Distance Education: Discipline and Service

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In the first issue of this journal, Holmberg argued the case for the study of distance education as a discipline in its own right (Holmberg 1986). His conclusion is implicitly supported by the theme of the current issue: "building bridges between conventional academic disciplines and distance education." My intention is not simply to review Holmberg's case—though that will be my starting point—but to ask whether it matters that distance education is established as a discipline. I will also reflect briefly on the implications of this for bridge building.

Holmberg offers two main criteria for determining whether a new discipline has been established: "the claims of organized and specialized basic research," and "the need to delineate areas of applied research and to train professionals in the field" (ibid, p. 26). He argues convincingly, largely on the basis of his own extensive bibliographic research, that the first of these criteria has been satisfied. Though a great deal obviously remains to be done (see, for example, Perraton 1987), there is now a substantial and growing body of theoretical work in the distance education field. The evidence on the second count, however, is less clear. Holmberg identifies only a few courses in distance education, taught at a distance or face-to-face, all of recent origin. Hence, though we may on balance accept his view that - judged by his own criteria - a sufficiently coherent and common structure for the subject has now been developed, we might well question whether distance education as a discipline is indeed *established*, or is still *emerging*.

Holmberg's criteria for judging disciplineness are not the only ones; other academics who have considered this question might argue that they are neither strict, nor comprehensive enough. Goodlad (1979), for example, has suggested the following definition—which interestingly, incorporates both internal and external criteria for judgement—of a discipline:

> . . . the defining characteristic of an academic discipline is its intellectual structure, its power to organise and concentrate experience; the political viability of an academic discipline is, however, dependent upon contextual relevance to an occupation or group of occupations outside educating institutions, upon self-consciousness systematically developed, upon social coherence, and upon interconnections with other academic disciplines (Goodlad 1979, p. 19).

Distance education might qualify as a discipline, or at least as an emerging discipline, in terms of its intellectual structure and its contextual relevance (i.e., to the putative profession of distance educators). These characteristics are closely analogous to Holmberg's two criteria. It is doubtful whether distance education currently encourages sufficient self-consciousness in its students (or, for that matter, in itself), or has an adequate social coherence (viewed from the perspective of others). The question of interconnectedness is also debatable, though contributions elsewhere in this issue should shed some light on it. In Goodlad's terms distance education should probably not yet be accorded the status of a fully fledged discipline, whereas the 'conventional' academic disciplines—physics, chemistry, history, economics, etc.—most certainly would be.

If distance education were accepted as a valid discipline, a similar case could surely be made for any or all of the following fields: adult education, community education, educational technology, open learning, special needs education, the education of the elderly, and so on. Following this line of argument, we are all clearly multi-disciplinarians, constantly engaged in interdisciplinary study. However there is much overlap between the areas of study I have indicated. None, distance education included, has the distinctness of separateness of such conventional disciplines as botany or archaeology. Perhaps, then, we might usefully think of distance education as either a sub-discipline (of education), or as a kind of second-order discipline, the business of which is the exploration of methods of study rather than, or as well as, the study of a particular field of knowledge.

To some, the foregoing discussion may seem nit-picking. After all, does it really matter whether distance education is an established discipline, an emerging discipline, a sub-discipline, a second-order discipline or none of these? The obvious retort is yes, of course it matters, at least to some people; otherwise, why would academics with a vested interest in the area waste time and effort debating the point? Why does it matter? What are the advantages and disadvantages of establishment? What do those involved in the field, and others, stand to gain or lose from disciplinehood?

The answer to the last, and most important, of these questions would seem to be the gain of *power*. If distance education were established as a discipline on anything like a par with conventional academic disciplines, one would expect it to gain substantially more in the way of available resources within education as a whole, and to acquire a greater influence on policy-making, both within and outside of education. The whole panoply of traits associated with traditional disciplines - specialised departments and staff in a wide range of educational institutions, named chairs and visiting professors, international conferences and contact networks, distinguished patrons, learned societies, competing journals and critical academic infighting - would become fully developed. Distance

education, still widely regarded by academics (at least in my experience) as being something akin to a scarlet woman—cheap, nasty and disreputable—would have come of age.

But nothing of worth, least of all power, is likely to be achieved without risk. In this case, the principal disadvantages to distance educators in establishing their field of expertise as a discipline are those associated with compartmentalisation. If carried too far, specialism can become introspective and isolating. There is no dividing line between distance and conventional, face-to-face, education: the two concepts are placed at the ends of a spectrum on which all the interesting activity occurs somewhere in the middle (Tight, 1987).

Education, unlike most conventional academic disciplines, relies for its success on maintaining close interconnections at a variety of different levels with all other disciplines. Distance educators, and educators in general, are primarily in the business of enabling, encouraging and facilitating learning by whatever means are desirable and possible, and should not seek to erect barriers (disciplinary or otherwise) which might diminish their effectiveness in performing these tasks. Distance educators exist essentially to service and collaborate with specialists in conventional disciplines by offering their expertise in interpreting and communicating the results of research and scholarship to other, wider, audiences.

In saying this, I do not mean to diminish in any way the importance of distance educators studying and improving their own work and that of their colleagues, and passing this knowledge on. All educators worthy of the name, whatever their subject specialism, should surely spend some time doing this.

In conclusion, I believe that it is more appropriate to think of distance education more as a set of methods and practices, than a discipline. I feel that this is likely to be the most helpful attitude if we are concerned with building bridges between conventional academic disciplines and distance education. Distance education, asserted as a discipline, may be seen by the practitioners of other disciplines as an upstart, a competitor or a threat.

References

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