

THE ROLE and FUNCTION OF DISTANCE EDUCATION WORLD FROM WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE: Interview with Dr. Gülser Acar DONDURMACI for intWOJDE

Interviewed by Harun SERPIL
intWOJDE, Anadolu University,
Eskisehir, TURKEY



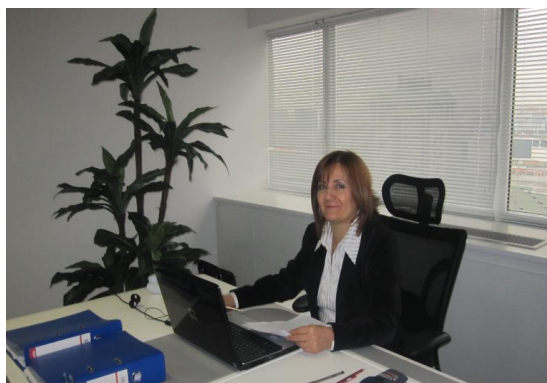
Distance education -DE- has an increasingly powerful impact on the education systems around the world and plays an especially vital role in the education of developing countries. It enables a large number of populations to access educational opportunities which would not be otherwise possible through conventional systems of education. As being a member int.WOJDE team, Harun SERPIL has interviewed with Asst. Prof. Dr. Gülser Acar DONDURMACI from Zirve University, Istanbul, Turkey. Our "Interview" section starts with her views on distance

learning/education practices. This semi-structured interview aims to benefit from her experiences, feelings, and perceptions about distance learning/education by eliciting her deep insights on the issue.

Int.WOJDE: What is your overall view on distance education? How do you think distance education supports the education system in Turkey?

Dondurmaci: Distance education is getting more and more popular around the World. I think IT technologies are crucial in such popularization. The tremendous development in mobile devices has made this type of education particularly more relevant and prominent. Distance education system is a very important tool in making education accessible in the remote corners of our country, and achieving "life-long" education goals. In the countries where the number of academic staff is inadequate, current academic staff can serve the whole country only through distance education systems. Therefore, DE also needs to be factored in determining education policies. In Turkey, distance education has now become an important component within the higher education system.

Int.WOJDE: How has your job experience been with distance education/learning? What are the major differences you have encountered during your distance learning career in private versus government sector?



Dondurmaci: I have been involved in DE since 2002. During this time, first I worked for Ahmet Yesevi International Turkish-Kazakh University and then for Zirve University, where I am still working at. I have worked especially in the launching and managing of such systems, so I can definitely say that I am experienced in the field of distance education. Based on my professional experience, I can say that there is growing attention paid to distance education both by the private and the public sectors in Turkey. The private sector sees distance education as an effective way of

cutting training expenses for their staff.

Moreover, they use distance education tools to introduce and promote their products. The traditional methods of education in the public sector are being replaced by distance education methods. If we are to think of the private foundation universities as a type of public institution, the most important development is can be said to have been occurring

in this area. We are witnessing that almost all the universities are interested in the issue of distance education and most have begun to serve through this medium. We also see that some DE projects are under way in other public institutions. For instance, Ministry of National Education and Ministry of Health are seriously interested in this issue and are offering distance education activities. Considering the issues I have mentioned, it is clear that the private sector is especially focusing on in-service staff training, and the public sector is aiming to extend its already available formal education to the wider society through DE.

Int.WOJDE: What are the advantages of DE compared to the traditional model of learning? And why do people go for distance education instead of traditional education?

Dondurmaci: The biggest advantage of DE is its independency from time and place, clearing the way for personal learning. The student is able to plan his/her own learning processes. This is the greatest distinction DE has compared to the traditional learning model. Another advantage concerns the students that have to work full-time. Such students do not have any education opportunities outside of distance education. In addition, when the specific nature of "life-long learning" is considered, this type of distance education becomes imperative. It is one of the best methods of learning for disabled learners as well. Distance education systems also enable academic staff living abroad to get directly involved in the teaching activities in Turkey. Also, the academicians living in the western part of Turkey are able to teach the students living even in the remotest towns of our country.

Int.WOJDE: How does DE contribute to the welfare of women in Turkey?

What other measures need to be taken to improve it?

Dondurmaci: In Turkey where 26% of the working population is made up of women, women are not duly represented in the professional life. Therefore, their education needs to be improved urgently.

That means housewives must be a part of the business life, which requires proper education. We find DE as the most appropriate method to deliver education at all levels to their homes. Completing secondary education, receiving higher education or acquiring another profession can only be made possible for them in this way. The educated housewives can also work as teachers in this system.

Int.WOJDE: Which aspects of distance education in Turkey need to be improved and how?



Dondurmaci: In order for DE in Turkey to progress up to the desired level, first and foremost the existing educational practices in this field need to be revised. In particular, Computer and Instructional Technologies (ICT) programs need to be revised and the students should be trained in subjects like distance education technologies, content quality, and academic quality. Further, initiatives to produce such software in Turkey should also be launched. For example, Learning Management Systems, virtual classrooms, content production tools, performance analysis tools and such product development activities should be supported, and by revising the ICT program curricula, the students studying in these departments must be encouraged to work in collaborative projects with software producers. I don't think we will be able to achieve the national DE objectives specific to our country just by importing all the software.

I strongly believe that Turkey has to become a producer of distance education technologies at all levels, for which it has to execute effective education planning.

Int.WOJDE: What are your suggestions for distance learners?

Dondurmaci: For the distance education students to be able to fully benefit from the opportunities of provided by this system, they must first grasp the purpose of this system. This system requires the student to plan his/her own learning. Therefore, the student needs to learn how to use the presented tools well. For example, course content is one of the most important learning tools and that is why the student has to focus intensively on the course content,

according to his/her study plan. The student in a virtual classroom is also expected to follow the courses very carefully. However, to be able to do all these activities he/she has to have the proper requisite equipment. For virtual classroom applications, the student will obviously need a broadband internet connection.

He/she has to perfectly understand the messaging, forum participation, taking online tests, and interaction functions of LMS, otherwise he/she cannot effectively benefit from the systemden.

Int.WOJDE: What are your suggestions for distance education teachers?

Dondurmaci: Distance education instructors need to pay attention to some points. First of all, they have to have more robust technical equipment and structure than their students because they are the broadcasters in virtual classrooms and that necessitates proper internet band capacity.

The camera and sound system must also be of high quality. DE instructors are expected to have prior training in how to use LMS and virtual classroom software. Most importantly, instructors need to have a facility with this education method and be competent users of computer technologies.

Int.WOJDE: What are your suggestions for distance education administrators?

Dondurmaci: It is critical that distance education administrators are aware that DE technologies are constantly evolving and act accordingly. Since DE differs from the traditional teaching methods, the administrator must first focus intensively on the organizational structure of DE. New professional DE positions are emerging.

The work definitions of the conventional education do not meet the needs of distance education. I would recommend that administrators be very selective in hiring for their distance education organizations and try to pick ICT graduates. Also, in choosing the LMS, content development and virtual classroom software, national products should be given priority. Setting up the technical infrastructure is also crucial. Especially the virtual classroom servers must be powerful and the internet band capacities must be easily upgradable when necessary.

Int.WOJDE: What changes would you propose for distance education, and what would be the possible disadvantages for women?

Dondurmaci: I believe that, as DE course content, video-based ones should play a more prominent role because I have observed that students prefer to watch video presentations rather than reading traditional course content or coursebooks. I suggest course contents be produced via "Interactive Video" method. Further, I think that television-based learning called "T-learning" can also be incorporated into DE. None of these will pose a disadvantage for women.

Int.WOJDE: As a woman, what do you think would be more effective or helpful for women with regard to their distance education?



Dondurmaci: If we look at this question from the perspective of women's benefiting from distance education activities as students, I believe the system can be used as a medium to implement the economic and social policies targeting women. This medium can be used as a social and economic education tool to teach women what their rights are, how they can participate in the economic activities, how to become micro entrepreneurs, how to market their handcrafts and so on. It is obvious that especially for those women spending much of their time at home; this system could offer great opportunities and benefits. Such training programs for women should be increased, and vocational programs to facilitate their integration into the economic system should be prioritized. As a women myself, I strongly propose that by revising the distance education projects in Turkey, the projects focusing on women should be given higher priority than others and it's high time such a process using distance education methods be started. I believe that by providing distance education options for the housewives who want to get education but am unable to do so due to their physical restrictions, their contribution to the development of our economic system can be increased.

Int.WOJDE: You must have experienced some interesting cases and episodes in your career. Do you have any such memories you can not forget?

Dondurmaci: I have been working in the distance education field for almost 13 years now, so naturally I have come across many interesting and proud cases. I would like to tell you one such anecdote. Working now as part of the distance education system administration, one of our past students sent me this message: "My dear teacher, I am one of your distance education students from Posof.

I am a civil servant here. Living right on the country border and having a freezing winter here and it is impossible to go out. At the moment my whole family is by the computer watching a lecture by Boğaziçi University professor Fikret Hoca on "Computer Architecture" in virtual class. What a great blessing, my dear teacher!"

Int.WOJDE: Have you ever faced gender discrimination in any of the places you have worked?

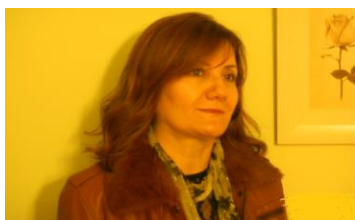
Dondurmaci: No, never.

Int.WOJDE: Which organizations have you worked for so far?

Dondurmaci: I started my career by working in the automation project for the *General Directorate of Monopolies*. This project covered the *General Directorate of Monopolies'* large and extensive network of factories, tobacco leaf processing centers and sales units. As the chief engineer of the Project, I mainly managed the financial projects. Then I moved on to the private sector and worked as the Education Director in *Ant Education*.

Afterwards I worked as a free-lance consultant in some private sector projects. Later I worked in academic capacity in Ahmet Yesevi University Distance Education Co-Coordinator and as the head of the Management IT Systems Program. Right now I am the deputy manager of Zirve University Distance Education Center.

Int.WOJDE: Which distance education projects have you been involved so far?



Dondurmaci: The distance education project of Ahmet Yesevi University began in 2002 and I was involved in the project from its inception until 2010. This project was the first university in the current sense in distance education. In the first year nine programs offering associate, undergraduate

and masters degrees were opened. The project was a pioneer in the DE field and spearheaded many others. We started using virtual classrooms in 2004 for the first time in our country. We bought an LMS system from a professional software company, and used international software as the virtual classroom.

We produced our own course content at the university. The main campus of the university in Turkey was in Kazakhstan and its distance education units were in Turkey. Therefore, the distance education system registrar's, personnel and accounting services were provided via the LMS. The structure of the system was ensured to be an independent "Virtual University". I began to work in Zirve University in 2010. Maintaining most members of the team, we started to work in the new University.

Int.WOJDE: Are you working on any distance education projects at Zirve University?



Dondurmaci: Yes. Armed with the experience we had by solving the problems at Ahmet Yesevi University, we began this current project. As a matter of fact, these problems are experienced by most of the DE centers today, arising particularly from LMS and virtual classroom software. Purchasing these two products from different companies and trying to force them to work together created some compatibility problems. Additionally, the failure of these existing software products to meet the demands leads to subpar quality in education. This type of change demands could not be met especially with the foreign software. Also, Learning Management System Works independently of the existing IT systems of the institutions. For example, Learner Automation System is not integrated with the systems like Human Resources System and Accounting System software.

Int.WOJDE: What methodology did you employ to solve these problems you have just mentioned?

Dondurmaci: To solve all these problems we had identified, all the software was produced by our team by taking the LMS and Virtual Classroom not as separate entities but as a whole. We had built this infrastructure before transferring to Zirve University. It was totally local software and it worked on the web. System has the basic functions of the traditional Learning Management System and virtual classroom software and had architecture to immediately respond to change demands as well. It was equipped not only to address the distance education needs but also had the tools to integrate with the other systems in the University.

In service for six years now, the system offers five postgraduate (Master's) and three undergraduate programs. Besides, 30% of the face-to-face courses at the university have been transferred to the distance education system.

Int.WOJDE: Can distance education tools be used in open education? Are any ideas or suggestions on this?

Dondurmaci: The biggest difference between Open Ed and Distance Ed is the lack of online courses, in other words, the lack of virtual live courses in Open Ed. We can say that a significant portion of higher education in Turkey consists of open education. Given that Anadolu University Open Education Faculty has over one million active enrolled students, the massive size of the student population can be understood better. Offering synchronous virtual class courses is not possible in such enormous organizations. TV-based solutions are suggested for such environments. We recommend the use of interactive TV platform.

I am going to introduce the Interactive TV platform at Anadolu University on December 22.

Int.WOJDE: What is interactive TV, what is it used for?

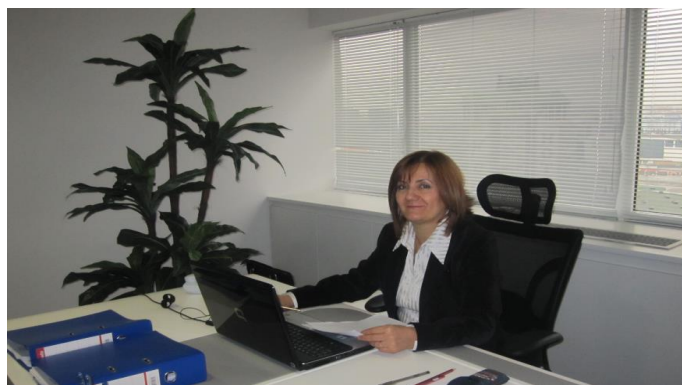
Dondurmaci: Interactive TV can be thought of as a web TV. However, it is not an IPTV platform. Neither is it a distribution channel for the available TV programs over the internet but it is about broadcasting TV programs via the Internet. Interactive TV is an environment whereby programs are delivered to viewers over the Internet with the help of browsers. TV programs on all kinds of subjects can be broadcast by using this platform, and thanks to some of its advanced features it also enables DE activities.

Int.WOJDE: Are there such programs broadcast in Turkey?

How are they different from your model?

Dondurmaci: We see that in Turkey some web TV type programs are produced. Such programs are currently broadcast in some universities, such as Istanbul, Ankara and Hacettepe Universities. Some private companies offer web TV services as well. However, with some of its qualities our system differs from all these, especially by the level of interaction it facilitates. Most importantly, we think that, with its interactivity and extra features, this system can be used as an effective distance education platform.

Int.WOJDE: What type of features does the Interactive TV platform offer?



Dondurmaci: Studies for this platform are very simple to set up. For example, by turning a corner of your house into a studio, you can broadcast to the whole wide world from there. Also, with low-budget micro broadcast studios, you can go on air at schools or businesses. If so wished, professional studios can also be created. A network of multiple studios can broadcast from one single center as well. These studios can broadcast live or recorded

videos. One of the most important qualities of the system is that it is interactive, which means that the viewers can participate by signing up and getting online with a camera. Since this platform also allows mobile applications, viewers become natural "reporters" of the system.

Similar to how Twitter's Periscope works, when viewers get a news scoop, they can instantly post that news story via their smart phones. The system also enables management of live broadcast streaming devices as well. The studio module of the platform performs the video-mixing functions of the normal TV studios. It allows basic functions such as managing cameras, broadcast streaming, screen captioning/tickers, news programs, and video production.

Int.WOJDE: On which media devices can the programs aired via this platform be watched?

Dondurmaci: Interactive TV programs can be watched on personal computers as well as on iOS and Android phones, tablets and Facebook apps. Moreover, an app to be used on smart TVs is also being developed at the moment.

Int.WOJDE: Can you tell us about the broadcast quality of the system?

Dondurmaci: The quality of the programs broadcast via Interactive TV ranges from the lowest level to HD quality, depending on the Internet connection capacity. Adjustments to the program quality can be made over the studio app that manages these programs.

Int.WOJDE: Can this system be used as a distance learning environment?

Dondurmaci: Thanks to the features I have mentioned, this system can be used in distance education. It offers all the virtual classroom features needed for distance education. It features standard components like broadcasting virtual classroom presentations, White board, screen-sharing, instant-polling, and chatting. In addition to these standard virtual classroom features, it offers some extra capabilities such as using document camera, LMS integration and virtual classroom integration.

Int.WOJDE: We deeply appreciate Dr. Gülser Acar DONDURMACI for sharing her invaluable distance education experiences with int.WOJDE. Once again, thank you so much for your time.

Dondurmaci: You are welcome. My sincere regards to the intWOJDE readers. And also, happy new year to all them. December, 2015

