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The Use Of Audio For Distance Education

By

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THE USE OF AUDIO FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

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Introduction

If you were asked which learning activities consume the major portion of a student's classroom time. Would you answer reading instructional materials, answering questions, discussing the course content, or taking tests. Actually typical high school students spend about 60 percent of their schooltime just listening. College students in conventional universities are likely to spend no less than 90 percent of their time listening to lectures. The answer would be different if the students are distance learners.

In an open learning system where the majority of students study on their own utilizing the media available at hand. One of the most common media they have are radios. Then the importance of audio media should not be underestimated.

What do we mean by audio media? By audio media we mean various means of recording and transmitting the human voice for instructional purpose. The audio devices commonly found in the classroom are the record player, the open-reel tape recorder, the audio card reader, and the radio. Radio has been used widely for educational purpose. For decades it has been the major media of the Public Relations Department in terms of information service. In Thailand educating people through radio became necessary when distance education emerged in early seventies. At present Ramkhamhaeng University employ radio as a second
main media next to printed media.

Ramkhamhaeng University and the use of audio

During the sixties there was a high demand for more higher institutions in Thailand, because the conventional universities could not cope up with the outgrowing number of high school graduates. The Bill of an Open University was passed in 1970 and became an Act of Ramkhamhaeng University on 26 February, 1971. On 2 August, 1971, Ramkhamhaeng University opened its door to all people with secondary school certificate or equivalent. The main aim was to solve the problem of high school graduates that conventional universities could not admit as well as the problem of equal opportunity in higher education. Ramkhamhaeng was also supposed to serve non traditional students which included people with a wide range of ages, abilities, purposes, and motivations. These students can be intelligent high school graduates with financial problems, or retired individuals looking for advocations, or students who never did well in school and are seeking academic and professional skills. They can be mature, marginally capable, old or young, motivated or desperate. The point is that these students are different in background, intelligence, and desires. Also these students may not be able to attend class in traditional style or time frame because of existing jobs or family considerations.

There were four faculty offering bachelor degree program in the field of law, business administration, humanities, and
education. The enrolment in 1971 was over 35,000. The teaching-learning system made use of large lecture halls equipped with closed-circuit television. However, only 40 percent of the students could attend the lecture because of space limitation. The rest had to study on their own by means of textbooks.

In 1973 three more faculty were added to the system, Faculty of Science, Faculty of Political Science, and Faculty of Economics. The freshman enrolment had increased tremendously since 1971 and reached the peak of 120,000 in 1979. The total enrolment was over 500,000. In 1978 there were nearly 200,000 high school graduates and the twelve conventional university all over Thailand could accommodate only 13,000 freshmen. Therefore, in 1984 Ramkhamhaeng University with an area of 120 acres had to open a second campus which is about 25 kilometer east of the main campus.

Though Ramkhamhaeng operated on open learning system basis, but teaching was done in lecture halls with closed-circuit television for six years. Teaching by means of radio began in 1977. Radio Thailand under the control of the Public Relations Department offered an educational program for Ramkhamhaeng University 5 hours a day, and Ramkhamhaeng was able to broadcast lectures of 63 courses. The broadcast range covered 27 provinces within the range of 300 kilometer. The period for each lecture was 30 minutes. Most of the lectures broadcasted were those of general education courses. In 1978 the broadcasting time was extended to 10 hours a day.
Presently Ramkhamhaeng University program starts from 6.00 am to 11.00 pm with an hour break for news at 12.00 am, 6.00 pm, and 8.00 pm. In addition to Radio Thailand there are 43 local stations all over the country that could broadcast our program for 2 hours a day. The courses broadcasted rise up to 130 courses varying from 30 to 90 minute period.

All lectures are recorded with reel tape at studios in Ramkhamhaeng. Delivering and returning the tapes to local radio stations are done on weekly basis. In addition to radio program, there are 9 regional centres all over the country where textbooks, cassette tape, and video tape are available for distance learners.

Problems encountered

Ramkhamhaeng University has encountered many problems since the first day of operation 15 years ago. Coping up with large number is burdensome task. One can hardly forget those hectic days with thousands of prospective students queuing up during registration. The lack of qualified faculty and staff at the beginning, and the public attitude on the quality of graduates were among the most severe problems encountered during the first seven year of operation. Now most of the problems are solved to some extent. However, some problems are still with us and they are associated with problems on the use of audio for distance education.

The use of electronic media need a lot of fund for
equipment and studios as well as for staff. Presently Ramkhamhaeng has established the Office of Educational Technology mainly on our own budget. Over 90 percent of the staff of this Office depend entirely on the tuition and fee funds.

The question of cost is an important one for university administrators. Technology may be widely available at relatively low cost, but they may not necessarily be educational resources. Usually the latter may become available at relatively high cost. The economic picture of technology in distance education is not a bright one. The money will still have to be found and there are few signs that the university is ready to pay the cost of installing technology especially on a massive scale. The cost of technology in distance education would be more acceptable if benefits could be clearly demonstrated. But the search for such clear benefits has yielded results that partly inspire confidence among university administrators. In addition, the educational budgets and regulations are constructed in such a way that cuts cannot be easily accommodated, nor funds switched to other purposes. High proportion of the budget goes to paying the salaries of university personnel. The rest goes towards constructing and maintaining university buildings. Only a very small percentage is available for electronic media.

The problem of commercial bias is a point that university administrators should keep in mind. Most of the higher institutions in developing countries have been looking for
assistance from developed countries. Educational technology, for the time being, is the phenomenon of capitalist economies than to centrally planned economies. Most of the hardware and software are the products of Japan, United States, and Western Europe. Any assistance from these nations will consequently lead to the problem of commercial bias.

Another problem that results as a consequence after installing audio media is technical problem. Audio media is not free from technical problem, and overcoming technical problem is usually possible at a cost. Also, maintenance is quite a problem that needs a part of the annual budget.

One of the drawbacks is the semester system of Ramkhamhaeng University. Since Ramkhamhaeng offer classroom lectures, printed media, audio and audiovisual media to all students, the faculty and staff have to work excessively in terms of teaching, proctoring examinations, grading and supervising students three times a year. Such work keep the faculty and staff working all year round. The lecturers of courses chosen for radio and television broadcasting have to double their work. The staff of the Educational Technology Office has to work overtime six days a week and mostly beyond 10.00 pm. Even though the general education tapes are used at least one year, the work is still burdensome and time-consuming.

Besides, the quality of software is what the audio people has to keep in mind. No matter how versatile the hardware may become, education depends on the quality of software.
The last question concerning the use of audio for distance education is educational elitism. It seems that students who attend classroom lectures regularly take advantage of what become available to them through lectures including facility and service at the campus. On the other hand, some non traditional students, may be the majority, do not have the same learning pace as those of the first group. This tends to result in widening the gap between the traditional students and the non traditional students especially in some area of study such as science and computer. Therefore, there is an increasing demand for tapes of classroom lectures. At present many broadcasted lectures and all cassette tapes for regional centers were directly recorded from classroom lectures, and quite a few students are satisfy.

A New Look at the Older Media

At a time of economic uncertainty and retrenchment, costs and tight budgets appear to be on many educator's mind. New technology tends to be expensive and large capital investment are impossible for many institutions. In addition, development and production costs associated with some new technologies continue to be relatively high. Thus, with declining budgets and other cost constraints, the traditional readily available technology, which the university already owned and used, should take on additional importance. In developing countries, the time may already have arrived in which the concept of "New is better"
Educators may find that existing media may not only be more available and economical, but also as effective and efficient as new media if used properly. There is often a fear factor associated with the use of anything new. Many would be users might be more comfortable and more likely to use existing equipment and technology. Many new technologies require special training as well as specialized and often expensive software. Besides, training and software may not be readily available or economically feasible in many higher institutions. This generally would lead to the reconsider or rediscover of the available equipment.

Considering the factors and problems mentioned, and the cost-effectiveness, it appears that audio media yield pretty beneficial results in terms of distance education. The question is how to keep students from becoming bored with audiotape. Generally the audiotape is considered to be an old and outdated medium. Most instructors know from personal experience that audiotape can be boring, unless the narrator is a talented speaker or there is exceptional personal interest in the topic.

Direct recording from the classroom lectures do give the non traditional students a feeling of the classroom atmosphere. If an instruction allows students to study and practice at times most convenient to them, then adding activities might be the key to use of older media. It also appears that some of the new media, while certainly very impressive, may merely duplicate basic processes of existing media. We feel that the
the time is right for new approaches to the use of old media for distance education.
Reference


