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Online Postgraduate Education: Some reflections

Peter S. Cookson,
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In early November 2002, I travelled from my present location at the University for Peace in San José, Costa Rica to Mexico City to attend *el Primer Encuentro Iberoamericano de Educación Superior en Línea* (the First Iberoamerican Meeting of Online Education). It was sponsored by *la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, la División del Sistema Universidad Abierta* and *la Coordinación de Universidad Abierta y Educación a Distancia* of *la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. The theme of the conference was “Online Education Myths and Challenges.” This editorial is an elaboration of a theme presented in one of the panel sessions.

Online Learning – a Manifestation of Distance Learning

As has been amply recorded in the institutional and national case studies presented in previous issues of *IRRODL*, one manifestation of the current technological revolution is the rush of higher education institutions around the world to offer courses online (via the Internet). It is fascinating to observe how many university professors and administrators are unaware that such courses and programmes of study are not a completely new phenomenon rather than one of the most recent developments in the vast field of practice of distance education. Oblivious of what their online programs have in common with previous forms of teaching and learning at a distance, many of these newcomers are eager to suggest replacement of the term distance education with such in vogue terms as *online education, distributed education, Web-based education*, etc. While such terms usefully refer to current technological applications, they also reflect “blind spots” of understanding with respect to distance education that may lead not only to incomplete course and programme design, but also failure to construct the attendant course, student, regulatory, and logistical subsystems (Kaye, 1981) that comprise the infrastructure required for optimal distance education system functioning.

Online Postgraduate Education

Although distance education programs now serve people of all ages worldwide, the fastest growing form is postgraduate education delivered via the Internet for mature working men and women. The aim of this editorial is to present a conceptual scheme with which to understand more fully this “offspring” of fourth generation distance education technology (Peters, 2002), a conceptual scheme that draws on four factors: higher education, lifelong education, distance education, and technology. Thought of as “ideal types,” definitions of each of these factors follow:

- *Higher education (HE)* is that form of education that occurs in universities and other postsecondary or tertiary education institutions. Reluctant to merge the concept of higher education with every type of training given to adults after secondary school, some people

in traditional universities distinguish between “postsecondary/ tertiary” education on the one hand and “higher” education on the other hand. Students in higher education earn credits. When they complete their programmes of study, institutions are authorized by the state to award them diplomas or titles. First degree programmes are referred to as “undergraduate” programmes and possession of undergraduate degrees often constitutes a minimal credential for entry to certain occupations. Second or third degree programmes are referred to as “graduate” or “postgraduate programmes.” Demographic characteristics of people who enroll in undergraduate and graduate programmes are changing. Although the majority of undergraduate students continue to be older adolescents/ young adults who define their principal (often fulltime) social role as college, institute, or university “student,” the majority of participants in many graduate programs, the focus of this editorial, tend to be mature working adults.

- Based on a definition of adult education advanced by Houle (1972), *lifelong education* (LE) may be defined as a comprehensive process whereby men and women (alone, in groups, in institutions, or community contexts), seek to improve their knowledge, skills, or sensitivities with the objective of improving themselves or others. It is a comprehensive process carried out not only formal education in schools, but also in a myriad of other work, civic, recreational and voluntary organizational settings. Sometimes lifelong education may be viewed as a process coterminous with the entire life cycle. Nevertheless, the term may be more usefully reserved for the process of education experienced by people who, having progressed beyond the status of older adolescent/ young adult, have accepted the status of working men and women.

Given the pace of globalisation with attendant flows of goods, capital, people, and new technologies, as well as the threat of mass violence now emanating from terrorist organizations, the need for people to continue learning throughout the life cycle has never been greater. Abundant opportunities to participate in lifelong education exist in all but the poorest parts of the world. Businesses and agencies provide training to employees during work hours. Schools and universities design education programs for adults in their free hours. Voluntary agencies and non-governmental organizations provide instruction for staff members as well as for the general public. Lifelong education programmes provide practical emphasis on application on the knowledge learned to work and daily life.

The majority of lifelong education programs are conducted face-to-face, requiring participants to comply with location and schedule conditions set by programme providers. Still, not all learning needs can be delivered by face-to-face education and training. Physical locations of the lifelong education programmes may be inaccessible to many. Too, the number of people who a common interest may be insufficient to justify specific face-to-face programmes in any particular geographical area. Barriers of time and geography may thus limit lifelong education opportunities for large segments of the population. In contrast, lifelong education programs offered via distance education formats can enable men and women to overcome barriers of time and space.

- *Distance education* (DE) is defined as the process of teaching and learning that occurs through interaction between professors and students between or among whom there is a temporal or spatial separation that is mediated by one or more information communication technologies.

- In the context of distance education, *technology* (T) is defined as the combinations of technical knowledge, tools, methods, and procedures instructional agents deploy to facilitate the process of teaching and learning for learners from whom they are separated temporally and/or spatially. Often online distance education technology is thought to comprise only of hardware and software connected to the Internet. However, distance education technology, broadly defined, also involves a more comprehensive array of such instruction-related elements as instructional design procedures, development of teaching materials, methods and techniques for instructional delivery, other learning activities planned by instructional agents to enable interaction with and among students and between students and the content to be learned. Beyond these instruction-related functions, online distance education requires a technological infrastructure that includes the administrative functions of registration, counselling, assignment to courses, distribution of materials, evaluation of learners, as well as record-keeping operations. Without this broader technological infrastructure, online distance education programmes will likely be unsustainable.

A manifestation of an inadequate definition of technology is when higher education institutions assume that establishment of online education programs consists merely of the purchase of the essential hardware and software. They are often influenced by what might be referred to as “mythical virtues” of technology. Such common misperceptions of technology include: “more bells and whistles are better,” “more expensive is better,” “more technically complicated is better,” “newer is better”, “more like face-to-face teaching is better,” “faster is better,” and “to teach online all one has to do is upload face-to-face teaching resources to the Web.

Possible Combinations

Taking into account these four factors *higher education* (HE), *lifelong education* (LE), *distance education* (DE), and *technology* (T), we can now refer to the following possible combinations:

1. *DE + T*: Because DE, by definition, involves mediation of some form of T to bridge the temporal or spatial distance between the instructional agent and the learners, all DE comprises DE +T. In this regard, the scheme breaks down because it is impossible to have DE that does not constitute a combination without T.
2. *HE + T*: Perhaps the most prominent expression of this combination is face-to-face higher education courses that are enhanced or supplemented through the application of various information and communication technologies (e.g., online resources and extension of in-class discussions on the Web). In articles published in recent issues of this journal, such combinations have been referred to a *hybrid courses*.
3. *LE + HE*: This combination is evidenced by the long-held practice of higher education institutions to offer non-credit programs that meet the ongoing learning needs of men and women that arise from the performance of their multiple social roles. Such programs are commonly referred to as instances of *continuing education* or *professional continuing education*.
4. *DE + LE*: This combination is manifest when numerous providers, both public and private, sponsor literally thousands of online training and educational programs. Conducted for profit,

cost-recovery, or free, such programs provide abundant lifelong education opportunities for men and women located anywhere there is a connection to the Internet.

5. *HE + DE*: This combination is manifest by the ever increasing number of higher education courses being offered for credit via distance education, with the Internet being the most popular vehicle. Although such programmes serve an increasing number of younger adults, older and more mature adults tend to be better suited for participation in online postgraduate education courses that require self initiative, self direction, and high motivation.

6. *LE + T*: This combination refers to all instances in which technology is being applied to facilitate learning of men and women across the life cycle in both face-to-face and distance education settings.

7. *DE + T + LE + HE*: This combination of all four concepts corresponds to online postgraduate education that for many mature working adults, has become the most accessible forms of not only higher education, but also lifelong education, and distance education.

Online Postgraduate Education

As indicated by the seventh option, all four factors (HE, LE, DE, and T) can make significant contributions to online post-graduate higher education for mature working men and women. Realizing that most participants of postgraduate online education are mature adult participants, organizers of online postgraduate education will treat them differently than the young adult/ older adolescent students who study fulltime in undergraduate programs. They will avoid replication of the teaching/ learning processes of higher education that have been developed over time for older adolescent/ young adult students and will modify the traditional rules that govern student admission, participation and residence. They will also devise course assignments and activities that incorporate the rich and varied experience of mature adults. In short, mobilizing and combining elements from all four factors can result in more appropriate, balanced and optimal online postgraduate education and, as a consequence, more optimal conditions for effective teaching and learning.

Contents of This Issue

As will be noted by the contents of the main and succeeding sections of this journal “open issue, “ the field of distance education encompasses far more than the online postgraduate education that is the focus of my reflections above. The twelve articles in the main section address such varied topics as analysis of communication patterns in online instruction, analysis of standards of quality in distance learning, the effects of dialogue on learning, the use of case studies in distance education, the nature of learning objects in distance education, comparative description of courseware platforms adopted by Australian and Scandinavian universities, meta analysis of research on Web-based courses, a macro-analysis of how distance education institutions may resolve the crisis faced by tradition-bound Latin American universities, the cultural differences in using educational psychology in the Chinese context, and the role of libraries and how their funding structure may affect DE. The international diversity of our main section is continued in our succeeding “Book Notes” and “Research Notes” sections.

Acknowledgements

As has been the case with all previous issues of the journal, this issue represents the culmination of efforts by many people. Even with the addition of new editorial team members, there were so many manuscripts to review that we still had to send multiple manuscripts for our individual Editorial Board members and Consulting Editors to review. Speaking for the editors, I express our heartfelt appreciation for what in some cases amounted to many hours of service in behalf of our now 4,000 readers in more than 80 countries. Thank you also to our many contributors to the different sections. We especially applaud the service rendered by Professor Jonathan Baggaley who, along with several students, has produced a second collection of articles about free and/or inexpensive software options that distance educators will find useful expanding their teaching and learning options via the Internet. Too, we appreciate the efforts of all the authors who submitted their manuscripts for review.

We encourage all of our readers to consider *IRRODL* as their journal of preference for sharing their scholarly work with distance educators worldwide. *IRRODL* is now the only “mainstream” journal explicitly designed to serve the entire field of distance education internationally. While the other distance education journals one by one have transformed themselves into for-profit commercial ventures, thanks to the generous sponsorship of Athabasca University, Canada’s Open University, subscriptions to *IRRODL* continue to be available free of charge to anyone anywhere with a connection to the Internet.

Our Next Two Issues

Our guest editor for the April 2003 “theme issue” will be Professor Alan Tait of the UK Open University. That issue will focus on the topic of support for distance learners. If you are one of our 4,000 subscribers in more than 80 countries, we will notify you as soon as it becomes available.

If you are the author of a manuscript relating to any aspect of distance education theory, research, or best practice, we invite you to consider submitting your manuscript to us for our next “open issue” to be published via the Web in October 2003. Our deadline for that issue will be 30 June 2003.

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