

Book Review – The Costs of Open Learning: A handbook

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April – 2003

Book Review

The Costs of Open Learning: A handbook

Author: Thomas Hülsmann (2000). *Bibliotheks-und Informationssystem der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg*. Oldenburg, Germany. Softcover. 150 pages, ISBN 3-8142-0724-6

Reviewed by: Ricardo Vanella, Director, Distance Learning and Virtual Education Department, in collaboration with Gabriela Milanese, Students Administration Manager of the Distance Learning and Virtual Education Department, Universidad de Belgrano, Argentina

Our Experience Part I

When I assumed the post as Director of the School of Distance Learning and Virtual Education in March 2000, my first task was to define a strategy to follow. In a context where trends indicated a dramatic increase in the application of new information and communication technologies used to support distance learning, there was a need for new institutional policies to provide a framework to support our activity. In short, I had to decide how to organize an academic unit to support distance learning. This task called for an analysis of all educational technologies available at the time, in order to develop the courses which were to be included in our educational offer. Costs were clearly an important consideration.

By recalling this three-year-old experience, I am now in a position to assert that, as stated by Hilary Perraton in the Introduction, Thomas Hülsmann's book is an effective tool for decision makers in the field of open and distance learning.

The Costs of Open Learning – Analysis of the Book

The first part of Hülsmann's book consists of five chapters. It proposes a methodology to carry out comparative cost analysis among the different technologies used to develop open and distance learning programs. These chapters provide a clear and detailed explanation of their use, their relation with quality and effectiveness in learning, and the difficulties found while interpreting the findings. Likewise, the last chapter contains interesting recommendations in its closing comments. Although the book's contents are basically technical, they introduce interesting issues that deserve theoretical analysis.

Chapter One describes and analyzes from a comparative cost perspective, four sets of teaching technology: print, sound (i.e., audiocassettes or radio), audiovisual communication (i.e., videocassettes, open circuit broadcasting, and closed circuit television such as videoconferencing), and computers. Providing key information for management decision-making, the author highlights the importance of considering the costs of these alternatives and the different ways such costs behave. The "student learning hour" has been chosen as a standard

measure to compare costs, and a distinction has been drawn between technology as (1) a resource media, and (2) as a communication media. In both cases, fixed and variable costs, and the reason why they behave differently, are analyzed.

The methodology of cost-effectiveness analysis and its use in an educational environment are explained in Chapter Two. In order to discuss the selection of media in an educational context, the authors analyze media capabilities and information costs. Their starting point for a quick forecast is the combination of teaching processes vis-à-vis the cost per student learning hour.

Chapter Three describes both conceptual and practical difficulties in applying these findings.

Applying the information and methodology described in the foregoing chapters, Chapter Four focuses on helping choose correct media for open and distance learning.

Chapter Five concludes with a consideration of reception costs and their implications for learners, as well as issues related to quality, effectiveness, access and equity.

The second part of the book presents eleven case studies funded by the European Commission's Socrates Program. The cases describe the experiences of educational institutions in several European countries and the USA, including: the British Open University and the Anglia Polytechnic University in the UK; NKS Fernundervisning in Norway; the Fachhochschulfernstudienverbund der Länder and the Centre for Distance Learning Teaching at the University of Oldenburg, in Germany; the Centre de Téléenseignement Universitaire of the University of Rheims, France; the Politecnico di Milano, Italy; the Catalan Open University in Barcelona, Spain, and the University of Maryland in the US.

Using a general approach to examine the information obtained from those institutions and their experiences, the methodology explained in the first part of the book was applied to the analysis of each of these case studies. Because the courses selected used a wide variety of technologies (from traditional print materials used until the advent of videoconferencing and computer-based teaching), the analysis of these case studies produced a wealth of helpful insights.

Our Experience Part II : Conclusions and Remarks

As we attempted to integrate diverse technologies in our own programs at the Universidad de Belgrano, we were required to make a 180 degree shift in the way our courses were developed, particularly in terms of prioritizing computer-base learning. Our ultimate decision was to maintain a varied media offer. And although social and economic conditions, as well as the state of technology development in our country influenced the decision to retain print material as one of our main resources, we also, had to consider the production, reproduction, and distribution costs involved.

In the light of our recent experiences and recent social and economic developments in Argentina, we have had to revise the decisions we made three years ago. We have considered several alternatives such as the delivery of material on the Internet, despite Hülsman's argument in Chapter One that such delivery transfers reproduction costs to students with consequences for the quality of print and permanence of students in the system. Similarly fruitful comparative analyses can be conducted of case studies of institutions with long track records in distance education

throughout Latin America, where managers responsible for making decisions must be constantly aware of changing conditions in this arena.

Although we agree with the author that it is essential to consider “both pedagogy and economics to justify the choice of one teaching medium rather than another,” we found that the pedagogical choices of particular media used to increase quality and to capitalize on specific strengths and capabilities, must often be tempered – and sometimes forced – by cost considerations. In other words, distance education managers must have a sound knowledge of how their programs can be affected by the current and variable economic trends and forecasts of the global economy.

