IN REVIEW / CRITIQUES DE LIVRES

The Foundations of Distance Education

Desmond Keegan
Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 227 pages

Desmond Keegan has written extensively on the subject of distance educa-
tion. This latest book adds little to what he and others have already
published. Indeed, in his acknowledgement statement, the author observes
that "Many of the ideas in the book have been published before..."

The author claims three objectives for the book:

1. to provide a guide to the literature, theory, and practice of distance
   education;
2. to provide a guide to good practice in distance education both for
   distance educators and for those who are studying this sector of educa-
   tion for the first time;
3. to contribute to the foundations of distance education as a new
   discipline within education.

The author achieves his first objective but is less successful with the other
two. The book does provide an overview of much of the literature relating to
the theory and practice of distance education. It is organized into 14 chapters
and grouped into the following five parts: the concept of distance education,
theories of distance education, a synthesis of a theoretical framework and a
typology of distance teaching, distance education in practice (including such
matters as students, staffing, media selection, and administrative factors), and
evaluation (including the costs associated with distance education). The
author is personally familiar with distance education programs and institu-
tions in many countries. He gives many useful examples that are drawn from
this experience to illustrate his points.

The overview that the author provides of the field is generally clear and
descriptive but would have benefitted from a more reflective and analytical
treatment. For example, Chapter 10 discusses the use of educational media
in distance education. The author selects six studies which "...have been
chosen for comment because of their authority and influence." The complete
comment provided for one of these six studies is the following: "...provides
an up-to-date listing of the various media available to distance systems and
the reader is referred to this book for details of the availability and use of
media in distance education."

The second objective for the book is to provide a guide to good practice in distance education. Nonetheless, the implications for practice are not extensively developed. Indeed, the final chapter observes that the many and varied conclusions offered by the author "...are not put forward here as judgments which are to be considered normative for practice."

The third objective is to contribute to the foundations of distance education as a new discipline. The author repeatedly espouses the view that distance education is a legitimate and distinct field of enquiry. One might expect that a field of enquiry would have a significant agenda for research, theory, and practice. Keegan concludes that there are 11 suggestions for research and areas of contribution to theory and practice in distance education that he believes are among the most important to pursue. Examples of his conclusions are as follows:

- the correct term for this sector of education is "distance education";
- distance education institutions can be classified into five major groupings;
- distance systems have inherent difficulties with the quantity, quality, and status of provision;
- distance education is a legitimate field of academic enquiry.

Nonetheless, among his suggestions there is no mention of issues in instructional design, in the use of various educational technologies, in the possible relationships between the cognitive/learning styles of students and persistence and success in distance education.

The author provides a new element to his previous statements on a definition of distance education. He envisages distance education as being premised upon not only the separation of the learner from the teacher but also the learners being separated from each other. Distance education is to be distinguished from "group-based" education. This perspective may come as somewhat of a surprise to those many individuals involved in the provision of educational audio-teleconferencing. Many North American educational institutions provide educational opportunities to small groups of students in scattered locations that are linked by audio-teleconferencing for instruction and discussion on a regular basis. Keegan apparently excludes such programs from consideration as distance education. This perspective is not altogether surprising, however, in the light of his attempt to "position" distance education as a separate and unique field of educational activity and as a discipline in its own right. Whereas his previous writings have sought to adopt a broadly encompassing definition of distance education, he now seeks to establish a sharper contrast between "conventional education" and distance education.

In summary, the book provides a useful overview of the field of distance education. It is clearly written and includes many useful examples. It would be of particular interest to readers not familiar with the extensive literature on the field of distance education.

Gordon Thompson
The University of Victoria