

A CONCLUDING GENERAL APPRAISAL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

This chapter on distance-education evaluation has been concerned both with how this type of education is evaluated and with the outcomes of evaluating studies. The latter concern would seem to warrant a concluding remark.

There are different types of distance education which make more or less consistent use of the potential of its special characteristics. Within these types there are also more or less successful practices. Like conventional types of education, distance education cannot be described as intrinsically either effective or ineffective, good or bad. It opens up a number of possibilities, however, and it does so in ways that are different from those of conventional education.

The preceding chapters will have shown that distance education is applicable, and has been successfully and economically applied, to many educational tasks and many different target groups. It mainly serves adult students, the secondary and tertiary stages of formal education, vocational and professional basic and further training, and self-actualizing study with or without purposes connected with academic credit or labour-market interest. Methods have been developed that strengthen its personal relevance to individual students and make it effective from the aspects of goal attainment, intellectual and emotional development, and involvement in serious study, as well as from those of energy, time, and financial resources invested. Distance education can safely be described as a useful and flexible kind of education with special potential for student autonomy.

Distance education has been shown to have generated theoretical considerations, which are concerned with its particular character, and hypothetico-deductive approaches to its educational effectiveness. After early attempts at distance education in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, followed by about a hundred years of experiences with organized distance education and a great number of scholarly studies into its theory and practice, we are entitled to describe it as an established mode of education in its own right.

THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Considering the integration of educational, psychological, organizational-administrative, sociological, philosophical, technological and economical aspects of the study of distance education it is possible to regard it as an interdisciplinary field of study. It can also be assigned a place under the comprehensive discipline of education. It has been shown to be a separate entity, however, which can only to a limited extent be described, understood, and explained in terms of conventional school or university education, classroom teaching, or group activities (see pp. 164-5), and so it makes sense to describe it as a special discipline with its roots in education, which, in its turn, is rooted in philosophy. The criteria for a university discipline are usually that there is a body of research encompassing and defining it and that it is taught as a university subject. 'Obviously, an academic discipline is an area of academic interest, and one that poses sufficient problems to stimulate research, and one that leads to the publication of journals in the subject area' (Sparkes 1983: 179).

RESEARCH ON DISTANCE EDUCATION

That there is a body of published research on distance education will have been made manifestly clear by this book with both its constant references to research and its bibliography. However, the study of distance education is evidently benefiting from knowledge and theory developed in disciplines that were established earlier. Most of the research done on distance education could be ascribed to these, for example to general education, pedagogics and andragogics, philosophy, psychology, sociology, history, and economics.

It is only when such diverse studies concentrate on the concerns of distance education and emerge as consequences of a desire to attain expertise in distance education that it is possible to describe these united efforts as the beginnings of a new discipline. This is so when distance educators test the applicability of existing knowledge to their particular type of education and their target groups, and also discover new knowledge and 'new relationships within existing knowledge' (Jensen *et al.* 1964, on adult education).

The contents list of this book may be read as an articulated catalogue of research in the field, as the presentation of each chapter and section is based on research work. Other research areas, which have been given scant attention in this book, include economics and the history of distance education.

Sparkes' requirement that a discipline should lead to 'the publication of journals in the subject area' has been abundantly met. The following (with country of publication) should be mentioned:

- The American Journal of Distance Education* (USA)
- Distance Education* (Australia)
- Epistologdidaktika* (England)
- Journal of Distance Education* (Canada)
- Open Learning* (England)

To these should be added the newsletters and occasional publications of universities, schools, and professional bodies in the field such as:

- Open Praxis: The Bulletin of the International Council for Distance Education*
- Open Campus* (Australia: Deakin University)
- Spotlight on Open Learning* (of the British Training Agency)
- Fernstudium aktuell* (Deutsches Institut für Fernstudien an der Universität Tübingen)
- Istruzione a Distanza* (Università Degli Studi Di Roma La Sapienza)
- Neuer Too Far* (Unesco/Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University)
- Per Distans* (Swedish National Organization for Distance Education).

Quite a few research departments have been established within

and outside distance-teaching organizations. The British Open University has its Institute of Educational Technology (IET), which on the one hand contributes to R&D work related to the teaching of the University, to course development and evaluation, and on the other hand does independent distance-education research. The German FernUniversität has one service organization supporting the various faculties in their teaching, media development, evaluation etc. (Zentrum für Fernstudienentwicklung, ZFE), and also an autonomous research institute concentrating on problems of distance education independently of the immediate concerns of the FernUniversität (Zentrales Institut für Fernstudienforschung, ZIF). The Open Learning Agency in Canada, Open Universiteit in the Netherlands, Deakin University and the University College of Southern Queensland in Australia as well as the Norwegian NKS and NKI schools are further examples of well-known distance-teaching organizations running their own departments for research on distance education. Research bodies wholly or partly unrelated to the actual teaching at a distance are, for example, the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at the Pennsylvania State University in the USA and Deutsches Institut für Fernstudienforschung at Tübingen University in Germany.

DISTANCE EDUCATION AS A UNIVERSITY TEACHING SUBJECT

Some universities regularly arrange courses and seminars on distance education. The University of Wisconsin at Madison should be mentioned as a pioneer. Credits towards degrees are sometimes awarded for this type of study.

Curricula have been developed for mainly postgraduate study of distance education and are offered, as seems logical, as distance-study courses by some universities. Among them are the FernUniversität (FeU) in Germany (Bäth 1984a; Holmberg 1982, 1983b), the South Australian College of Advanced Education (SACAE) (Mitchell 1982; Willmott and King 1984) and the University of Wisconsin with a programme leading to a 'Certificate of Professional Development in Distance Education'. The International Extension College in London offers a distance-education course preparing students for a University of London MA degree in distance education.

While there are considerable differences between the various courses of this type, as far as organization and media are concerned, their views of the subject, i.e. the discipline, largely coincide. Among other things they cover the following: the concept, theory, rationale, and philosophy of distance education, the distance students, study motivation, course planning and course development (instructional design), self-checking exercises, communication and support strategies, information technology, media, principles of adult education, organization and administration, systems and course evaluation. Issues of principles bearing on this teaching have been discussed by Willmott and King (1984) and the present author (Holmberg 1984). See also Kaufman (1984).

The consensus on the content of the discipline is strong also outside organized university teaching. This is apparent from various staff-training programmes for distance educators. An example from New Zealand has been presented by Nicoll (1986). The Association of European Correspondence Schools offers a comprehensive diploma course for distance educators taught by distance-education methods. This training is recognized by the British College of Preceptors, a body granted a Royal Charter as early as 1849 for the purpose of 'promoting sound learning and of advancing the interests of education'.

RECOGNITION

From what has been said it is evident that distance education meets the criteria mentioned and can, if these are accepted, be described as an academic discipline. There seems to be far-reaching unanimity about its content in research and university teaching.

There can be no doubt, however, that this claim is queried by many (as, for instance, the parallel claims of adult education have been rejected; see a discussion in the *Journal of Distance Education* I, 1 (1986) and IV, 1 Coldeway *et al.* (1989). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to uphold it, although to many scholars it would evidently be more satisfactory to call distance education a field of study.

Sparkes asks in what ways an area of academic interest must develop to be 'acceptable to the academic community as a discipline' and answers that the following apply:

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- 1 it must grow in degree of relevance to real and important problems . . .
- 2 it must grow in theoretical and conceptual depth;
- 3 it must develop its own 'conceptual structure'; that is, there must be a complex set of inter-relationships between its fundamental ideas.

(Sparkes 1983: 181)

This book should have shown that distance education is growing, and has been at least since the 1950s, in all of these respects. However, it must be conceded that on a further issue mentioned by Sparkes, the use made of distance-education theory and data by other disciplines, there is so far little to be adduced.

As further characteristics of a discipline Dressel and Mayhew (in discussing higher education as a field of study) mention the existence of 'a specialized vocabulary and a generally accepted basic literature' as well of 'some generally accepted body of theory and some generally understood techniques for theory testing and revision' (Dressel and Mayhew 1974: 3). The former evidently applies to distance education, whereas the latter – as shown in this book – is a concern of today's distance-education research.

What must in any case be admitted is that distance education is an area of research and academic teaching that constitutes a cohesive structure of theoretical and practical interest.

While this is decisive for its recognition as a discipline, the professionalization of distance educators beyond training programmes should also be considered. Contributions of relevance in this respect are Delling (1987a and 1992) on the scope of the profession; Coughlan (1980) on the mentor role (mentor styles and facilitation styles); Crick (1980) on the tasks of course developers (teams and their leaders); Meacham (1982) on change agents; Sewart (1980) on the role (and the support of) tutor-counsellors.

ON THE CHARACTER OF THE DISCIPLINE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

As has been shown in the preceding chapters, distance-education research, and thus the discipline as a whole, has largely been concerned with problems of understanding and explaining its circumstances and conditions; the needs and requirements of its students; the measures taken to meet these needs and require-

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ments; methodology; media use; organization and administration; evaluation of these measures and of complete distance-education systems from educational, social, and financial points of view. The search for understanding and explanation has in some cases resulted in attempts to find a kind of instrumental approach to improving distance education, i.e. facilitating distance students' learning. As shown in Chapter 9, these attempts have had some success in the spirit of Popper. The present author shares Popper's already quoted epistemological view, according to which the task of scholarship is both to bring about explanation and to provide for application and technology (see p. 180).

Some scholars are very pessimistic as to the practical technological part. It has been claimed that students' learning ability and readiness are determined by their learning experiences and habits, can only be partly improved and are above all largely irreversibly preconditioned by society. I do not share this belief in the dominance of social influence; I interpret the findings made and reported on about the impact of various kinds of course development and two-way communication as evidence of possibilities to apply cause-effect principles to the improvement both of distance education generally and of individual students' learning. The limitations of these possibilities have been discussed on pp. 180-1.

Most of the above exposition has concentrated on the internal problems of distance education, such as methods, without paying much attention to its milieu apart from its very prerequisites. There are scholars, however, who find it more important to investigate the role of distance education in society and how social conditions and distance education influence each other. In a paper published in 1991 Mick Campion and Patrick Guion, both of Murdoch University in Western Australia:

hope to begin to challenge the theoretical underpinning of policies which ignore, and hence deliberately or inadvertently, hide the fundamental importance of the economic, technological, demographic, cultural, political and social contexts within which a system of higher education operates. In essence we are arguing that... an emphasis on endogenous factors will no longer do.

(Campion and Guion 1991: 12)

Discussions among distance educators of what in comparison to

industrial processes has been called Fordism and post-Fordism as related to power illustrate the trend towards research on exogenous factors. The social outcomes of distance education are thus coming to the fore. Anyone doing research on distance education must, independently of his or her own research orientation, be aware of these trends and take note of the fact that they are given priority in some research programmes (Evans 1991 and Edwards 1991).

In discussions of the kind mentioned a fear of alienation as a consequence of the industrial character of much distance education is often explicitly or implicitly in the foreground. This makes it important to demonstrate the fact that in distance education we actually have the only real one-to-one relationship between student and tutor that - but for Oxbridge tutorials - occurs in education. However 'industrial' the course development may be, mediated student-tutor interaction - in writing, on the telephone etc. - brings about personal contact between each student and his/her tutor. The importance of this one-to-one tutoring can hardly be exaggerated. It is also, as shown in Chapter 6 of this book, a most important and fertile research topic.

Endogenous and exogenous research of the kinds discussed undoubtedly characterize the discipline of distance education.

There are evidently good reasons to describe the discipline of distance education as both theoretical, in search of understanding and explanation, and practical or technological, applying principles that have been investigated with a view to facilitating learning and in other ways improving distance education.