The History of Distance Education

Early History

Though the focus of this guide is online education, the origins of this educational approach actually date quite a bit further back in history than the proliferation or even the invention of the Internet. In fact, online education falls under the larger umbrella concept of “distance education.” Distance education refers to the experience of receiving instruction as mediated by some mode of communication that transcends geographical space.

According to a 2005 article in *Distance Learning* magazine, this educational strategy did begin with an innovation, but it wasn’t email. Long before the term “snail mail” had entered the popular vernacular, the innovation of standardized penny postage in the United Kingdom made distance education a reality.[1]



In 1840, English teacher Isaac Pitman put the Penny Post system to constructive use, offering shorthand writing instruction through mailed correspondence. What most differentiated Pitman’s approach from prior attempts at correspondence education was the educator’s own active feedback and assessment of completed work. This bilateral communication between remotely located educator and student would form the basis for distance education.[2]