

Chapter 19

An Alternative Technology: Distance Education through Transnational Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen massive growth in transnational education, and this appears to have arisen from strategies of risk mitigation among traditional educational institutions (Adam, 2001). The results of this process have been for universities from the UK, Australia, and America, in particular, to enter into partnerships with providers around the world who then deliver the universities' programmes at a distance. A consequence of these developments has been a trend in parts of Higher Education for pursuit of growth in non-traditional market segments to change in focus from distance education and to transnational partner-based modes of delivery. However, rather than taking the view that transnationalisation is displacing distance education, the central argument of the chapter is that this process of transnationalisation could actually be understood as a developing form of distance education itself, and it may be time to widen prevailing definitions of distance education.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a form of education in which a learner or student engages with an institution through an intervening gap or distance created by either geography or time. Distance education has been a phenomenon in education, in one form or another, since the 1850s and has progressively grown in scale over that period to reach extremely large scales. For example, Allen

and Seaman (2011) reported around 6 million students now studying at a distance in the USA, and this represents around 31 per cent of total tertiary registrations. Although distance education has gone through a series of distinct phases of development (as is discussed later), the current definitional approaches to distance education tend to encompass only the current prevailing form. So research at present tends to focus on separation between teacher and student being bridged by technologies and those technologies being associated with computer based and online learning

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(e.g. Lee & Choi, 2011). The definitions also tend to stress the tensions created by these specific technologies in good pedagogic practice and student learning experiences.

However, in recent years there has been a large growth in education that crosses national boundaries. Transnational education, (TNE) as it is called, tends to be sponsored by traditional universities and colleges (especially those in the United Kingdom and Australia) who are seeking new markets (Ehlers, & Schneckenberg, 2010; Adam, 2001). However, one of the little-charted outcomes of this growth in TNE has been the huge increase in students being educated “at a distance” from the educationalists in their awarding institutions. Within TNE approaches, the lead institution develops the courses and franchises or licenses an agent partner-organisation to deliver (and sometimes assess on its behalf).

Despite the scale of the growth in TNE it is apparently absent from consideration in the contemporary distance education literature except where the TNE arrangement also involves online delivery. This is because the distance education literature is generally exclusively focused on the relationship between student and educator, so the prevailing focus of literature tends to be upon the ‘technology’ and pedagogy of distance education. Because of this prevailing focus, the literature does not encompass the prospect that TNE provides for students to be educated both local (by the partner staff) and at a distance (from the course leaders and awarding institution).

The objective of this chapter is to re-examine definitions of distance education and the phenomenon’s contextual underpinnings using Taylor’s (1999) typology of the phases of distance education to describe distance education. The chapter then examines the TNE phenomenon and then highlights that there may be space for the TNE phenomenon to be considered a form of distance education.

DEFINING ‘DISTANCE’ IN LEARNING AND EDUCATION

It has often been observed that within the field of education research, the terminology in respect ‘distance’ forms of education and learning have been imprecise and sometimes confused (Bates, 2005; King, Young, Driver-Richmond, & Schrader, 2001; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Indeed, within the phenomenon there are a range of inter-locking terms: distance learning/ education, online learning/ education, e-learning, mediated learning, and supported open learning/ education, and most of these are treated as similar, if not synonyms. But, as King, Young, Driver-Richmond and Schrader (2001) observe, tighter definition of the terms related to the field of distance education might be necessary “...so that these terms can better form a common basis for the exchange of ideas and information, particularly for research and development” (p. 1) (also see Moore, 2012).

In categorical terms educational instruction is generally divided into the two broad groupings – that of ‘in-person’ and that of ‘at distance’. They are divided according to whether the learners and educationalists share the same time and location or are separated by either of these two aspects (Barker & Dickson, 1996). On these lines, Muir (1991) describes it as “a form of education in which there is normally a separation between teacher and learner and thus one in which other means ... are used to bridge the physical gap” (p. 313). Also stressing the aspect of separation, Newby, Stepich, Lehman and Russell’s (2000) definition is that distance learning is “an organized instructional program in which teacher and learners are physically separated” (p. 210). Similarly, King, Young, Driver-Richmond and Schrader (2001) offer their definition that: “distance education is formalized instructional learning where the time/geographic situation constrains learning by not affording in-person contact between student and instructor” (p. 2). Finally, de-emphasising the separation but stressing the outcome, The

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