, learners can communicate live by using tools such as Blackboard Elluminate, Adobe Connect, Go to Meeting, Google+ Hangout, Skype, Citrix Go to Training, and so on. Due to these factors, distance MBA programs have been prospering as they reach out for adult learners all over the world. Many universities offer distance MBA programs usually fully online and sometimes blended. In the United States there are currently 271 accredited online MBA programs and this number is very likely to increase in the coming years ("Accredited online schools").

Research on the distance MBA is called for to create and maintain the quality of teaching and learning. This challenge fits the mission statement and purpose of ABSEL, and thus is relevant to ABSEL scholarship. This is evidenced by the addition of the "Innovations" track to the annual ABSEL program, as well as a listing of distance education as an appropriate topic in the Innovations track. To date, ABSEL papers have not focused on the need for guiding philosophy and theories relative to distance education, an area this paper hopes to constructively address.

Research and work on distance MBA learning has been overshadowed by practical advice on how to design, develop, implement, and assessing distance MBA programs. A search on world renowned online research database sites such as EBSCO, ERIC, Web of Knowledge, JSTOR, and Scopus have shown very few research about theoretical framework for distance education and absolutely no research done on theories for distance MBA. Little practical advice was based on learning theories and instructional models. It is a potential pitfall for the development of the distance MBA to follow a trial and error approach to distance MBA educational paradigms with little consideration being given to theoretical frameworks. The need for more of a focus on philosophy and theory is called for to fill potential theoretical gaps. In

this paper, we review theories that examine frameworks pertinent to the philosophy and practice of distance MBA programs.

## **LEARNING THEORIES FOR THE DISTANCE MBA**

In this section, we review learning theories that commonly have significant impacts on teaching and learning. Our review aims to highlight implications of the learning theories for the distance MBA. Complete descriptions of each learning theory are beyond the scope of this paper, and therefore each theory is presented here in a summarized form.

### **1. OBJECTIVISM VERSUS CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Objectivism and constructivism are considered two ends of a continuum. Objectivism is based on realism and essentialism (Lakoff, 1987). Realism considers the existence of the real world is external to humans and independent of human experience. According to realism, all learners gain the same understanding about the world around them. On the other hand, essentialism believes that what makes an entity a particular thing is the existence of essential properties. In other words, for any specific entity such as an animal, a tree, a person, or any kind of physical object, there are certain properties and attributes used to identify and distinguish it from others. From the viewpoint of objectivism, there is only one true and correct reality. The role of education is, therefore, to create student learning about the real world, and not to encourage students to make their own interpretations on what they learn. Teachers and instruction are designed to interpret the real world for students. Learners are expected to follow the real worldviews shaped by teachers and objectivism instruction and to replicate this content.

Constructivism, on the other hand, believes that knowledge is dependent on and constructed by the learner. The emphasis of constructivism is on how learners construct knowledge of the real world, which depends on such factors as prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs that one used to interpret objects and events (Bruner, 1963; Bruner, 1990). Therefore, it is very likely that different people would have different views of reality and there is no one and only correct and true reality. Radical constructivists even consider there is absolutely no real world, i.e., no objective reality that is independent of human mental activity (Jonassen, 1991).

Most scholars researching objectivism and constructivism agree on a common ground: either objectivism or constructivism is the panacea for all of the instructional problems in education and training (Jonassen, 1991; Vrasidas, 2000). Objectivism is most beneficial in teaching fundamental concepts, principles, and theories especially in the field of natural science where personalized

knowledge of the reality may lead to academic chaos. Nevertheless, when it comes to applications of what learners perceive about the reality, radical objectivism may inhibit their creativity in that it precludes learners' role in personalized the external world; this, obviously, goes against the essential trend of education – a learner-centered orientation.

Constructivism allows more of learners' personal knowledge construction and therefore does a better job in fostering engagement and creativity than objectivism does. Learners' needs, backgrounds, and interests are addressed when designing instruction and assessment. Nonetheless, if education is leaning too much towards the constructivism end of the continuum, it may risk its effectiveness since learners are often unable or unwilling to assume a large amount of personal responsibility for learning. Learners need interventions during their learning process, which is basically why they pursue formal education at institutions.

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

We do not believe objectivism and constructivism necessarily create a dilemma. The best answer on which learning theory we should implement to develop instructions is: it depends on the context. In the distance MBA, where most learners are adults and have gained a significant amount of prior knowledge, skills, and most importantly the ability to take responsibility for their own learning, constructivism should dominate objectivism. Instructional goals and objectives should be negotiated not imposed. In other words, they should be tailored to fit into learners' interests, needs, abilities, and backgrounds. Tasks and strategies should be less prescription-oriented, i.e., the position should not be taken that there is only one single correct way to an instructional problem. Evaluation should be less criterion-referenced. Constructivist activities can be carried out in forms of working individually, in pairs, and groups on cases and projects. Digital and online synchronous and asynchronous tools should be used to aid these activities to promote learning. Having said that constructivism is dominant in the distance MBA, we do not mean to neglect the critical role of objectivism in providing learners with fundamental concepts, principles, theories, and guidance prior to their applications. In the distance MBA, the instructors' job first and foremost is to present the science of business administration, then to offer a learning environment and opportunities for learners to construct and implement that science.

### **2. BEHAVIORAL THEORY**

Behavioral theory's fundamental emphasis is to create and maintain desirable behaviors by manipulating conditions in the learning environment. It is associated with theorists such as E. L. Thorndike, Ivan Pavlov, and B. F Skinner. Thorndike's (1913) connectivism comprises

three major laws: Law of Effect, Law of Exercise, and Law of Readiness. The Law of Effect assumes if an association is followed by a “satisfying state of affairs” it will be strengthened, and if it is followed by an “annoying state of affairs” it will be weakened. The Law of Exercise has two subcategories, i.e., law of use – a response to a stimulus strengthens their connection, and law of disuse – when a response is not made to a stimulus, the connection’s strength is weakened. The Law of Readiness states that when one is ready, response satisfying that stimulus is rewarding and not satisfying is punishing. Pavlov’s (1927) classical conditioning focuses on involuntary and automatic behaviors. Classical conditioning involves making a connection between an involuntary response and a stimulus.

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning was based on the work of Thorndike (1913). B.F Skinner (1938) is famous for his operant conditioning theory, which assumes the best way to understand a behavior is to look at the cause of an action and its consequences. There are three types of operants: neutral operants, reinforcers, and punishers. Neutral operants do not either increase or decrease the likelihood of a repeated behavior. Reinforcers increase that likelihood while punisher decreases it. One significant difference between Pavlov’s classical conditioning and operant conditioning is classical conditioning deals with connection between an involuntary response and a stimulus, while operant conditioning focuses on making a connection between a voluntary behavior and a consequence. Skinner’s operant conditioning has more implications on human learning because of its emphasis on voluntary behavior. Generally, behaviorism believes that learning often occurs by trial and error; satisfying stimulus-response connections are strengthened and annoying ones are weakened (Schunk, 2012). Behavioral theories avoid dealing with “mentalistic” constructs such as thoughts, reasoning, processing, or memory (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011).

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

Even though behavioral theory does not take into consideration “mentalistic” constructs, which are found to play significant roles in influencing how people think and acquire knowledge, it does identify many principles for learning. Programed instruction is used in web-based instruction in forms of drills and tutorials: information and feedback to students are presented based on students’ answers (Schunk, 2012). Teachers should help students to form habits (Thorndike, 1912). Thorndike also suggested teachers do not expect students to create habits themselves. This perspective is not quite consistent with constructivism and current trend of learner-centered approach; therefore, we would recommend teachers encourage students to form good habits by themselves in distance MBA programs since learners are adults who can take responsibility for their learning. Teachers can promote good learning habits

by providing learners with rewards and discourage bad learning habits by punishment by utilizing grading policies. Additionally, teachers should entice learners’ readiness to learn. Showing learners good models and examples to provoke their needs and desires for learning new knowledge and skills can enhance readiness.

Morrison, Ross, Kalman, and Kemp suggested some principles of behavioral theory that might provide guidance for a course or unit design (2011). When designing instruction for distance courses, instructors should give frequent verbal feedback to every correct response if learners are beginners and new to the course. However, as learners progress and have sufficient skills, feedback should switch to intermittent. In addition, quizzes in online classes should be graded in the form of feedback as soon as the students complete them. Students need to master a series of prerequisite knowledge and skills with rewards before reaching more complicated issues. If they have not succeeded doing so, they would have to practice until they demonstrate mastery of those prerequisite knowledge and skills.

We found the principle saying a small reinforcement given immediately is better than a large reinforcement given later is particularly applicable for distance MBA education. In a face-to-face MBA course where learners are adults, it is very important for instructors to save face for learners; sometimes, small immediate negative feedback may hurt learners’ confidence or even self-esteem. In distance courses, on the contrary, feedback is private most of the time – except synchronous communication among groups of learners and instructors.

### **3. COGNITIVE THEORY**

Whereas behavioral theory focuses on what is directly observable and controllable – memorization of factual knowledge, rules, laws, and terminology, cognitive theory studies how human minds generate knowledge and meaning. Piaget and Vygotsky are representative cognitivists. Piaget’s (1952) most famous finding was his discovery that children think and reason differently at different stages of their lives graduating from mastery of concrete objects, symbols, relations and how to reason, to thoughts. Lev Vygostky (1962) suggested an emphasis on social activities and cooperative learning based on his introduction of the “zone of proximal development” – the area slightly above learners’ present level of knowledge and skills. Teachers and peers can assist and scaffold learners to cross this “zone of proximal development” in order to reach higher levels of knowledge and skills. Cognitivists support the following perspectives: (1) students form personalized and unique knowledge structures called “schema”; (2) the more the learners connect prior knowledge with new knowledge and apply it to new situations, the better the knowledge will be learned; and (3) prior knowledge influences new learning experiences and new knowledge change learners’

knowledge structures (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011).

### Implications for the distance MBA

Cognitive theory has important implications for distance education and is commonly used to guide web-based instruction and multimedia learning. Generally, instruction for distance courses, objectives, materials, and activities need to be designed and organized in ways that meet learners' "zone of proximal development", facilitate memory, and provide interaction with instructors and peers. Mayer (2009) suggested principles for multimedia learning design, which have become the bible for multimedia learning design for effective web-based instruction, which takes into consideration memory facilitation. Even though interpersonal skill training was warned to be less reliable for online instruction (Clark & Mayer, 2008), we find Mayer's principles valuable in designing distance MBA courses, especially for teaching facts, concepts, and principles. For MBA courses teaching interpersonal skills and attitudinal skills, we suggest using authentic cases either in form of text or multimedia for transferring performance. More analysis on how to make amends for face-to-face interactions in online MBA courses will be discussed in the next part about equivalency theory in distance education. Mayer recommended ten principles for

multimedia learning development shown in Table 1; nine are based on cognitive learning theory. The tenth principle – the personalization principle - is based on social agency theory.

Despite the fact that Mayer's principles have been widely adapted due to his rigorous and evidence-based research, we feel that they still need more research to become full-fledged theories. Most of his experimental research was done in undergraduate students and on science subjects. Further research in the field of the distance MBA should concentrate on experimental or clinical research on business management knowledge domains and on business administration learners to test whether and not the above principles really operate and affect MBA learning outcomes.

### 4. SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

Albert Bandura (1977) developed key aspects of social learning theory. Social learning theory bridged behavioral theory and cognitive theory in that it recognized the influence of consequences on the frequency of behavior as well as the role of internal mental processing and thoughts in influencing behavior (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011). Social learning theory proposes that people learn from others through observation and modeling (Bandura, 1969). In other words, people learn new knowledge and

**TABLE 1  
MULTIMEDIA LEARNING PRINCIPLES**

Principle	Description
Coherence principle	Learning is improved when interesting but irrelevant words and pictures are excluded from a multimedia presentation. Learning is improved when interesting but irrelevant sounds and music are excluded from a multimedia presentation. Learning is improved when unneeded words and symbols are eliminated from a multimedia presentation.
Signaling principle	People learn better when cues that highlight the organization of the essential materials are added.
Redundancy principle	People learn better from graphics and narration than from graphics narration, and printed text.
Spatial contiguity principle	Students learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented near rather than far from each other on the page or screen.
Temporal contiguity principle	Students learn better when corresponding words and pictures are presented simultaneously rather than successively.
Segmenting principle	People learn better when a multimedia message is presented in user-paced segments rather than as a continuous unit.
Pre-training principle	People learn more deeply from a multimedia message when they know the names and characteristics of the main concepts.
Modality principle	People learn more deeply from picture and spoken words than from pictures and printed words.
Multimedia principle	People learn better from words and pictures than from words alone.

*Note.* Adapted from "Multimedia Learning" by Mayer, R. E., 2009. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

skills not only from directly experiencing them but also from their observation of others' experience and interactions. Based his theory on behaviorism, Bandura (1965) claimed, "observation of rewarding consequences generally enhances similar performance, whereas witnessing punishing outcomes has an inhibiting effect on behavior" (p. 234). Social learning theory proposed four steps of learning: attention, retention, production, and motivation (Bandura, 1986). First, learners need to be engaged to the level that they pay attention to the instruction. Then they retain the knowledge and skills they have learned by repeating the knowledge and skills in forms of mental rehearsal. In the production step, learners implement the knowledge and skills they have acquired to replicate the behavior they observed; overt practice can help production. Motivation is maintained by reinforcement, which may involve intrinsic satisfaction for emulating the model, extrinsic rewards such as points, verbal compliments, and vicarious pleasure through watching others reinforced for the behavior (Morrison, Ross, Kalman & Kemp, 2011)

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

Social learning theory's assertion that people learn vicariously by observing others' behaviors and consequences entailed by those behaviors has relevance to the distance MBA. Real or fictional characters and situations can be displayed in forms of digital materials such as e-books, soft copy, films, television, and online media. There are numerous asynchronous and synchronous online communication tools that allow learners to collaborate and share models of behaviors of themselves or other sources they see, watch, or read. Recently, there has been a trend in developing intelligent tutors who emulate real-life models in computer-based environments. This is a promising propensity, which, if successfully developed, will significantly enhance the quality of distance education. Researchers are working on how to make intelligent tutors have high fidelity. Issues on voice and graphics interface, intelligent tutors' characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, accents, and expertise level are also being researched. Expertise level of the intelligent tutors particularly requires more time and effort for computer programming. Instructors and instructional designers should bear in mind that learners need to get involved with other people when they learn and have a desire of being recognized when performing well. Learning MBA from a distance could be interesting and meaningful if the instructor or instructional designers develop interactive activities in which learners can reflect the knowledge and skills they learn into their local work place. For example, learners can write reflection papers or video record stories related to course concepts to share with the instructor or classmates on the Internet. Social learning's focus on vicarious learning and modeling is efficacious for these techniques

## **5. VICARIOUS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

At the Seattle, Washington meeting of ABSEL, Hoover and Giambatista (2009) put forth this question --- "Why have we neglected vicarious experiential learning?". The vicarious experiential learning (VEL) model introduced by Hoover and Gaimbatista (2009) was based on Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Roger's (1980) concepts of immersive learning, and early ABSEL definitions of experiential learning (Hoover, 1974; Hoover & Whitehead, 1976). The gist of the VEL approach is that learning does not have to be processed as direct experiential learning for it to not only be effective for short-run learning goals, but also for learning resulting in lasting transformative change.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory makes a significant contribution to the concept of vicarious experiential learning. Indeed, Bandura (1997) stated, "People do not rely on enactive experience as the sole source of information about their capabilities (p. 86). Efficacy appraisals are partly influenced by vicarious experiences mediated through modeled attainments. So modeling serves as another effective tool for promoting a sense of personal efficacy." In a complimentary fashion, Hoover and Giambatista (2009) define vicarious experiential learning as a kind of learning that "exists when a personally responsible participant (s) cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills and/or attitudes through processes of observation in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement despite the absence of direct, personalized consequences" (p. 36).

We feel that vicarious experiential learning is highly valuable in situations where the cost and risks of direct experiential learning may prove prohibitive, or in situations where vicarious experiential learning can be used to complement and enhance direct experiential learning. For example, in a comprehensive study contrasting individual, dyadic and team performances, experiential learning was found to be more effective in enhancing classroom performance if vicarious observation preceded direct experiential learning (Hoover, Giambatista & Belkin, 2012).

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

The distance MBA can take full advantage of aspects of vicarious experiential learning. As a matter of fact, in the distance MBA environment, it is close to impossible to have learners experience direct experiential learning as they might in traditional brick and mortar classrooms. A possible exception to this could be found in distance MBA programs with an innovative form of hybrid courses. The separation of instructor and classroom can present additional challenges for distance learning programs.

For example, there is a difference between learning that is a product of learning system objectives and

processes of acquisition. Acquisition happening naturally is a product of subconscious processes and does not require formal instruction (Krashen, 1988). Therefore, learners in distance MBA courses may have direct exposure and interaction with their co-workers and the environment around them, a kind of exposure and interaction that can lead to experiential acquisition sourced in the remote environment. These acquisitional learning phenomena can be complementary to the experiential learning goals of the learning system, in addition to those goals, or even in opposition to those goals. .

When learners are enrolled in distance MBA courses, they are part of a formal education program, and thus they expect a certain amount of instructional and learning guidance. The astute delineation of the role of vicarious experiential learning in distance learning programs can be extremely important. What learners acquire from their random interaction and exposure to their local environment could be used to support what they learn from formal instruction; it cannot act as a stand-alone source of learning for distance MBA learners. Utilizing vicarious experiential learning methodologies, learners can be better prepared for knowledge enhancement and skills acquisition as they learn through observation and modeling. Graduates of such learning programs would thus potentially perform better when it comes to real life tasks and situations after graduation. The quality of instructional materials, strategies, activities and modalities for presenting materials are important affective factors on the effectiveness and efficiency of vicarious experiential learning in distance MBA courses.

## **DISTANCE EDUCATION THEORIES AND MBA PROGRAMS**

### **1. THE THEORY OF INDEPENDENT STUDY**

Charles Wedemeyer (1981) developed the theory of independent study. The fundamental basis of the theory is its belief in the independence of students in distance education. Wedemeyer emphasized the role of independent study particularly at the college or university level, placed significant responsibility on the students, and stated distance education should permit students to learn at their own pace. Additionally, he suggested students are separated from teachers. In addition, he believed the development of teacher-learner relationship is a key factor in distance education.

#### **Implications for the distance MBA**

The distance MBA is proven to be feasible by the theory of independent study because most distance MBA learners are adults and likely to be able to take responsibility for their own learning. Wedemeyer's argument that learners in distance courses should be

allowed to learn at their own pace can be attractive at first glance, but we feel that it is not really persuasive if looked at as a totality. If students learning at their own pace dominates a learning system design, many negative consequences related to course design, evaluation, and quality of peer-interaction could entail. Distance MBA course designers and instructors should be clearly aware of this issue. In science courses, the knowledge and skills are mostly linear and do not require as much narrative feedback or interactions among learners as in management courses where learners would absolutely need to interact with peers and the instructors either synchronously or asynchronously to progress.

It may be unreasonable and chaotic if students are allowed to proceed at their own pace. For example, if assignments are supposed to be due on a certain day, one student may get it done earlier than some others. If this happens at an extreme level, some students may proceed to the end of the course while others are still at the middle of it. Obviously, pair-work and group work, which are needed to track student progress by being done at the same time would become difficult or impossible. Additionally, it would be hard and time consuming for grading and assessing activities. That is not to say that it is even more difficult to have students work collaboratively in some interactive activities if the population of students is spread out at different stages of the course. For these reasons, we recommend, even though learners could go through the course at their own pace, they should stay in the parallel timeframes which could prevent a student to go too far ahead of another.

We also found Wedemeyer's argument about the relationship of teachers and students in distance education debatable. How can teachers and students be separated and have a good working relationship simultaneously? We suspect Wedemeyer's theory of independent study should define clearly what "separated" means. If it means "geographically separated", there would be little question about the theory's reliability. However, if "separated" means "psychologically separated", we would argue against Wedemeyer's position that learners are separated from teachers and need to have a relationship with them. In distance courses, learners may feel left out and isolated if they do not gain timely feedback and contact with instructors, mechanisms that foster teacher-student relationships. Even though MBA students are adults and can take responsibility for their learning, by attending formal distance courses, they expect instructor's guidance and feedback. This is particularly true in management courses, where nonlinear interpersonal skills are taught. We believe teachers and students should not be psychologically separated in spite of geographical separation.

### **2. THE THEORY OF TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE**

Michael Moore (2007) formulated the theory of transactional distance. He believes distance education

includes two-way communication and structure in the program – the extent to which a program is reflecting the needs of individual learners. Moore addressed the issue of autonomy in distance education and suggested two categories of autonomy: autonomous (learner determined) and non-autonomous (teachers determined), which are classified based on three criteria including the autonomy of the teacher and the learner in setting objectives, their autonomy in methods of study, and their autonomy in evaluation.

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

The distance MBA should have two-way communications including teacher-student and student-student communications by utilizing asynchronous and synchronous communication tools. We agree that distance education should take into consideration the learners' needs. Moore's criteria to classify distance education help guide instructors and instructional designers to determine which side of the autonomy they are leaning towards in developing MBA courses. Considering objectivism and constructivism learning theory, we would suggest that the distance MBA program design should be leaning a little more towards the teacher's responsibility to decide learning objectives, methods, and evaluation. This harmonizes the role of the teachers and students without creating academic chaos. Further experimental research to compare the propensities of these two forms of autonomy should be undertaken to verify this claim.

### **3. THE THEORY OF INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION**

Borge Holmberg (1985) proposed the theory of interaction and communication. His theory was further highlighted and categorized into communication theory (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2012). Holmberg believes interaction between teachers and students is the core of distance education because it allows students to consider and learn different views, approaches, and solutions. The theory of interaction and communication also assumes that emotional involvement in studying and feelings of personal relationships between teachers and students is a rich source for learning enjoyment, which then supports learner motivation and thus facilitates learning. Additionally, Holmberg claimed the more students participate in studying, the more motivation and engagement they have. Holmberg admitted his theory of interaction and communication is not overly rigorous. We suspect that may be because most of his proposed principles have not been tested by experimental research. Despite lack of evidentiary support, Holmberg believes that his proposed principles have logical explanatory power, and thus indicate essential characteristics of effective distance education practices.

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

Distance MBA course should be designed in ways that foster learner and teacher rapport and interaction. Instructional objectives, materials, strategies, and activities need to be interactive and authentic to engage students in the learning process. It is vital to have paired activities, group discussion and projects facilitated by competent, enthusiastic, devoted, and friendly teachers. The non-verified logic of the theory of interaction and communication may very well call for more experiential research, especially on the impacts of emotions and personal relationships between students and teachers.

### **4. ANDRAGOGY**

Many now consider Malcolm Knowles' work on andragogy to be a theory of distance education (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2012). Malcolm Knowles put forth the term andragogy in 1973 when he realized that "The culture does not nurture the development of the abilities required for self-direction, while the need to be increasingly self-directing continues to develop originally" (p. 44). He believed pedagogy - "the art and science of teaching children" is not suitable for adults and pointed out adult learners as a neglected species (Knowles, 1973). Andragogy is based on four main assumptions: changes in self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learn. In a more recent work, these assumptions were updated to include: the need to know, the learner's self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998).

Adults are different from children in that they need to know why they need to learn something before learning it. Also, adults, as opposed to children, have an enhanced self-concept of being responsible for their learning. They have a greater volume and quality of experience. Adults have the readiness to learn those things they need to know and able to do to better adapt to real-life situations. Adults' orientation to learn is also contrasted with children's orientation to learn in that adults seek life-centered goals. Motivation in adult learners has both internal motivation (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life, etc.) and external motivation (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries, etc.).

### **Implications for the distance MBA**

Many management educators have been applying andragogy into their teaching and curriculum design without fully realizing it (Forrest III & Peterson, 2006). Nonetheless, it is absolutely necessary to make the benefits and implications of andragogy more visible in order to shed light on practices that have been focusing too much on pedagogy. Andragogy is particularly supportive for the distance MBA because of its nature and strong focus on

methods and approaches to teach adult learners in MBA programs. There should be a shift from pedagogy to andragogy in MBA education; yet, pedagogy and andragogy need not to be mutually exclusive as it would be possible to design instruction that includes both.

We would like to add that the integration of andragogy and pedagogy is not only possible but also necessary and meaningful depending on the context and learner differences. Learners from different level of prior knowledge, cognition span, backgrounds, cultures, learning styles, motivation, needs, interests, and goals may benefit differently from pedagogy or andragogy. However, we believe andragogy should be the priority since it makes learners take the responsibility to be self-directed and independent in learning so that they can meet the changing demands of work in real life. Instructors need to help learners become aware of the “need to know”. Personnel appraisal systems, job rotation, exposure to role models, and diagnostic performance assessments can be used to raise the level of awareness of the “need to know” (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998). In the distance MBA we need to make the “need to know” even more vivid by providing learners with multimedia materials.

Adult distance MBA learners would benefit from activities that induce and encourage them to utilize their experience. These activities could be group discussion, simulation exercises, problem-solving activities, case methods, group projects, and portfolios. With advances in information technology and the Internet, the distance MBA is very likely to have all those activities as in a traditional class. When it comes to learners’ readiness to learn, instructors and instructional designers need to exploit adult learners’ “readiness to learn” and bring it to a higher level of readiness by engendering it through exposure to models of superior performance, career counseling, simulation exercises and other techniques (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 1998).

Even though Knowles’ assumption about adult learners’ orientation to learn is vulnerable to critiques saying that children’s orientation to learn is also focusing on real-life situations, it is meaningful and helpful for the distance MBA. This assumption leads us to design instruction more related to learners’ interests, needs, and most importantly the need of real-life situations they may want to or have to confront at work. Last but not least, instructors and instructional designers need to understand and address adult learners’ motivators, especially internal motivators, which are more long lasting and sustainable. By having insights into the motivations of distance MBA students, we are more likely to develop and design instructions that better meet their expectations and job market demands.

Andragogy has been commonly applied to adult education because of its logical explanatory assumptions. However, experimental research for evaluating and confirming this theory is still rare. Future research is

suggested to examine how to enhance the reliability for the scales for experience, need to know, readiness, and self-directedness (Holton III, Wilson, & Bates, 2009). We would suggest that the reliability for the scale of motivation and orientation to learn be researched as well.

## 5. EQUIVALENCY THEORY

Equivalency theory is considered an American theory of distance education (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2012). Simonson and Schlosser (1995) put forth equivalency theory. The fundamental idea of the theory is learning experience of distance learners should be make equivalent rather than identical to traditional students in face-to-face classes (Simonson & Schlosser, 1999). In other words, different instructional materials and strategies can be applied to both groups; however, the learning experience and outcomes should be equivalent.

### Implications for the distance MBA

We agree with Simonson’s statement that education at a distance should be built on the concept of equivalency of learning experiences. Learning experience is the heart of education, where learners construct knowledge in their own ways based on what they are taught. It is important that learners experience equivalent learning materials, activities, and outcomes regardless of their geographical locations. We also agree with Simonson and Schlosser (1999) that the more equivalent the learning experiences of distant learners are to the local learners, the more equivalent the outcomes of educational experiences of all learners will become.

When it comes to the key point of how to design a collection of equivalent learning experiences for distant and local learners, however, we do not find Simonson’s arguments totally persuasive. Notwithstanding that providing appropriate and equivalent learning experiences for all students is important to distance education, it is not always possible to do so. We question Simonson’s statement saying distance education systems should strive for equivalency in the learning experiences of all students, regardless how they are linked to the resources or the instruction they require. There are certain subjects that cannot be taught adequately from a distance and produce an equivalent learning outcomes like in face to face courses due to the nature of the subject matter. For example, physics, chemistry, biology, sports, and the like need at least a minimal amount of face-to-face interaction, give-and-take discussion, and adequate amounts of timely feedback. .

The nature of many aspects of the MBA allows the MBA to be taught effectively online. Learning experiences are likely to have the opportunity to be made equivalent since distant MBA learners are adults who have jobs and can reflect and apply their learned concepts and principles into their working environment. They can do so either by directly experiencing the incidents or observing from their

working environment. Students in distance MBA courses may be exposed to different instructional materials, strategies, and activities designed to fit into web-based instruction criteria by using various modalities. Their learning experience, thanks to their interaction with their work, could be equivalent to those who are in the brick and mortar environment. Instructors in distance MBA courses may design activities that allow and encourage learners to reflect on their jobs and make connections between what they experience at work or in life and what they learn from the course materials, peers, and instructors.

## CONCLUSION

Learning theories reviewed in this paper can be used to guide instructions in distance MBA programs. Each learning theory presented here has its pros and cons, and thus is by no means perfect. However, the art of integrating learning theories into designing and implementing instructions could yield fruitful learning outcomes for the distance MBA. As suggested by constructivism and objectivism, educators should provide learners with basic objective knowledge and create learning environments for them to construct their own knowledge and skills. Timely and meaningful feedback either through reward or punishment should be given to form good learning habits and to motivate learners. Instructions in distance MBA courses need to be authentic and adequate to foster the “zone of proximal development” without overloading learners’ cognitive capacities. Additionally, when designing or selecting multimedia materials, instructors should use Mayer’s (2009) principles of multimedia learning carefully since these principles have not been fully tested. Multimedia material is a powerful means for presenting models and authentic cases for learner to learn vicariously. Besides, instructors and course designers need to plan and develop interactive activities utilizing synchronous and asynchronous online communication tools to foster interaction between teacher and learners as well as among learners. Distance learning environment usually makes learners feel isolated. If learners do not get to build a rapport with their instructor and classmates, they may feel helpless, underperform and even drop out.

Distance education theories are relatively newly developed and should be implemented with great care regarding their lack of experimental research evidence. There is a great deal of potential for ABSEL scholars assessing distance MBA programs as these programs continue to proliferate. For example, experimental research opportunities abound for ABSEL scholars should they choose to address the following topics:

1. Is it better to let students proceed through the course at their own pace? To what extent should learners’ independence in distance learning be allowed to produce unique and still beneficial learning outcomes?

2. Do learners who have a better relationship and rapport with classmates and teachers learn better? How do we measure these factors?
3. How can the reliability for the scales for experience, need to know, readiness, self-directedness, motivation, and orientation in adult distance education be enhanced?

## REFERENCES

- Accredited online schools and colleges.* (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.accreditedonlinecolleges.org/online-mba-programs/>
- Bandura, A. (1965). “Vicarious processes: A case of no-trial learning”. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.). *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 2. New York: Academic Press, 1-55.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundation of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Bandura, A. (1969). *Principles of behavior modification*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Bruner, J. S. (1963). *The process of education*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, R. C., & Mayer, R. E. (2008). *E-learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning*. (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer.
- Forrest III, S. P., & Peterson, T. O. (2006). It’s called andragogy. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 5(1), 113-122.
- Holmberg, B. (1985). *The feasibility of a theory of teaching for distance education and a proposed theory* (ZIFF Papiere 60). Hagen, West Germany: Fern Universitat, Zentrales Institute fur Fernstudienforschung Arbeitsbereich. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED290013).
- Holton III, E. F., Wilson, L. S., & Bates, R. A. (2009). Toward development of a generalized instrument to measure andragogy. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 20(2), 169-193.
- Hoover, J. D., (1974). “Experiential learning: Conceptualization and definition” in James Kenderine and Bernard Keys (Eds.). *Simulations, Games, and Experiential Learning: On the road to a new frontier*. ABSEL Proceedings, Vol 1.
- Hoover, J. D., & Giambatista, R. C. (2009). Why have we neglected vicarious experiential learning?. *Development in Business Simulation and Experiential Learning*, 36, 33-37.

- Hoover, J.D., Giambatista, Robert C. & Belkin, Luiba (2012) Eyes On, Hands On: Vicarious Observational Learning as an Enhancement to Direct Experience. *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, 12 (4).
- Hoover, J. D., & Whitehead, C. (1976). "An experiential cognitive methodology in the first course in management: Some preliminary results" in Bernard Sord (Ed.). *Computer Simulation and Learning Theory*. ABSEL Proceedings, Vol 3.
- Jonassen, D. H. (1991). Objectivism versus constructivism: Do we need a new philosophy paradigm?. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 39(3), 5-14.
- Knowles, M. S. (1973). *The adult learner: A neglected species*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company.
- Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company.
- Krashen, S. D. (1988). *Second language acquisition and second language learning*. Prentice-Hall.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). *Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mayer, R. E. (2009). *Multimedia learning*. (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Moore, M. (2007). The theory of transactional distance. In M. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Morrison, G. R., Ross, S. M., Kalman, H. K., & Kemp, J. E. (2011). *Designing effective instruction*. (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Pavlov, I.P. (1927). *Conditioned reflexes* (G. V. Anrep, Trans). London: Oxford University Press.
- Piaget, J. (1952). *The origin of intelligence in children*. New York: Basic Books.
- Roger, C. R. (1980). *A way of being*. New York, NY: Houghton-Mifflin.
- Schunk, D. H. (2012). *Learning theories: An education perspective*. (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Simonson, M. & Schlosser, C. (1995). *More than fiber: Distance education in Iowa*. Tech Trends, 40(3), 13-15.
- Simonson, M., & Schlosser, C. (1999). Theory and distance education: A new discussion. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 13(1), 60-75.
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, M. (2012). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundation of distance education*. (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*. New York: Appleton-Century.
- Thorndike, E. L. (1912). *Education: A first book*. New York: Macmillan.
- Thorndike, E. L. (1913). *Educational Psychology: Vol.2. The psychology of learning*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Vigotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thoughts and language* (E. Hanfmann & Vakar, Trans). Cambirdge, MA: MIT Press.
- Vrasidas, C (2000). Constructivism versus objectivism: Implications for interaction, course design, and evaluation in distance education. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 6(4), 339-362.
- Wedemeyer, C. (1981). *Learning at the backdoor*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.