

## Distance Education: International Perspectives.

*David Stewart, Desmond Keegan and Borje Holmberg. (Eds.)  
Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm Ltd., 1983. L 19.95.*

Reviewing a book this old demands an approach different from the conventional preview of a newly published volume. My approach to this book is suggested by the book itself. I intend, in Borje Holmberg's words, to engage in a "didactic conversation," guided by the book.

Before dealing with more substantive issues, I feel constrained to complain vehemently about the production values of this book. The proofreading and copy editing processes have left many errors. While errors in spelling and inconsistency in presentation do not constitute problems in fact (although they certainly can), it is important to recognize that this book was produced directly from camera-ready typescript, and it comes with an English price of L 19.95, or, roughly, \$40 Can. That there exists a captive (though small) market for this book is no excuse for allowing shoddy editing and proofreading. The ideas and the quality of some of the essays are poorly served indeed.

Most of the essays contribute something of value to perspectives on distance education. For the purposes of this review, however, I would like to focus on Moore's "On a theory of independent study"; Peters' "Distance teaching and industrial production"; and, generally, on Section 8: Economics.

Moore's essay contains the statement that places much of the rest of the volume in valuable context:

We liken theory to a map, and writing it is a matter of seeking out and describing relationships about different aspects of the topography of the business of teaching and learning. The purpose of such theory is to bring order to the phenomena in which we are interested, for we cannot become scientific in our enquiries, i.e. we cannot proceed to manipulate variables, as long as we are trying to work with masses of assorted facts.

... this theory has been developed as a tool, not an end in itself, and its primary purpose as a tool is to define a field which was previously ignored, certainly in North American educational theory. (p. 90)

The "theory" contemplated here is a theory of distance education, and Moore then proceeds to discuss two terms that we all recognize, intuitively, as important to distance education: independence and autonomy. Many of us working in service units in distance education seem almost to be trying to get away from the

high demands for independence and autonomy that learning at a distance makes. We try to provide students with several channels of access to help, and sometimes we might even fool ourselves into believing that we have mitigated the fierce demand for independence inherent in distance learning.

Moore's essay, albeit couched in social scientific language of variables, constructs, and conjectures, is valuable chiefly in that it reminds us of those two aspects of individual strength that learning at a distance requires. The insights are not new; but gradually they move into a more verifiable realm with the work of Moore and others.

I found Peters much more entertaining and thought provoking. I quote at length because the tenor of his essay is so well represented in this passage:

It is no coincidence that university study at a distance, in its early form of correspondence teaching, began its development only about 130 years ago, as it requires conditions that only existed from then on. One necessity, for example, is a relatively fast and regular postal and transport service. The first railway lines and the first correspondence schools were established around the same time. When one further realizes how much technical support distance teaching establishments need nowadays in order to cater effectively for large groups of students, it becomes clear that distance study is a form of study complementary to our industrial and technological age (p. 95).

Peters thereby opens a whole host of discussions—about the trademarks of industrial society, about traditional educational technologies and techniques, and, obliquely, about the factors necessary for cost effectiveness in modern distance education.

Peters' approach is radically different from Moore's. Moore focusses on characteristics of the learner. Peters focusses on the characteristics of the system of distance education. The distinction is important; they are not, of course, doing the same thing, but the differing theories, taken together, offer great insights into our endeavours.

Peters points out that distance education is a uniquely industrial form of education. Certainly as we practice it, and even more certainly as it often gets preached, it is not applicable to any country without well developed communication and transportation infrastructures.

That idea led me to a re-evaluation of Holmberg's concept of the "guided didactic conversation" in a different context. Wherever colonial patterns of education have left their mark, either in content or systems, the value of conversation as part of the educational process has been severely degraded. Conversation, with some major exceptions, has only been a major priority of education in North America since the sixties, Socrates notwithstanding. The educational systems inherited from colonial times in many developing countries

missed the sixties and the (renewed?) emphasis on conversation as a valuable aspect of education. Both teachers and students in many post-colonial settings seem, at the high school level at least, comfortable with a strong emphasis upon the rote learning of a specified quantum of facts, theories, and opinions.

This rote learning in large classes passed on as the educational heritage of colonialism cuts directly against the requirement for independence and autonomy on the part of the learner, at the same time as it degrades the value of interplay in learning.

We, as predominantly Western writers, researchers, educators, and practitioners of distance education must be much more circumspect—not to mention commonsensical—in our prescription for the world's educational needs. Our systems require sophisticated technological investments; sophisticated and highly reliable communications and transportation infrastructures; and a high degree of independence and autonomy in the learner.

Peters, in his provocative comparison of distance education with more prosaic industrial processes, lays bare some of the fundamental facts that will, at the very least, hinder the *successful* adoption of *our* forms of distance education elsewhere.

The section on economics of distance education sheds further light on just such issues, both as they relate to our own experience and as they relate to potential applications of distance education in other cultural and developmental settings. The economics of distance education are vitally important to all of us—both to those of us working in established institutions and to those of us working towards founding or expanding distance education services in one way or another. Despite this importance, the economics of distance education remain complicated and confusing.

The critical difficulty, it seems, is reaching any kind of agreement on which inputs should be measured against which outputs—and how on both counts. The introduction to the section on the economics of distance education states that quite clearly, and none of the articles within the section comes close to suggesting otherwise.

Not only do researchers not agree on which variables are significant, but some of the variables are exceedingly difficult to measure. As an instance, Leslie Wagner discusses something called "value-added." If, for example, an open university, using distance education, manages to educate someone who otherwise could not be educated, the "value-added" is much greater than a conventional university, whose admission and education of a properly qualified student might be interchangeable amongst different conventional institutions.

I do not wish to belabour the point, but the increasing sophistication of economic thought in the context of distance education is encouraging, although it will tend, inexorably, to the greater confusion of non-specialists.

Indeed, although requirements of space preclude further discussion, the volume as a whole demonstrates the increasing sophistication of approaches to various aspects of distance education. The non-specialist requires that overview. The specialist will find it imperative.

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