

The Boundaries of Distance Education

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Since I entered the field of distance education in 1970, there have been some fundamental discussions concerning what distance education is all about. First we discussed what ought to be the appropriate name of the field, and most of us eventually chose distance education. Then came the discussion about the meaning of this term and how we could develop relevant theories to guide our practice and to shape the development of distance education.

The most influential definitions of distance education were formulated before the recent developments of information technology, which may eventually be applied generally in distance education. Our definitions must be reconsidered against the background of recent and future technological developments. Will they stand the test?

In the first issue of *The American Journal of Distance Education*, D.R. Garrison and D. Shale (1987) analyze Desmond Keegan's attempt to give a comprehensive definition of distance education (Keegan, 1986). Keegan's definition includes a set of five characteristic features and "two socio-cultural determinants which are both necessary pre-conditions and necessary consequences of distance education" (pp 49-50). Garrison and Shale argue that Keegan, by requiring too many necessary characteristics, gives a too restrictive definition, one that is overly bound by past practice. They also criticize Keegan for recognizing the learning group, except to note that it meets occasionally, and for putting too much weight on the educational organization in an "industrialized" mass education setting. (Similar criticism of an earlier version of Keegan's definition was put forward by John A. Bååth [1981]).

Garrison and Shale advocate the following "three criteria essential for characterizing the distance education process":

- 1) Distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between (among) teacher and student(s) occurs noncontiguously.
- 2) Distance education must involve two-way communication between (among) teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.
- 3) Distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication (p. 11).

I wholeheartedly agree with Garrison and Shale in this attempt to bring the definition of distance education back to a precise description of its essential feature(s). Their objective is to avoid the exclusion of forms of distance

education that are emerging, such as teleconferencing. A definition of the term "distance education" should not be prescriptive as regards methods or organizational forms; rather, it should "map the boundaries" of what we want to describe.

It is possible to go still further along the line chosen by Garrison and Shale, by giving only one "essential criterion" to delineate distance education from other forms of education. In doing so, we need not offer normative descriptions that may be disputed, such as those in Keegan's definition. The essential criterion can be found by combining and refining the first and second criteria of Garrison and Shale:

- Distance education must involve a significant amount of real, noncontiguous two-way communication between teacher and student(s) for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process.

The two main differences between this criterion and Garrison and Shale's criteria are:

1. I don't demand that *the majority* of educational communication must occur noncontiguously. I feel that this is an arbitrary distinction and difficult to measure. Some distance education programmes involve only a small amount of noncontiguous communication. However, that small amount constitutes a significant part of the educational system in question. The significance of the distance education element should not be measured in quantitative terms: it should be determined by an overall judgement.
2. My definition requires that the noncontiguous communication (or a significant part of it) be *real*, not simulated. This allows the inclusion of self-study packages as well as individualized learning programmes with only pre-produced communication or messages. Interactive learning programmes should not be considered as distance education unless they involve a teacher. One may argue, as Garrison and Shale do, that "simulated structured interaction with sophisticated microprocessor-based courseware . . . in fact meets the criterion of two-way communication" (p.12). I am not at all against distance delivery of such educational courseware, but I would prefer not to include it under the category of distance education. I would prefer not to use the expression two-way communication when the process from one side is entirely pre-programmed. A distinction should be maintained between real and simulated distance education.

I would like to add a remark on the topic of the educational organization. Garrison and Shale challenge the essential role of the organization:

While educational institutions may perform many functions, two of the more important ones are providing the physical structure to facilitate two-way communication and awarding credit. The basic question is whether it is possible to conceive of situations where distance education could occur without the influence of a formal educational organisation (p. 11).

. . . [T]he teacher is the essential element on the delivery side of the educational process, and the educational organisation, when it exists, plays a secondary and supportive role (p. 12).

Although this argument may serve its purpose in the discussion with Peters/Keegan concerning "industrialization", I cannot follow Garrison and Shale in their strict distinction between the teacher/professor on the one hand and the educational organization on the other. The use of the word "teacher" implies in itself the existence of an educational organization of which the teacher is a part, and from which she/he derives the role of a teacher. The organization may consist of only this one teacher, who would then have to carry out all the functions of an educational organization. The degree and type of "industrialization" will depend on the scale and structure of the organization and is not a necessary feature of distance education, although it is essential to many, perhaps most, institutions of distance education.

When we have a precise criterion of what distinguishes distance education from other forms of education, we may also determine what is *not* different, thus bridging the gap between the academic study of distance education and that of education in general. The phenomenon of real, noncontiguous two-way communication is the specific element. It has to be studied as such, and its implications for all elements of the educational system have to be studied as well. However, distance education is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a particular form of education, for which all the relevant knowledge of education may be called upon for illumination.

References

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