What's Next for Distance Education: Is Our Work Done Here?

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Introduction:

The title of this paper "What's Next for Distance Education: Is Our Work Done Here?" asks two questions. Alternatively, the following related titles were proposed for this paper:

- The Changing Face of Distance Education: They're Here to Stay
- The Changing Face of Distance Education: Mixing Oil and Water?
- Mainstreaming Distance Education: A Case of Identity Theft or Validation?
- Distance Education: The Impact of Mainstreaming
- Distance Education Goes Mainstream: Is Imitation the Sincerest Form of Flattery?

In response to the title's 2nd question, No! We're not done here. Distance Education is still relevant in the United States, but must evolve and adapt to remain so. Where we go next and what issues face the field in the United States is the [decidedly ethnocentric, myopic] topic of this paper. The paper will cover the issues of four areas deemed to be especially relevant to the field of distance education: Policy, Pedagogy, Technology and Administration.

***Definition*:**

> Distance Education is planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p.2)

Background:

An important demographic change is being reported in the field of distance education (DE). DE offerings are no longer for only for the "nontraditional" student. Increasingly, dual-mode institutions are experiencing a hybridization of their offerings as fully matriculated, campus-based students account for a large share of DE enrollments. (Dillon & Greene, 2003; Cookson, 2002; Waddoups & Howell, 2002; Bleed, 2001; WBEC, 2000; Guernsey, 1998; Wallace, 1996) The author has chosen to frame the paper around this topic of changing demographics, as it raises many of the current issues facing distance education.

Related to this demographic shift or diversification is a mainstreaming effect, referring to an ever narrowing gap between the practices of distance and on-campus education due largely to the increasing campus adoption of online course management systems (CMS) like Blackboard, Angel, WebCT as well as a host of other similar systems employed in corporate environments. These CMSs are used to post course materials, readings, syllabi, facilitate online discussions, administer and grade tests, and in many instances, completely eliminate face to face encounters—even on campus. At least two major universities are taking steps to consolidate their traditionally distinct student populations into a single CMS platform. Mainstreaming has also led to conceptual confusion that exists in the broader field (Saba, 2002)

Clearly, the lines between DE and campus education are becoming very blurry in the United States. Physical distance is no longer the de-facto defining characteristic of the field, despite Moore's 1993 explication of a theory of Transactional Distance. Moore introduced the notion that distance was as much a function of interaction and structure levels as it was of proximity. It is hence, quite surprising that the definition of DE provided by the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA, 2003), still sets *geographic location* as the defining characteristic of distance education and learning.

An unplanned "black market" (Javons, 1990; Wallace, 1996) has developed of independent study enrollers by traditional urban students. Today, it is entirely plausable that two students seated side-by-side in a computer lab could be in the same online DE course with their professor just down the hall and not "know" one another. In a course for which the author was the instructional designer, two students went home for the summer (one overseas), but arranged with their faculty to "attend" class online via the CMS. They both received full credit as if on campus. The department was effectively running an unauthorized distance education program independent of the university's knowledge. When approached, the faculty simply responded "what's the difference if they come to class or not, all our activities and materials are online?" Professors and students alike are awakening to such new conditions for learning or "new learning spaces" as defined by Otto Peters (2000a).

At issue here is a tremendous array of policy, pedagogical, technological and administrative concerns. This convergence can very directly impact the following areas of administrative services, course and curriculum design, institutional goals, mission statements and structures, resource allocation, faculty and student roles, assessment, student support services, department collaboration (Waddoups and Howell, 2002) Some of these will be addressed in the following pages.

Policy Issues:

As institutions relax existing policies (like classroom seat-time) in an effort to explore alternative models, continuing education (CE) and distance education administrators would do well to pay close attention and be part of the change process. The marginal status of many of their units increases the risk that they may not be as central to the institutional planning process as they'd like to be (Wallace, 1999).

The "black market" alluded to previously, has largely been ignored with no institutional prohibition against such use, perhaps due to resident program arrogance. What's more, there has been little in the way of planned or purposeful efforts to serve of this population, or evaluate their needs. (Wallace, 1996) CE and DE administrators at dual mode universities might express displeasure with the potentially inequitable competition on-campus, quasi-DE practices promote within an organization. Do they remain silent because this market supports their own programs? Either way, now that parity is being realized between offerings and credit transfer problems diminishing, this unofficial "don't ask, don't tell" policy will not likely last.

What does this convergence mean for single mode DE institutions or the traditional CE and DE programs at dual mode institutions? Wallace (1999) writes that DE programs have long been associated with continuing education units due to their history with extension programming. This in turn has led to DE's marginalization from the central mission of the university as it attended nearly exclusively to non-traditional students. Likewise, Wallace argues that practice has followed adult education models which may be now prove somewhat disenfranchising to younger, less autonomous DE students. In the eyes of many higher insitutionites, DE still represents a corporatized [read "for profit"] and industrial model, which is anathema to their idealized (but seldom reached) teaching-learning assumptions and values."(Garrison, 2000)

In an effort to help counter such commonly held notions, Brigham Young University, for example, recently rearranged reporting lines within the university to have their DE unit report directly to the academic vice president reducing the boundaries between on and off campus. Similar institutional restructuring may prove useful at other dual mode schools. (Waddoups & Howell, 2002)

The changes are not unique to dual mode institutions. Single mode DE universities like Athabasca University in Canada have felt the need to respond to a growing demand for more social and synchronous and instruction. Individual programs within the university have been experimenting with course design and delivery models that deviate from the largely print-based, self-directed models common at Athabasca. (Galbraith, 2003)

On the one hand, current convergence trends are not very scalable. They still rely on the instructor to be both the course developer, and primary student contact. Administrators fail to change and don't employ the systems approaches to DE (Moore & Kearsley, 1996) that are needed to create scalable solutions. Garrison (2000) ascribes this to their not "understanding how to create a viable strategic plan for adopting DE methods congruent with their institutional values and goals." These models may not prove to be scalable as they are currently implemented, but this may be where the field contributes some leadership and guidance as we enter a post-industrial era of DE (Garrison, 2000). Simply adding student body by way of online courses does nothing to alleviate the enrollment caps many university's struggle with, and in fact frustrate faculty who perceive they are being asked to do more with less.

While Sir John Daniels (1997), and many others puzzle as to why the United States does not adopt more scalable, student centered DE models, it is also possible that such models would not account for the diversity that this country is currently experiencing. Institutions continue to experiment and try new models. It was only last year that Stanford began formulating institution-wide policies for distance education despite its having had multiple successful forays into DE. "Better late than never", says Mr. Leith, who adds that "the university better face these serious questions sooner rather than any later." (Chronicle, 2002)

Simonson and Bauck divide policies into the seven general category areas listed in the left hand column below. In the right hand column is a summary of policy and regulatory issues associated with that category area.

Policy Category	***Potential Impact***
Academic	• Remaining issues of course equity should dissipate as campus instructors and administrators recognize and adopt the DE technologies and approaches to instruction. • Will academic structures and reporting lines be redrawn? • Will DE courses be relegated to print and correspondence?
Fiscal, Geographic & Governance (Perhaps the most messy category)	• How are student populations divided, recruited? • Will cost recovery models be applied to On-campus programs as well (similar to business and law and some engineering schools) Or will Continuing Ed and DE units receive more university funding? • Do out-of-state tuition models continue to apply? • Should students pay more for an online course than FtF or campus counterparts?
Faculty	• Are online and FtF classes considered equal load? • Can full or tenure track professors teach exclusively online? • Who will their employers be? • What will reporting lines look like? • Will obstructive federal financial aid policies and practices continue to fall away?
Legal	• If courses are taught for consortia or for other institutions, corporate partners, who retains copyright and intellectual property? • Is the university responsible for monitoring copyright infringement in online course materials?
Student	• What are the differences between a full-time online student and FtF student? • How long will residency requirements persist? • Will DE courses only attract students with extreme needs (time flexibility etc.)
Technical	• Can individual programs or colleges select their own delivery, course management, and student support technology? • Who will decide on standards and ensure universal accessibility? • Do faculty build their own courses? • Are standard templates used for consistent university image and branding? • Will faculty be trained in good DE practice?
Philosophical	• What will be the role of distance education programs if the trend continues?

	• Can the two operations remain separate? • Will the university see legitimate differences between DE populations and courses and their seemingly on-campus cousins? • Will the duplication of effort continue, or will schools work to concentrate DE offerings on their core competencies, or relative competitive advantages?

Finally, what was until only recently a major, long standing hurdle facing distance education, was the discriminatory practice of Federal Financial Aid policies toward DE programs. New laws passed in 2002 overcome many of the hurdles and represent yet another example of the convergence described in this paper. This achievement will go a long way in further promoting demographic variance in the DE population.

Pedagogical Issues:

One common benefit realized in the design and development of DE course materials is an increased awareness and attention by all parties to goals, objectives, the learner and content. Often, simply the desire to put one's course or syllabus "online" is enough to generate a healthy examination of the instructional materials and process. The benefits can be bi-directional in that examining one's own course can lead to higher-level curriculum refinements. (Waddoups & Howell, 2002)

A cynical view of what modern DE has done to teachers and pedagogy is expressed by a professor's union official in the following excerpt from the Chronicle for Higher Education (10/14/2001)

> The traditional role of the professor is being "unbundled" by online-course creators, and its parts are being doled out to technology experts and instructional designers as online courses are being created…Faculty groups around the nation need to watch out for institutions that adopt a business-sector approach to their online programs and create "cookie-cutter" programs…that rob[s] the students of the diversity of knowledge that professors bring to the classroom

On one hand, experience has taught us that in order to scale up or realize efficiencies and cost savings, faculty must think differently about the shaping of their own courses, and be willing to incorporate products created by others (FIPSE, 2001). But what of the learner characteristics? Questions remain as whether the demographic shift described above should affect how we design our instruction. Young students who take DE courses cite flexibility as one of the major strengths. This flexibility demands that students pace themselves and initiate the search for help when they need it. Many of these students are ill-equipped to learn independently, and struggle when given the flexibility. (Waddoups & Howell, 2002) This point illustrates another potential contribution that the DE can make. DE programs should share their vast experience in coaching and supporting learners as they grow more independent.

FIPSE's Learn Anytime, Anywhere Partnership (LAAP) grants sought to provide funding for partnerships willing to explore what is takes for non-traditional DE students to succeed. (FIPSE-LAAP, 2001). Similarly, Wallace asks "what components of adult

education are well suited to this new population? For example, to what extent would the younger distance education students benefit from the adult education emphasis on constructed learning and self-directedness?"(1999, p.3). Some caution us from focusing too much on individual student styles and traits (Dillon & Greene, 2003; Merrill, 2002). They instead propose that we might better serve [all] students by helping them learn how to learn and acquire self-directedness and learning strategy skills. Any way you look at it, one call that must ring clear, is an invitation to move toward a learning-centered approach.

It might be said of DE in the past that there was too much focus on content and the individual student and self directed learning (SDL) was a DE reaction to the teacher-centered models of traditional campuses. Garrison (2003) believed that SDL, popularized during the 1970s, was simply misunderstood and never prescribed removing the teacher from the equation. For DE, the pedagogical challenge in this next era must include leadership and a focus on learn**ing**-centeredness. Explicating and sharing what the field has learned about the process of learning in more autonomous and independent ways.

The structure of the [British Open University] online classroom places the material and the student at the center of the learning environment and emphasizes the instructor's role as facilitator. That is, the technology of the online classroom facilitates "collaborative and interactive teaching and learning" (Wegerif, 1998). The transformation of some traditional universities into such "self-study and distance teaching" organizations (Peters, 2000b) will likely take a long time, but evidence suggests it is happening.

Numerous learning-centered pedagogical issues and practices exist that are neither unique nor exclusive to distance education. Issues of media selection, modality, classroom management, synchronicity, use of discussion boards, online assessment, are all relevant and worthy pedagogical pursuits for DE practitioners, but they are not unique to their domain per se. What is and will remain unique to DE, are these same pedagogical issues and models just mentioned, but cast in a framework that is capable of concurrently or jointly addressing the increasingly diverse population concurrently with the traditional DE student.

Technological Issues:

The use of technology in higher education has regrettably been identified as synonymous with distance education in North America (Olcott, as cited in Holmberg, 1999). A consequence of this misrepresentation is that others, who now use technology, assume they also now know about distance education. That can only be as distant from the truth as DE practitioners and researchers in the field truly believe that it is. Two of Keegan's (1990, p.44) five decisive characteristics of DE directly address technological issues, but illustrate the fact that technology is merely a means to an end:

- The use of technical media -print, audio, video or computer- to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course.

- The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue.(this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)

Two issues currently stand out with regard to DE and technology today: the Digital Divide, and the very technology-dependent issue of Learning Objects and SCORM. Firstly, the issue of digital divide is inescapable. DE has traditionally been highly accessible and portable. The demands, or perhaps merely expectations of the younger, college age demographic, are for more stimulating electronic learning environments. This in turn sets up requirements for computer access and internet access at a minimum. Beyond this, simply keeping up with current software releases presents a significant challenge, or potential barrier to access for many. Boshier & Onn (2000) eloquently summarize the issues:

> We are disturbed by US hegemony (Boshier et al., 1999) and have reservations about techno-zealot or techno-utopian proclamations about the inevitability of education and democracy arriving at the end of fiberoptic cable. This is a particular problem for developing nations that are hard pressed to maintain a minimal infrastructure for traditional forms of education, let alone the kind of sophisticated technologies needed to secure access to the Web.

Secondly, born in the aerospace industry and brought to the DE forefront by the military and corporate training, the Self Contained Object Reference Model (SCORM) specifications for learning objects have the potential to significantly impact everything from authoring tools, to course managements systems, assessment tools, not to mention instructional design models and practices. In an ideal world, this type of highly modularized instruction should lead to very sharable, adaptable, brand-able, and interoperable instructional content. SCORM adherents claim the specifications only define/prescribe the packaging and handling of information, and not the sequencing or design of instruction. (Advanced Distributed Learning, 2003)

Numerous challenges, however, exist with learning objects and SCORM. A steep learning curve and high upfront development costs are necessitated to make existing content conform to SCORM specifications. Although it smacks highly of the industrial model of DE, (a negative for some) instructors, designers and administrators should be aware of its promise to enhance the educational experience for all parties. It allows for much more efficient tracking of students or self monitoring of progress through learning materials and has the potential to individualize instruction to the learner on multiple levels.

Clearly, technological convergences offer clear benefits to dual mode institutions when it comes to providing student services. Shared registration and student information databases, grading engines, course management systems, server administration and backup facilities, shared library services and accounting practices all make fiscal and administrative sense.

"The idea of using communication technology to deliver instruction at a distance is at least as old as the invention of universal postal systems in the 19th century" (Moore, 2003), so post-industrial technologies will neither replace industrial approaches to distance education (Garrison, 2000), nor pull it from its moorings and charter to serve the disadvantaged. Hopefully, the DE field will use these technologies and current opportunities to experience its own growth and to invite others into the fold.

Organizational Issues

In the preceding section, the suggestion was made that courses both on and off campus generally benefit from going on line. Organizationally, this is not as smooth as it may appear. Tied to the act of posting one's course, lectures, learning activities online, or putting them in print, is the observable record. Von Pittman (2002, p.119)) describes it as "signing their work." DE instructors have come to terms with the fact that their content was made available for peers, parents, administrators and a host of others to see—and critique. Luckily, in the systems that support DE, faculty have had help or have been part of design teams in putting together their course materials. Such is not the practice for on-campus faculty. Pittman goes on to say describe how:

> Their teaching is on display in a way that it never has been in the conventional classroom, where any shortcomings were more or less hidden from public view. Great visibility has always been a part of distance education…but now that it is coming into the mainstream, this kind of open display implies greater oversight and more systematic accountability on the part of the institution. (2002, p. 119)

Institutions are also affected and need to be far more aware of issues of intellectual property and copyright infringement. Copyrighted materials, perhaps used unwittingly for years in the "private" once posted on official university-branded courses, set the institution up for potential legal action. If on campus faculty are to get the same level of support as DE faculty, where will the money come from?

Additional administrative issues that continue to be high priority in DE are student attrition rates. Research might be conducted on whether the new younger group of resident DE students significantly affect attrition statistics. Faculty load, compensation for DE and intellectual property issues are perennial topics of discussion among faculty as are whether DE instruction and course development count toward promotion and tenure. Universities would be well advised to include DE professors and administrators in discussions on such matters.

At the risk of sounding trivial, do DE students demonstrate an affinity for school mascots or demonstrate school loyalty or spirit? Is there strong identification with one's DE alma mater? What is the relationship between alumni giving and distance education students? How might it change if students are from out of state or enrolled in non-degree seeking DE programs? With regard to the mainstreaming affect, will resident students who begin taking DE courses give on average as much as students who don't take DE courses? It is obviously too early to know, but the impact, and answers to such questions are no trivial matter to university development and foundation offices.

Finally, the burden remains on DE practitioners to ensure that high standards of quality and benchmarks are met. The issue of quality assurance has by and large been dealt with by individual faculty or by the DE unit, but as organizational structures are realigned, and departments are merged, it is important that quality control positions or and resources are safeguarded. This will go a long way in legitimizing the field and distinguishing DE professionals from their less experienced peers.

Conclusion:

It is hoped that "what's next" for distance education has been made somewhat clearer. Despite the emulation of distance education practices becoming mainstreamed, the work is clearly not done, and the researchers interested in the field cannot lay idle if it is to remain relevant. Holmberg (2000) characterizes DE research to have risen to an acceptable level, and that the field is a legitimate discipline. He and others call for increased research in theory building. (Moore, *personal communication*, 2003; Holmberg, 2000; Garrison, 2000; Peters, 2000b)

First, the demographic trends and characteristics described in this paper should be empirically verified and analyzed. New post industrial era DE models that are inclusive of this new audience need to be developed. In particular, if dual mode institutions are in pursuit of unsustainable distance education goals, simply mis- or re-branded as distributed or online learning, they'll need to be provided with viable systems-view strategies for addressing the trends and demands being made on them. And what of fundraising for the institution? What research might be conducted to discover the giving patterns of DE students, and what strategies might be employed to raise giving levels among this unique population?

The traditional DE population has not gone away, if anything it too continues to grow. With all the buzz surrounding residents students and online learning, it only risks being eclipsed by a younger, louder, more needy, [and arguably less deserving] crowd. DE has long been about serving disadvantaged populations. New and existing scalable DE models should not be abandoned either for the traditional DE student nor for the new demographic. Correspondence and independent study models should not be abandoned, but where sustainable, be applied to appropriate situations.

It is the sign of truly blessed times to have so much opportunity and diversity in choices to improve ones lot in life. DE researches need to remain active and vigilant to ensure that quality, viable models can be developed to support hybrid and traditional DE programs.

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