
IN REVIEW/CRITIQUES DE LIVRES

**Distance Higher Education and the Adult Learner:
Innovations in Distance Education**

*Ger van Enckevoort, Keith Harry, Pierre Morin
and Hans G. Schutze (Eds.)*

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This book is a collection of papers presented at a 1984 conference sponsored by the Dutch Open University, the Dutch Ministry of Education and Science, and OECD's Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI).

Following a brief preface and introduction, the volume is divided into three major sections. The first, entitled "The Adult Learner in Distance Higher Education," consists of four papers by well known authors in the field, i.e., Lord Perry of Walton, Hans Schutze, Kjell Rubenson and Ger van Enckevoort. These papers are well written and timely but they cover familiar terrain, i.e., the need to identify and remove barriers to participation and suggestions for overcoming them, the "problem" of the middle-class nature of participation, over-reliance on technology, and the impersonal and industrial nature of distance learning. Of the four papers, the one by Schutze is the most provocative. He argues that "new" technologies, while removing traditional barriers such as geography, "might erect new ones that are equally difficult to overcome" (p. 37-38). In particular, he cites the high cost and ultra sophistication of telecommunications equipment and other factors that put such technology, and hence education, out of the reach of students from lower socio-economic groups. Similarly, Rubenson's paper reflects scepticism toward the new technology. Schutze, Rubenson, and van Enckevoort are critical of the liberating potential of technology. Thus, in their collective view, print-based materials will continue to dominate distance education worldwide.

The first section provides a solid social perspective touching on the issue of continuing accessibility to distance learning, even though there is little in the way of empirical support for the arguments presented. The second section, "Distance Higher Education, Aims and Organization: Country Experiences," contains papers on eleven OECD member nations. With the exception of a critical paper by Iain Morrison on distance education in Canada, these papers which are largely

descriptive accounts of distance education systems and universities. In no way can these papers be taken to reflect comprehensive accounts of recent developments in the countries surveyed. The focus is automatically narrowed by referring only to developments at essentially the higher education level. Consequently, what one is left with is some sense of the operation and problems associated with a particular institution (usually a university), but no information is presented on distance learning in the adult education, secondary education, or vocational education sectors.

The countries surveyed include England, West Germany, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, the United States, Japan, and to a lesser extent Australia, Sweden, and Yugoslavia. The editors provide no clues as to why other OECD countries with distance education provision, such as Norway, Austria, Denmark, Finland, and New Zealand, are not included in the survey. One can only surmise that representatives from those countries were not invited to give papers.

With some exceptions, the authors of the papers are well-known. For example, Otto Peters and Jorn Bartels, Keith Harry, and Ger van Enkevort provide well-written accounts, but the ground they traverse has been tread elsewhere. One wonders if the reader can put up with yet one more case study of Britain's OU or the Fernuniversitat. The four most interesting papers were those on Spain's Universidad Nacional de Educacion (UNED); Portugal's Instituto Portuges de Ensino a Distancia; distance education in Yugoslavia, and a comparative study of distance education in Sweden and Australia. Knowledge of Spanish, Portuguese and Yugoslavian distance education institutions is sparse amongst North Americans and hence these articles in particular are of value.

As one might expect, the status of distance education as reported varies considerably from country to country. Similarly, the diversity in provision between countries is striking. The difficulty with this section is not so much the purely descriptive, non-analytical nature of the articles, but the lack of effort by the editors to impose a uniform structure of reporting. Had they requested authors to describe developments under more or less universal concepts, such as organization, staffing, planning and budgeting, academic management, production/operations management, student services, research, etc., the reader's interests would have been better served. At one end of the continuum are highly centralized national institutions. At the other end are small-scale, decentralized organizations. Not much is said about how distance education complements national systems of higher education, or how distance education methods have influenced traditional theories and practices of adult learning and teaching. One is struck by the organized chaos of distance education in the United States. Marilyn Kressel, author of a paper on electronic distance education systems in the United States, makes the point that the only controlling factor is the educational marketplace. This has led to a proliferation of providers at every educational level in virtually every state with little or no input from the Federal

Government.

Clearly, one of the better articles in this section is Urban Dahllof's paper comparing Swedish and Australian distance education. Dahllof inductively develops models of both "large-scale" and "small-scale" distance education and contrasts the advantages and disadvantages associated with both types. This kind of study is foreign to distance education research in North America which is generally preoccupied with the relative use and effectiveness of telecommunication technologies. Dahllof's study is theoretical and informative from a policy and decision-making perspective and stands apart from the rest as a major theoretical contribution to the volume.

At the other extreme, one paper which appears out of place is Morrison's short, critical piece on distance education in Canada. It would have been better placed in the first section or left out of the volume altogether. Morrison tells us that distance education has not increased access to higher education but provides no empirical support for his claim. He offers a potpourri of advantages and disadvantages to distance education and ends his paper by concluding that distance education is no panacea. This article, unlike the others in the same section which attempt to describe national systems, offers no substantive information on distance education in Canada whatsoever. Nothing is provided on trends, institutions, problems, or policy. The paper poorly reflects on what is going on in Canadian distance education, and can hardly pass for a "country experience."

The third section, "Learning Processes and the Section of Media," consists of papers by Pamela Christoffel, Ger van Enckevort, Jef Moonen, and Norman Kurland. These papers are uninspiring and provide no new insights for the knowledgeable reader. To the uninitiated, however, the papers are general enough to be of some value. To their credit, the authors deal with the issues of selecting appropriate media in a straight-forward manner. Useful guidelines and recommendations underly the discussion. Perhaps the best article of the four from a practitioner's point of view is van Enckevort's and Gastkemper's paper on the experience of the Dutch OU. Having had the opportunity to benefit from the experience of Britain's OU, the Dutch approached the task of media selection in a business-like fashion. Three criteria—economic, didactic, and technical—formed the basis for decision-making. They appear not to have been obsessed with any one technology—an important lesson for all policy makers and practitioners. The paper will be of particular value to those unfamiliar with the basis strengths and weaknesses of electronic media, and with little or no knowledge of how to make intelligent choices from the bewildering array of media available in the marketplace.

This book contains numerous typographical errors which is ironical given that it was edited by no less than four authors. Aside from this, the quality of presentation and production is very good. The attractive cover and top-quality

binding are especially noticeable. The editors have obviously exercised a gentle hand vis-a-vis content but, to their credit, have imposed a consistent bibliographical style which enhances the book's appearance. The volume is a welcome addition to the literature—particularly as a reference source.

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