Chapter 1

Distance Education: A Shared Understanding

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Side by side with the development of radio and television, human ingenuity is evolving another method of aerial correspondence. I refer to the immediate transfer by radio of facsimile documents through the ether. Man writes a letter and - presto! - its exact image appears somewhere 3,000 miles away...Ether delivery will one day be developed so that I will be able to write a letter at my desk and have that letter transmitted in facsimile almost instantly to Australia. My correspondent in Australia should be able to reply within a few minutes. Then it would not take more time to transmit his reply than to dictate the letter...We have not reached this point as yet, but it is a development that will come within our lifetime.

After Television - What?
David Sarnoff
October 10, 1936

What a tremendous vision, and the vision was occurring in 1936! David Sarnoff, the president of RCA, was clearly captivated by the idea that the “ether” could be used to carry an exact image of the printed word back and forth between people living at considerable distance from each other. And clearly the feature that most excited Sarnoff was the idea that it could be done instantaneously. There would be no need to wait for days – even weeks or months – to gain feedback on one’s ideas. It could happen almost immediately.

And so was established yet another marker in the journey to establish new tools to speed our ability to communicate with one another via technology. Starting slowly at first, that journey today has taken on such tremendous speed that we get dizzy thinking about what our communications technology looked like only a few short months ago.

Thinking back in history for a minute, only 35 years before Sarnoff’s vision Marconi had successfully broadcast the first wireless signal across the Atlantic Ocean. And at that time Marconi was happy with his success at transmitting just the code for the letter “S” – not a facsimile of an entire page of information as General Sarnoff would dream. Furthermore, if we were to push the clock back an additional 25 years before Marconi’s accomplishment, we would find Alexander Graham Bell still tinkering with the design of what would eventually be his invention of the telephone.
And to think that today we get frustrated when a worldwide web page takes more than a second or two to load onto our computer!

So here we are bursting at the seams with more communications technology than even Bell, Marconi or Sarnoff could ever imagine. We are not only able to send a facsimile copy of something to Australia and back in a fraction of a second, but the technology guarantees the communication will be free of errors, in vivid color, and our computer will even play a small tune when it arrives. Today, we enjoy an unbelievable array of technology to fulfill just about any dream that we could have when it comes to communication.

As we know, however, communication that is truly effective is only partly a function of the technology that is used or its speed. The larger part of good communication is the design of the message that is being sent. Although it is exciting to be able to transmit messages at lightning speed around the world, unless the design of the message fulfills its function it doesn’t matter how quickly it can be delivered! The key to effective communication is the use to which we put the technology.

The Learner in Distance Education

Distance education is an area of practice that draws significantly on the power of technology. Yet it must focus more heavily on the instructional aspects of the communication process in order to facilitate learning. The challenge is to keep the many parts of a distance education teaching and learning system in balance. For most of us, however, the brightness of the technology can often blind our view of the variety of essential considerations that are foundational in distance education. And first among these considerations is the learner. Reid (1995) suggests that “…managing learning support will bring many challenges, but its success in any institution will be underpinned by the sharing of a common vision and model of support which places the learner firmly at the centre of everyone’s efforts” (p. 274).

Tait (1995) supports Reid with his concern that the development of open and distance learning (ODL) systems must begin with an understanding of who the students are rather than starting with the production of the course materials. “Who are your students? This central question lies at the heart of the issue, and yet is often ignored. The question, though short and to the point, is one of considerable depth and complexity. It is not an original observation to say that education has represented a provider-led rather than a client- or consumer-led activity. ODL systems that start with the production of course materials in whatever medium can also ignore in important ways the consideration as to who their students are” (p. 233).

Probably the most essential characteristic of the successful learner in a distance education teaching and learning environment is that the learner must be willing and able to be self-directing. Such a self-directing learner is one who is able to take responsibility for his or her own learning agenda. Deciding what to learn, how to learn it, when to learn it, and when the learning goal has been achieved are all important aspects that a self-directing learner must consider. For distance education to make a serious and constructive impact on an individual demands that the individual be a full and active participant in the learning environment. In other words, a learner who is accepting and exercising responsibility for his or her own learning.

Why is self-direction such an important consideration in distance education? Any time there is an
instructional system that is removed from the learner because of location, the teacher loses a significant amount of control over the learner. And, of course, control by the teacher often plays a major role in the teaching and learning environment. Without a lot of teacher control, as exists in most distance education situations, the assumption is that the learner will step in and exercise the needed control to make learning successful.

This student-directed learning can be very exciting when it happens. As a teacher, it’s a wonderful feeling to be involved with a group of learners who are willing to accept responsibility for learning. However, in many cases the very opposite can be true. The learner can be acting in very dependent ways and working hard to avoid accepting responsibility. This situation can be disastrous in a distance education setting and can often leave the teacher without the power to facilitate or direct much learning.

One of the many challenges for the distance education teacher then is to recognize this need for self-directedness on the part of the learner and to begin to build it from the very beginning of the program. Evans and Nation (1989) push this idea even further when they suggest that the foundation to self-directedness is critical reflection and must be practiced by both the teachers and the students. “The process of critical reflection is continuous and leads to a set of transformatory practices through which students (and teachers) become competent, self-directed learners. The process of critical reflection is not just about distance teachers reflecting on their practices but is also about critical reflections in distance education. In this sense both distance teachers and students are engaged in a reciprocal teaching-learning/action-reflection process which leads to each other’s understanding of themselves and the social conditions of their existence” (p. 252).

In later chapters specific strategies will be described for assisting students in distance education to assume a meaningful and responsible role as self-directing learners. This is truly a challenge for distance educators – to be concerned not only about the content of the instruction, but also the instructional strategies that clearly foster the emergence of self-directed learners and the growth of learner responsibility. When both agenda are working; that is, content is being delivered well and learner responsibility is being strengthened, then the power of teaching at a distance can be fully realized.

**Who controls the learning environment in distance education?**

As we focus our attention on learning and the learner we must also explore the wider framework of distance education and consider the issue of exactly who exercises control in the learning environment. Distance education, more than many other educational initiatives, provides the potential for a distribution of the power of control in the educational setting.

Writing from a perspective of higher education, Dirr (1990) describes four barriers of access and equity that can prevent a learner from controlling his or her education and deriving full value in higher education.

“The first barrier is one of distance (i.e. for many people educational sites are too distant to encourage them to take advantage of the programs offered). The second barrier is time (i.e. available courses are not offered at times convenient to the busy schedules of many of today’s adults). Study after study has shown that most college students today juggle schedules that include responsibilities to family, job and community, and often conflict with college schedules. The third barrier is access to rich resources (e.g. library and
Distance education offers significant potential for reducing these barriers and putting more control in the hands of the learner.

Starting with the advent of the printed page, there has been a continuing development of media. This development has made receiving information a more efficient and effective process, which can be controlled by the receiver or the learner. This ability for the learner to control his or her own learning has made a tremendous leap ahead in recent years with the development of the worldwide web and is certain to continue in unforeseen ways in the future. This equity of control between the learner and the teacher is sure to be an ongoing strength of distance education as it blends both formal and nonformal education in a balanced and dynamic learning environment.

**Why call it distance “education” and not distance “learning”?**

Although the field seems to be split between the use of “distance education” and “distance learning”, we will consistently use the term “distance education” throughout. This distinction might seem strange in light of the concern for learning that forms the foundation for these writings. However, using Maslow’s humanistic view of psychology as a base, we began with the assumption that learning is something that is a very personal phenomenon that goes on within the learner. Maslow (1962) states, “We can no longer think of the person as “fully determined” where this phrase implies “determined only by forces external to the person.” The person, insofar as he is a real person, is his own main determinant” (p. 36).

In other words, the learner is in control of his or her own learning. And in the best of all possible worlds, the educator is able to contribute to the individual’s learning agenda through meaningful and appropriate instruction.

Within this view then to suggest that there can be “distance learning”; that is, implying that learning can go on away from the learner makes little sense. Certainly, however, it is possible and correct to use a phrase such as “learning that is stimulated by instruction from a distance.” The key is that the instruction is that which is at a distance and not the learning.

Moore (1990) adds further clarity to the use of the phrase “distance education” when he reflects on the historical roots of the phrase.

“After nearly half a century of practice a group of mostly American and Canadian correspondence educators, most but not all from university extension divisions, met in Vancouver, Canada, in 1938 to form an organization which they called the International Council for Correspondence Education (ICCE). Conferences of these correspondence educators were held about every four years, and it was at the conference in Warrenton, Virginia, in 1972 that the use of the term “distance education” in English, and the concept of distance as a dimension of teaching and learning, was introduced. The use of the term was proposed after a search for a name that would describe not only correspondence instruction, but a whole family of teaching-learning arrangements that had emerged in the 1960s. These arrangements had the common characteristic that the learner and teacher were normally separated, geographically and often in time, and the communication that normally in education occurred by word of mouth in a classroom was carried by correspondence, and, increasingly, by electronic media. These media came to include not
only radio and television broadcasting, but audio and video recording, and
teleconferencing through computer modems, telephone, satellite and microwave systems”
(p. xiv).

So what exactly is distance education?

Distance education is the process of helping people learn when they are separated by time or location from the more typical “live” face-to-face learning environments that most of us have grown up with. According to Moore (1990), “Distance education consists of all arrangements for providing instruction through print or electronic communications media to persons engaged in planned learning in a place or time different from that of the instructor or instructors” (pg. xv).

Distance education that is designed well empowers the learner through an increased ability to exercise control over the sequence and pace of the instruction, along with the opportunity to be able to have such control at a time and location that is most convenient to the learner. A helpful way to conceptualize distance education and when it is most appropriately used is through a 2 x 2 matrix that compares time with location. Table 1 presents such a matrix and identifies the types of learning environments that can be created in each of the four quadrants when time and location variables are viewed in their extreme.

In Table 1 the factors of Time and Location are only presented as extremes. Certainly there are numerous learning environments that are designed at a variety of points along the continuum from “same time” to “times that are convenient” and the continuum from “same location” to “locations that are convenient.” However, Table 1 serves as a guide when considering the variables that help define whether a learning environment can be considered distance education. But does this mean that all distance education courses must emanate from only Quadrant 3 and Quadrant 4?

Must an entire course be technologically mediated in order for it to be considered distance education?

We are now beginning to get a sense of when a learning environment is rather typical – Quadrant 1 and Quadrant 2 – and when it begins to have characteristics that make it clearly viable as a distance education candidate – Quadrant 3 and Quadrant 4. However, it is not necessary for an entire sequence of instruction to be delivered in a mediated form in order for the instruction to be considered distance education. A course does not have to be exclusively in a single quadrant. A course can be made up of a variety of different strategies or components that effectively move the course in and out of different quadrants. In other words, it is very possible to take a rather traditional looking course, class, or program and to effectively integrate the use of distance education to support and enhance learning by varying the learning environment.
Table 1
Learning Environments as a Function of Time and Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Quadrant 1</th>
<th>Quadrant 2</th>
<th>Quadrant 3</th>
<th>Quadrant 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In-person learning environments that bring learners and teachers together.</td>
<td>Replicable learning environments that allow learners to learn independently at a single defined location.</td>
<td>Synchronous learning environments that are enhanced by using technology to allow learners and teacher to meet together at the same time though at a distance from each other.</td>
<td>Asynchronous learning environments that are enhanced by using technology to allow learners and teacher to exchange ideas at times convenient to each and at a distance from each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructional activities are designed with the assumption that all learners will be together at the SAME LOCATION.</td>
<td>Instructional activities are designed with the assumption that learners will be available for instruction at TIMES THAT ARE CONVENIENT to each individual.</td>
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For instance, considering a situation where a course operates at one time or another in all four of the quadrants may sound rather ambitious, but it is now occurring much more frequently. The course begins in Quadrant 1 in a face-to-face situation, using a traditional classroom. Course objectives are clarified, teacher and learners get to know each other, and dialogue begins. In other words the Quadrant 1 aspect of the course becomes the foundation of the course. To help everyone in the class gain access to needed readings, the instructor can add a Quadrant 2 component whereby a special reading shelf of “reserved” publications are placed in the library and made available to the students. Periodically Quadrant 4 asynchronous activities are added to the instruction by using the worldwide web to put the learners in touch with content posted by the instructor on the course website and to move the learners to additional content at distant websites. A web-based course bulletin board can also allow for asynchronous threaded discussions on a variety of topics. Moreover, as the semester progresses there will most likely be times when instructor and learners will want to “get together” outside of the scheduled class times to discuss key ideas and concepts. These meetings could easily be accomplished by adding a Quadrant 3 synchronous learning component through the use of a chatroom. In short, the use of multiple quadrants in a teaching situation can tremendously enhance the learning environment.

By using a broad and encompassing view of distance education, it is possible to begin to understand the complexity of what can go on in a teaching and learning environment. A multitude
of arrangements can be created to capitalize on the best learning opportunities from all four quadrants in Table 1. The challenge in distance education is not to attempt to remove all aspects of face-to-face learning. The challenge in distance education is to enrich the learning environment through appropriate selection and use of instructional strategies that are drawn from all four quadrants.

**Must you have a teacher to have distance education?**

Using premises upon which the study of adult learning is founded, we have adopted the view that learning and education do not necessarily require a teacher. Merriam and Caffarella (1991) state,

> Learning on one’s own, being self-directed in one’s learning is itself a context in which learning takes place. The key to placing a learning experience within this context is that the learner has the primary responsibility for planning, carrying out, and evaluating his or her own learning. Participation in self-directed learning seems almost universal – in fact, an estimated 90 percent of the population is involved with at least one self-directed learning activity a year. (p. 54)

This broader view of adult learning allows us to consider a greater spectrum of designed learning experiences that are both formal and nonformal in nature and include one or more distance education learning segments. Ward (1984) has provided a very helpful set of definitions of formal and nonformal education. He describes formal education as very school-like and having characteristics that are “...deliberate, planned, staffed, financially supported, using time-and-space fixed procedures” (p. 2) Nonformal education is also described by Ward (1984) as deliberate, planned, staffed and financially supported. However, he goes on to say that nonformal education, “is also functional, unrestricted as to time and place and, in general, responsive to need” (p. 5).

More importantly, however, Ward (1984) makes a strong point in saying that nonformal education must not be seen merely as a methodology: “Nonformal education borrows its methodologies widely. Although some instructional methods are more appropriate, others less, defining nonformal education as a particular methodology blurs the important distinctions” (p. 5).

He further states, with similar caution, that nonformal education should not be considered as a new term created especially for adult learners since it has often been used with children. And likewise it should not be considered as a new way of describing continuing education since continuing education is almost always concerned with the furthering of an educational experience that has its roots in formal education.

Similarly, distance education must not be restricted to a single and simplistic view of a learning environment, limited only to a certain set of instructional technologies, focused on one set of outcomes or responding to only a particular type of learner. Distance education must be seen in its broadest and most inclusive manner. It cannot be seen exclusively as a teacher-or-institution-designed-and-controlled, formal education phenomena. Distance education must be viewed in the context of facilitating learning for a vast array of learners, unique to each learner due to the conditions of his or her environment and the learning agenda each is attempting to fulfill. To be successful, distance education must be seen as powerful both to the institution and the learner in fulfilling their goals of teaching and learning.
References


