

Distance Learning Paradigms: An Overview¹

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In the 1960s an influential educator (C. Wedemeyer) broke from the familiar model of correspondence study and focused on issues of independent study and learning. He noted that “a particular philosophy of teaching and learning usually lies behind” the concepts of independent study and learning.² By the 1970s Wedemeyer’s thinking had significantly influenced the development of the British Open University along with Otto Peters proposal of effective organization.

Peters advanced a robust understanding of the structure of distance learning. His organizational model was based on the system in business production of reproducibility, mass distribution, a division of labor, and economies of scale. It became known as the industrial production model of distance education and was a dominant model for nearly forty years. It emphasized the organization of the educational process so that economies of scale could be efficiently realized. For this reason, teaching and learning issues were not of particular importance. Peters (1994a) described the industrial approach as ‘objectification of the teaching process’.³ According to Peters (1994b), ‘it reduces the forms of shared learning, and keeps learners away from personal interactions and critical discourse’. As a result, Peters did not advocate this approach for all of distance education.’⁴

For several decades distance education scholars were engaged in the debate between the independence of the learner over against the value of learner interaction. With the development of first computer-mediated communication (CMC) and now the global advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) that debate has been rendered moot as current technologies support both learner independence and numerous forms of interaction.⁵ Peters remains an advocate for independent self-study, now enhanced with social interaction, but structured in an informal and individually controlled manner. From his perspective self-learning and tele-learning are very much autonomous approaches to learning. His ideal of complete learner independence remains consistent with his industrial model.

¹ This summary is largely drawn from Theoretical Challenges for Distance Education in the 21st Century: A shift from structural to transactional issues by D. Randy Garrison, University of Alberta, Canada. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 1, No. 1, June 2000. www.irrodl.org/index-php/irrodl/article/viewArticle/2/333. Accessed on April 12, 2013.

² Ibid, 2.

³ Ibid, 111.

⁴ Ibid, 3.

⁵ In early 2013 the World Bank reported the global penetration of mobile phones at nearly 86%. This data was very likely drawn from 2012 reports and mobile technology has advanced globally at a rate far greater than experts expected.

In the late 20th century, Borje Holmberg influenced the field through his introduction of 'guided didactic conversation' understood as simulated conversation with the emphasis on the content and conversational character of the written pre-produced course. 'Real conversation with the tutor is, by economic necessity, supplementary to the pre-produced course. . . . It is the responsibility of course developers to create this simulated conversation through well-written materials.' Although *conversation* was the defining characteristic in Holmberg's theory of distance education, this theory was directed to the pre-produced course package and clearly within the industrial paradigm.⁶

Holmberg's conception of teaching and the role of the teacher are largely simulated by way of written instructions and commentary. Teaching becomes primarily one-way communication within pre-set course packages. It was not long before scholars began to question this approach to distance learning. For example, Garrison asked, "can an inert learning package, regardless of how well it is written, be a sufficient substitute for real and sustained communication with the teacher as both content and learning expert (a tutor does not always fully meet this standard)?"⁷ Garrison further noted that, "organizational assumptions and the principals of the industrial model and dependence upon written communication seriously constrain and limit the role of conversation and the full emergence of a transactional perspective."⁸

Transaction as a critical aspect of distance learning, first introduced in the early 1970s in the "seminal work" of Michael Moore, was based on his recognition of the limitation of structure and the independent learning package. Moore established what has become a fundamental component of distance learning with his emphasis on the place of dialogue and interaction in the context of the transactional distance in distance education. As a result an assumed design element today in distance learning courses is the interweaving of his three transactional components; the interaction of the learner with content, with the teacher, and with other learners. For example, the North American accreditation of distance theological programs by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) requires students have sufficient interaction to foster the sense of a community of learners.

Over the last several decades a paradigm shift has been underway as an emphasis on learning over organizational structure has become the focus in course and program design. Simultaneously, an expansive body of research in learning is influencing the field including: situated learning, experiential learning, and culturally compatible learning, as well as influential brain research. There are promising signs that these, and other socially informed research is contributing to fundamental changes in the design of online learning.⁹ For example one model based on a collaborative understanding of learning proposed

⁶ Ibid, 4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Australian and U.S. scholars have published research on the changes in the paradigm of Instructional Design. Mark Hendricks, PhD. of ProMETA, whose PhD is in the field of instructional design recently indicated he is seeing change underway.

courses be designed based on the “five dimensions of the learning process – participation, interaction, social, cognitive, and metacognitive.”¹⁰

Distance learning courses and programs involve both structure and various kinds of interactions. Fundamental to blending each component effectively is an understanding of the educational purposes and the learning intended for the participants. Additionally, contextual opportunities and constraints inform the way distance learning is designed. No one model is considered the standardized format for every purpose in every location.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

