DEVELOPING DISTANCE EDUCATION

PAPERS SUBMITTED TO THE WORLD CONFERENCE IN OSLO 1988

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION

DAVID SEWART

JOHN S. DANIEL

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Papers submitted to the 14th World Conference in Oslo 9–16 August 1988

International Council for Distance Education
Oslo 1988

Distance education comes home: the decentralised learner comes of age

JASON OHLER
University of Alaska-Juneau
USA

INTRODUCTION

In the industrial age we go to school. In the information age school is coming to us. This is the primary message implicit in the media and movement of distance education.

Although distance education is too young as a discipline to have spawned clear trends, some things are certain. As technology and course content quality continue to improve, the ranks of distance learners continue to grow, lowering per student costs and attracting more attention and development capital. This in turn is helping to make distance education, originally developed for the geographically disadvantaged, a viable alternative for those who have traditional means of schooling available to them. In the coming years, the difference between those who must use distance education delivery, and those who would rather do so will become less and less pronounced. By the year 2000, the geographically dispersed "classroom" will be a frequent option in the educational community. Thus we are in the remarkable position of having a clear image of the future in our midst: today's distance education student can serve as a model of future information age learners, the new breed of students who will receive some portion of their schooling via cable, broadcast, satellite, phone or postal systems. By observing the distance learner of today we are looking through a portal into the future and seeing what we will become.

This assumes that distance education technology and delivery organisations will continue to grow and improve and squarely enter the market-place to form a competitive industry. There is no reason to doubt this will happen. In a sense it already has, under the auspices of commercial television. Given the omnipresence of network television, it is not surprising that children are spending more time being educated by TV than by school. Commercial television may not constitute school to the literal minded but it is a formidable teaching institution nonetheless.

In fact, the child in front of the television and the distance learner have much in common. In them we see the seeds of new trends in learning that promise to grow. More and more, individualised education. More and more, those who want the information usually acquired at school but on their own terms will use "traditional" distance education means to get it. More and more, school will come to us.

THE DECENTRALISED LEARNER COMES OF AGE

Accepting that "distance learners" do not necessarily live in remote areas, a redefinition of terms is needed. What we are talking about are dispersed, or decentralised learners. The word is hardly new or under-utilised. Techno-philosophers from Toffler to McLuhan have used it exhaustively to describe the fundamental shift from the industrial age to the information age in the way we work, play, learn and live. Note that it is the student body that is decentralised, while the teacher or provider of materials is usually quite centralised.

There are many ways to view or categorise the decentralised learner. The most appropriate for this paper is to do so based upon the three primary reasons that students are led to use "distance education media" in the first place:

(1) They have no other way to receive a state-sanctioned education due to geographic isolation. To many, these constitute the real distance learners. This category also included those so severely disabled and without support that they are essentially isolated from nearby schools.
(2) They would rather learn, or their parents would rather they learn, at home despite the traditional means of education available to them. I hesitate to use the term "home learner" because to some this term is as all-inclusive as distance learner is to others. The students in this category are often avoiding the socialization at the nearby learning institution. The most obvious example of this are those who learn at home in order to receive an education with a religious emphasis. Patricia Lines estimates that fully half of all home learners fall into this category (Lines, 1987).
(3) They want to expand their learning opportunities and resources beyond those immediately or

traditionally available to them. Anyone can fall into this category, including those usually identified with categories (1) and (2) above. Typical examples are people who attend regular school but need a particular course not offered, or home learners who want to supplement their education by using any one of the number of services available, from mail courses to on-line video services, to video text. The courses they take are often called "enrichment" or "specialty" courses.

There is overlap among the three groups. No doubt there are geographically remote learners who would prefer a religious education and who want a speciality course such as Japanese. This overlap only serves to expand the number and broaden the profile of decentralised learners and provide extra incentive for "distance education" developers to bring school to us.

THE IMPLICATIONS

This shift from a centralised to decentralised student body has profound ramifications.

The potential student body is immense. Tax base is no longer the determining factor regarding what "a school" can afford to offer. Decentralised educational delivery is limited primarily by the level of interaction the teacher needs to maintain during delivery and by the transmission media, such as satellite footprints, cable routes, phone system, etc., most of which are vast. Such a large student body reduces the service per individual cost dramatically. It also allows education to continue to be developed in various flavours with specific foci. We should expect more educational television channels, videotext and video services with specific philosophies; we should expect everything from Christian fundamentalist programming with evolution-free science courses to science coursework developed by environmentalists which are anti-development in nature.

Student or parent control over education is greatly increased. The vastness of the educational networks is balanced by the fact that electronic teachers can be turned off at any time. The industrial age's counterpart, getting up and walking out of a class, was virtually unheard of. This ability to control one's education is in direct contradiction to the factory model which provided the design concept for public education. Factory owners realised that they needed a work-force that was capable of inordinate amounts of "sameness"; to show up at work at the same time on the same days and perform the same tasks in the same way, over and over. Public education was created to meet this need, training children in the spirit of this "sameness". In contrast, information age students will find themselves learning in different environments at different times at different paces, all of which conspires to promote individuality and undermine the power structure upon which the industrial age was founded.

As Anne Batey and Richard Cowell noted in Distance education: an overview "Distance education may force us to redefine what a school is" (1986). In fact, decentralised education allows us to reinvent what school is.

Although it will be easier for higher education to take advantage of the individualised, disciplined nature of decentralised education, the fact that electronic learning can be convenient, fun and effective, combined with new attitudes in parenting and the ability to work at home in a number of electronic cottage industries, may give birth to many different styles of schooling even in the lower grades. Like-minded neighbors will be able to form study groups for themselves and their children, using many of the educational services available to them as their basis. Guides or coaches, rather than teachers as we currently envision them, will facilitate such groups, monitoring and promoting student progress, while relying on everything from interactive laser disks to a live broadcast of a teacher in another classroom as the primary source of information for the courses they oversee. On-the-road technology (microcomputers, ever-smaller satellite transceivers) will disperse the student body even more, encouraging practicum-based education, with students travelling to the hands-on kinds of resources they need and reporting back to a distant teacher.

In the year 2000 we may well be choosing how much of our school taxes we will want to pay the school system and how much we wish to retain to spend on home delivery of educational materials and service. Besides providing access to equipment that is not affordable on an individual basis, such as chemistry labs, schools may become institutions whose most cherished aim is to deliver all of those services now considered secondary; sports, art, choir, socialisation opportunities and individual attention, the only kinds of activities which Glasser sees as currently succeeding in public education (Gough, 1987). The dominant home class format for older learners may well become two to three lectures a week attended at home via cable, satellite or video service and one seminar which the student attends in person at school or a local discussion group. In short, with school coming to us, we enter the age of the viable alternative to standard public education.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO NOW?

Three adjustments in attitude are of primary importance.

First, we need to better understand the psychology and the needs of the decentralised learner of tomorrow and we can do so by studying the needs of the

because distance education is not yet considered mainstream that the psychology of distance education has not blossomed a great deal on its own. Seeing it as a model for future non-distance learners should provide the extra impetus needed. There is certainly plenty to explore. The needs of students who learn not only at a distance but, more importantly separated from a group of their peers and often under the supervision of their families or just themselves must be significantly different from those who have been cultivated in the industrial age model of centralised, norm-minded education. The psychology of the decentralised learner needs to be addressed as vigorously as education has addressed other special needs learners so that educators can develop the pedagogy for the future.

Secondly, we need to understand that education must become more co-operative on a number of fronts:

> between student and teacher. As it currently stands, almost all evaluation in the K-12 environment (and much in higher education) consists of teachers evaluating students, and not the other way around. This is a wonderfully illuminating remnant of the industrial age; rarely did the lathe operator critique management. Successful decentralised education will depend heavily on two-way evaluation to compensate for the information loss caused by the teacher and student not meeting face to face.
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> among students. The information available in most subject areas will be so abundant that it will become necessary to teach students how to use a blend of information and human networks to pursue their studies and to prepare them to solve the complex problems faced in the information age economy.
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> among different agencies responsible for providing education. Distance delivery systems will only become readily affordable if they serve a great number of people. Federal, state, and local governments, as well as private entrepreneurs, will benefit greatly by working together. Their co-operation will make decentralised education a reality for individual consumers not directly associated with a formal institution of education. However, a special sensitivity must be observed to the cross-cultural issues implied in wide area education delivery.

Thirdly, we need to encourage teachers to feel comfortable in the role of coach or guide rather than as boss and fount of all knowledge at the front of the class. In the same way that track coaches do not expect to outpace their fastest runners, information age teachers do not expect to be more factually competent than their students; in fact, they expect to learn from them. A teacher's level of knowledge will always be important, but more and more she or he will be called upon for wisdom, the kind that can't be tested by the National Teachers Examination, and that can only come from experiencing life as a human being and evaluating it as an educator.

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