

TRAINING
NEEDS IN
THE USE OF
MEDIA FOR
DISTANCE
EDUCATION

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Use of Media for Distance Education in Asia

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 school time just listening. College students in conventional universities are likely to spend no less than 90 percent of their time listening to lectures. However, the answer would be different if the students were 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 is radio. Thus, the importance of audio media should not be underestimated.

What do we mean by *audiomedia*? It refers to various means of recording and transmitting the human voice for instructional purposes. Those audio devices commonly found in a classroom are record players, open-reel tape recorders, audio card readers and the radio. Radio has been used widely for educational purposes. For decades it has been the major medium of the Public Relations Department in terms of information service. In Thailand, educating people through radio became necessary when distance education emerged in the early seventies, and at present Ramkhamhaeng University employs radio as a second main medium next to the print medium.

Ramkhamhaeng University and the use of audio

During the sixties there was a growing demand for more higher education institutions in Thailand because conventional universities could not cope with the swelling number of high school graduates. The Bill for an Open University was passed in 1970 and became the 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 qualifications. The main aims were to solve the problem of high school graduates who could not gain admittance to conventional universities, as well as to provide equal opportunity in higher education. Ramkhamhaeng was also intended to serve non-traditional students people with a wide range of age, ability, purpose, and motivation. These students might be qualified high school graduates with financial problems, retired individuals looking for vocations, dropouts now seeking academic or professional skills. They could also be mature, marginally capable, old or young, and motivated or desperate. The point is that these students are different in background, intelligence, and desire. Also these students may not be able to attend classes in traditional style or time frame because of existing jobs or family considerations.

There were initially four faculties which offered bachelor degree programmes in the fields 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 lectures due to space limitations. Many had to study on their own by means of textbooks.

In 1973, three more faculties were added to the system: the faculties of Science, Political Science and Economics. The freshman enrolment had increased tremendously since 1971 and reached a peak of 120,000 in 1979. In that year the total enrolment was over 500,000. In 1978, there were nearly 200,000 high school graduates in Thailand, but the twelve conventional universities in the country could accommodate only 13,000 first year students. Therefore, in 1984, Ramkhamhaeng University opened a second campus about 25 kilometres east of the main campus.

Although Ramkhamhaeng operated on an open learning system basis, teaching occurred in lecture halls with closed-circuit television for the first six years. Teaching by means of radio began in

1977. Radio Thailand, under the control of the Public Relations Department, offered an educational programme for Ramkhamhaeng University five hours a day and the university was able to broadcast lectures for 63 courses. The broadcast range covered 27 provinces within 300 kilometres of Bangkok. Each lecture lasted 30 minutes and most of the lectures were for general education courses. In 1978 the broadcasting time was extended to 10 hours a day

Presently, Ramkhamhaeng University radio programmes are broadcast from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. with a one-hour break for news at 12:00 noon, 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. In addition to Radio Thailand, there are 43 local stations throughout the country that broadcast the university's programmes for two hours a day. Broadcasts increased to cover 130 courses, each varying from 30 to 90 minutes.

All lectures are recorded with reel tape at studios in Ramkhamhaeng. Delivery of tapes to local radio stations and their return is on a weekly basis. In addition to radio programmes, there are nine regional centres in Thailand where textbooks, cassette tapes and videotape are available for distance learners.

Problems encountered

Ramkhamhaeng University has encountered many problems since the first days of operation almost 20 years ago. Coping with large numbers of students is a 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 public attitudes toward the quality of graduates, were among the most severe problems encountered during the first seven years of operation. Today most of the problems are solved to some extent. However, some problems are still with us and some involve the use of audio for distance education.

The use of electronic media requires a substantial investment for equipment, studios and staff. Presently, Ramkhamhaeng has established the Office of Educational Technology mainly on its own budget: over 90 percent of the staff of this Office depend entirely on funds generated by tuition fees.

The question of cost is an important one for university administrators. Technology may be widely available at relatively low cost, but it may not necessarily be educationally relevant. The economic picture for technology in distance education is not a bright one. High levels of funding are required 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. However, the search for such clear benefits has yielded results that only partially inspire confidence among university administrators.

In addition, the educational budgets and regulations are constructed in such a way that budget cuts cannot be easily accommodated, nor can funds be switched to other purposes. A high proportion of Ramkhamhaeng's budget goes to paying the salaries of university personnel. Much of the remainder 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 a phenomenon of capitalist economies rather than of centrally planned economies. Most of the hardware and software are products from Japan, the United States, and Western Europe. Any assistance from these nations will consequently lead to the problem of commercial bias.

Another problem that results from installing audio media is technical. Audio media are not free from technical problems, but overcoming technical problems is costly. Also, maintenance of equipment consumes its share of the annual budget.

The semester system of Ramkhamhaeng University also imposes problems. Since Ramkhamhaeng offers classroom lectures, printed media, and audio and audiovisual media to all students, faculty and staff must work excessively in terms of teaching, proctoring examinations, grading and supervising students three times a year. Such labours keep faculty and staff working all year round. The lecturers of courses chosen for radio and television broadcasting have to accomplish double the amount of work in order to produce programmes. Staff of the Educational Technology Office have to work overtime six days a week and mostly beyond 10:00 p.m. Even though educational tapes are used at least a year, the work is still burdensome and time-consuming. Besides, the quality of software is what audio people must keep in mind. No matter how versatile the hardware may become, education depends on the

quality of software.

The last problem concerning the use of audio for distance education concerns educational elitism. On one hand, it seems that students who attend classroom lectures regularly take advantage of what becomes available to them through lectures, including facilities and services at the campus. On the other hand, some non-traditional students, perhaps the majority, do not have the same learning pace as those of the first group. This tends to result in a widening of the gap between traditional and non-traditional students, especially in science and computer studies. Therefore, there is an increasing demand for tapes of classroom lectures. At present, many broadcast lectures and all cassette tapes for regional centres are directly recorded from classroom lectures and most students appear to be satisfied by them.

A new look at the older media

At a time of economic uncertainty and retrenchment, costs and tight budgets appear to be on many educators' mind. New technology tends to be expensive and large capital investments 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 technologies which are readily available and already owned and used by the university should take on additional importance. In developing countries, the time may already have arrived in which the concept of 'new is better' may no longer be valid.

Educators may find that existing media are not only more 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 potential users might be more comfortable and more likely to use existing equipment and technology as new technologies often require special training as well as specialized and expensive software. Besides, training and software may not be readily available or economically feasible in many higher institutions. In general, this should lead to reconsideration or rediscovery of the available equipment.

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

Direct recordings from classroom lectures do give non-traditional students a feeling of the classroom atmosphere. If an instruction allows students to study and practise 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 time is right for new approaches to the use of old media for distance education.

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