The Role of the Internet in Distance Education: The Russian Experience

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I. Abstract

A pilot program in New Technologies in Learning in Russia, undertaken by the State University of New York and agencies of the Committee for Higher Education of the Russian Federation, has established two viable elements of a globally replicable distance-based education/training system: The Moscow Center for Distance Learning, and the mechanism for delivering effective courses applying readily available technology. Using video tapes as the lecture delivery medium, electronic mail as the administrative and pedagogical communications system, and newly evolving Internet tools as mechanisms for facilitating information and data transfer and research, significant progress has been made, and the stage set for productive implementation of a set of newly announced Russian policies on informatics and communications in higher education.

II. Extended Abstract

The State University of New York has been cooperating with the Committee for Higher Education of the Russian Federation to develop and implement a program of New Technologies in Learning, comprising two key elements: the Moscow Center for Distance Learning (MCDL), and the presentation of a number of courses to Russian students via distance techniques. Early results have shown that existing Internet connections combined with readily available communications techniques can support a viable distance-based educational or training program -- one which is replicable worldwide.

At the most basic level, the system operates with professors delivering formal lectures which are recorded on video, the tapes of which are received and archived at a central facility in Moscow. Students view the recorded lectures at a later date. Electronic mail, conferencing, and discussion lists enable students and teachers to maintain long-distance dialogues relating to lessons and ancillary topics. Further resources are being made available to the students as quickly as possible through Internet-accessible library and database searches, books on demand programs, and networked multimedia for course support and independent research.

The MCDL is in operation in Moscow, with a local area network running off a donated VAX-4000, supporting a system of personal computers and terminals. This first center will evolve into the nucleus of a group of distance learning centers in the Moscow region, and eventually a nationwide organization of such facilities.

SUNY has been operating a pilot program of instruction, in which eight Russian students from the Moscow Institute of Electronics and Mathematics (Technical University) are pursuing a Master of Science degree in Computer Science using these distance techniques, and the lessons learned are being applied to planning for similar courses in other subject areas. Also, work is underway to adapt the processes to the training (in non-credit contexts) of large numbers of students, and there is significant cooperation with World Bank, USAID, and other training programs.

The technical systems being applied here are successful in part because of the rapidly evolving policy climate in Russia. Recent policy initiatives ("Concepts") have been approved by the authorities in the fields of Informatization and Library Automation in higher education, and (especially relevant to Internet concerns) in Telecommunications in Higher Education. Here a new policy framework is being put in place, premised on the building of a uniform telecommunications network for Russian higher education. Included is a backbone and a management network, as well as a science and education network. Extensive satellite usage is addressed, as is electronic mail support and network technology development (with marketing of information services).

Finally, there is an accelerating rate of development of the physical infrastructure in Russia, and the degree of connectivity will show rapid growth. This, in turn, will allow for early application of many more Internet tools (Mosaic browser and networked multimedia to name just two) which will stimulate the development of distance-based education and training systems.

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