

# From Traditional to Distance Education: Improvements and Implications

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**Abstract**— *The Internet emergence as a distribution channel for services firms has permitted that high contact services, that traditionally require the client physical presence in the provider installations to be delivered, to become low contact services that can be delivered at distance. Education is one of these services: in recent times we are watching how distance education is being used as an alternative to or in combination with traditional education. The purpose of this article is to analyze, using the concepts of service marketing, the improvements obtained by passing from traditional education to distance education, discussing the implications for the provider and the client of the service. As a service, traditional education is characterized as intangible, variable, perishable, and production and consumption occur simultaneously. When distance education is implemented by using electronic channels, there are important changes in two of the mentioned characteristics, which result in improvements in the service delivery process: less variability because the service can be standardized, causing a decreasing in the human involvement in service delivery, which produces an improvement in service quality; and a separation between the service production and consumption that permits the service to become massive (increasing productivity) and decreases human involvement in service delivery (improving service quality). Other improvements obtained are wide geographic distribution, convenience for the client and low costs.*

**Index Terms** — *distance education, service, traditional education.*

## EDUCATION AS A SERVICE

Education is defined as instruction achieved by teaching action[1]. The teacher transmits to the students topics about a specific area of knowledge, and the expected result is learning. Once the transmission is finished, the students will not have more physical objects than before, but they will have new ideas. This leads to the conclusion that education is a service, which can be defined as any act or performance that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything[2]. When an education service is offered, the educational institution (provider) offers to the student (client) the possibility to hire for a period of time teachers which have abilities and experience (employees).

According to tangibility degree, educational service can be labeled as a pure service, that is, an offer that consists primarily of a service. The tangibility spectrum represented in Figure 1 shows examples that go from pure goods on the left side indicating the maximum tangibility degree in the offer, to pure services (for example, teaching) on the right side indicating the minimum tangibility degree in the offer[3].

Services can be classified as equipment based and people based, and people based services vary by whether they are provided by unskilled, skilled or professional workers[2]. Education is a people based service delivered by professional workers (teachers).

Looking at the services as a process, and considering who (or what) is the direct recipient of the service and the tangible/intangible nature of the service act, we can obtain the four-way classification scheme represented in Figure 2[4]: tangible actions to people's bodies (people processing), tangible action to goods and other physical possessions (possessions processing), intangible actions directed at people's minds (mental stimuli processing), and intangible actions directed at people's intangible assets (information processing)[4-5]. According to this classification, education is a service directed at people's minds, which implies that although the service can be delivered in the provider location (as in traditional education), the physical presence of the receiver of the service is not required to deliver it, and the service can be performed remotely (for example, using electronic channels).

Some services require the client's presence to be delivered and for this reason are called high contact services. Other services do not require the client's presence and are called low contact services[5]. Traditional education requires the student's presence in the provider location to receive the service delivered by the teacher, implicating that it's a high contact service. On the other hand, distance education offered using electronic channels (for example, the Internet) eliminates this requirement, and can be named as a low contact service.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL EDUCATION**

Being a service, traditional education is intangible, variable, perishable, and its production and consumption occur simultaneously[2,6,7]:

- **Intangible:** when the class is finished, the student will not walk away with any new tangible asset, because services are consumed but cannot be owned. It is not possible to know in advance the service delivery result before consumption happens, that is, the student cannot know if a class will be satisfactory before it takes place. To reduce uncertainty, clients will look for evidence of the service quality, examining the place, people, equipment, communication material, symbols and price, and that is why educational institutions have to achieve and maintain adequate locations, positive image and strong positioning.
- **Variable:** being traditional education a people based service, the delivery result may not be always the same, that is, the performance of the teacher today can be better or worse than tomorrow. That is why people ask about the provider's performance before they buy the service (is he/she a good teacher?). To control variability, the provider must control service quality. Specifically, an institution that uses traditional education should carefully select and train employees (teachers), as well as monitor clients (students) satisfaction through suggestion and complaint systems and surveys in order to detect and correct poor service.
- **Perishable:** the education service exists in a given period of time and cannot be inventoried. If a student misses a class, he/she cannot assist to it later. This implies that an unbalance between supply and demand can occur: if demand exceeds supply the students could have to wait to receive the service, and if supply exceeds demand the provider will have unused capacity. If productivity is increased by augmenting capacity (more students per class), service quality may suffer.
- **Simultaneous production and consumption:** in traditional education the student's presence is required to deliver the service, because while the teacher (provider's employee) is actually teaching, the student (client) is learning. This means that the teacher's performance can affect positively/negatively the students preference for this particular teacher and his/her image. If the teacher is known to be very good and demand exceeds supply, the price could be used as a balancing factor.

## **FROM TRADITIONAL TO DISTANCE EDUCATION: WHAT CHANGES?**

The Internet emergence as a distribution channel for services firms has permitted that high contact services, that traditionally require the client physical presence in the provider installations to be delivered, to become low contact services that can be delivered at distance. Education is one of these services: in recent times we are watching how distance education (which involves a rich interactive environment with multimedia including slides, video, text, e-mail, chat rooms and two way communication) is being used as an alternative to or in combination with traditional education.

When distance education is implemented by using electronic channels (for example, the Internet), there are important changes in two of the characteristics mentioned for traditional education in the previous section, which result in improvements in the service delivery process[6]:

- **Less variability** because the service can be standardized, and electronic channels will deliver it in the same way in all transmissions. Since there is a decrease in the human involvement in service delivery (because there is no need for direct human interaction, and the only requirements are some predesigned service and an electronic channel to deliver it), an improvement in service quality is obtained. For distance education, what the student receives is a predefined organized information that is not altered by the human factors related to the teacher.
- **A separation between the service production and consumption** that permits the service to become massive (increasing productivity) and decreases human involvement in service delivery (improving service quality). In distance education, a larger group of students can be accessed without sacrifice quality.

Of course, there are other improvements obtained when distance education is used, like wide geographic distribution since there are not distance barriers, convenience for the clients that can access the service when and where they want, and low costs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Distance education, compared to traditional education, presents advantages that affect positively service quality and productivity, which benefit both the educational institution (provider) and the student (client). This leads to the conclusion that distance education should be the preferred over the traditional scheme whenever its feasible.

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## FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURE 1  
TANGIBILITY SPECTRUM

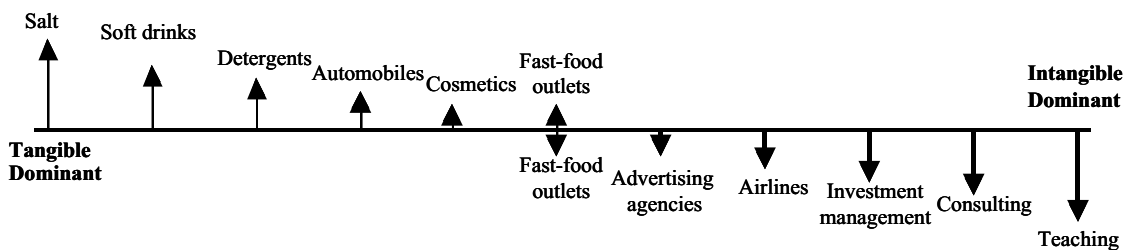


FIGURE 2  
NATURE OF THE SERVICE ACT

	Who or What is the Direct Recipient of the Service?	
	People	Things
<b>What is the Nature of the Service Act?</b>	Services directed at people's bodies:	Services directed at goods and other physical possessions:
<b>Tangible Actions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Health care</li> <li>•Passenger transportation</li> <li>•Beauty salons</li> <li>•Exercise clinics</li> <li>•Restaurants</li> <li>•Haircutting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Freight transportation</li> <li>•Industrial equipment repair and maintenance</li> <li>•Janitorial services</li> <li>•Laundry and dry cleaning</li> <li>•Landscaping/lawn care</li> <li>•Veterinary care</li> </ul>
<b>Intangible Actions</b>	Services directed at people's minds:	Services directed at intangible assets:
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Education</li> <li>•Broadcasting</li> <li>•Information services</li> <li>•Theaters</li> <li>•Museums</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Banking</li> <li>•Legal services</li> <li>•Accounting</li> <li>•Securities</li> <li>•Insurance</li> </ul>