The few commentators who treat the social and pedagogical aspects of technologically-enhanced learning and the impact upon students are inclined to disparage the conventional, “land-based” classroom and to replace it with a learning environment that is purportedly “different”, more “advanced”, and ushering in a “New Age” of learning. For example, in a March 10, 1997 Forbes article on technology and higher education, the management guru, Peter Drucker, states,

Universities won’t survive … Higher education is in deep crisis … Already we are beginning to deliver more lectures and classes off-campus via satellite or two-way video at a fraction of the cost. The colleges won’t survive as a residential institution. Today’s buildings are hopelessly unsuited and totally unneeded.

And Tom Haskins in an article appearing on the Internet, July 29, 1998 ("The Top 10 Ways to Strategize Virtual Universities") begins this way: “A virtual university must abandon most aspects of classroom delivery systems. Formulating any strategy requires intense scrutiny of assumptions and creation of new rules to play by.” While contempt for the conventional classroom is palatable among these proponents of distance learning, what they offer as a replacement of the conventional classroom is really nothing new or bold, rather it is little more than an aspect of established education theory — progressive education - now simply superimposed upon yet another learning medium — distance learning.

More precisely, in this transitional and quixotic education environment in which distance learning offerings are increasing at a rapid rate (for example, as of 1995, one third of colleges and universities offered distance education courses and one quarter planned to do so in the next three years) while there is not a great deal of evidence that the public is enrolling in such courses with equal enthusiasm (for exam-

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ple, it was reported widely that despite consider-
able publicity, only 75 students in the two
weeks since it’s opening have applied for
admission to the Western Governors
University, a web-based regional university),
numerous distance learning proponents have
assumed an Oedipal role in the field of educa-
tion. Distance Learning has many supporters
who are generating a kind of Oedipal tension
between the conventional classroom and dis-
tance learning. In Oedipal terminology, these
proponents are placing the “child” — distance
learning — as intent upon eliminating its “par-
tent” — the conventional classroom. Seemingly
unknown yet to these proponents, but
inevitable to those familiar with the Oedipal
myth, is that the usurper (distance learning)
will turn out to be a facet of the predecessor
(the conventional classroom). Two rather obvi-
ous questions are raised: “Why hasn’t distance
learning over the last few decades already
replaced the conventional classroom?” and
“Why do distance learning offerings increase
disproportional to enrolling students while the
“land-based” conventional classroom strongly
persists?” Both questions have the same
answer: distance learning cannot emerge fully
as long as its proponents argue for the rejec-
tion of the conventional classroom. Only when
proponents finally embrace in distance learn-
ing the full range of instructional possibilities
inherent in the conventional classroom will
they begin to offer the public a viable learning
model that is competitive with traditional edu-
cation.

The reliance of proponents of distance
learning pedagogy upon progressive educa-
tion theory, while unstated, is pronounced.
Progressive education, most pointedly associ-
ated with the educational theorist John Dewey,
originated formally in the early decades of the
twentieth century as a protest against a per-
ceived “restricted” education available to stu-
dents at the time. Progressive education, as
defined by Lawrence A. Cremin in his
Pulitzer-Prize winning book, American
Education, is “an enthusiastic embrace of
Pestalozzian and Froebelian ideals, with their
emphasis on self-expression as a central peda-
gogical device, on the harmonious develop-
ment of head, heart, and hand as a goal of the
curriculum, and on a collaboration between
home and school.” Progressive education
focuses squarely on pedagogy thought to
enhance the natural tendencies, or as Dewey
put it, instincts, of learners. Learners were to
construct knowledge themselves, they were to
be self-active and self-reliant. Since Dewey,
many aspects of progressive theory have been
integrated regularly into the conventional
classroom.

Placed in a context of utopian pedagogical
fervor — “a new millennium of learning,”
“this new age,” “the dawn of a new paradigm”
— the defining characteristics of the learning
delivery model that is forwarded by numerous
proponents of distance learning is decidedly
and exclusively progressive in that it high-
lights distance learning as “learner-centered.”
For example, the 1998 report from the Council
on Higher Education, Assuring Quality in
Distance Learning: A Preliminary Review cites
“Efforts to make instruction [through distance
learning] more learner-centered … largely self-
directed,” and the Society for College and
University Planning and PBS in describing a
special telecast about distance learning focus
exclusively on “the learner-centered environ-
ments of the future ….” And Tom Haskins in
his above-mentioned Internet article exalts the
virtual university where he finds educational
value “induced or created with the learner”
and where the instructor, now called the
“coach,” “guides learners to self-realizations
and connects concepts to the learner’s own sit-
uation and previous understandings.”

Further these proponents of distance learn-
ing portray the “land-based” conventional
classroom negatively and in direct contrast to
the promise of technologically-enhanced learn-
ing from a distance. The conventional class-
room is defined exclusively as the focus of a
mere transfer of “content” from “the sage on
the stage”, the instructor, to “passive” stu-
dents, where all learning is merely a short-
term, strictly utilitarian phenomenon and
where the learner either “uses it [knowledge] or loses it”.

The “New Age” pedagogy forwarded by numerous proponents of distance learning is thus revealed to be decades-old progressive educational theory merely applied to a new medium and in the process, they retain the original dichotomy between progressive education and what was then called “restricted” education (now termed “traditional” education). By relying too heavily upon this dichotomy, proponents of distance learning reveal their obliviousness to the fact that the conventional classroom has aspired for decades to be a blend of progressive and traditional pedagogy. Process and content, self-interpretation and external authority, self-actualization and “drill and practice”, self-assessment and normative assessment have always been combined by the best instructors in the conventional classroom.

A more productive approach to developing distance learning’s potential can be taken not by dismissing or discrediting the conventional classroom, but rather, by using knowledge of the educational value in the conventional classroom, with which students and the best instructors are already acquainted, to define a classroom delivery model for distance learning. Only in this way will distance learning prove ultimately a viable alternative to the “land-based,” conventional classroom.

There are at least two vital, intersecting elements that define the value of education — access and impact. It is with reference to these two elements that distance learning must be examined in order to evaluate its current performance and promise in the educational arena.

Access to educational opportunity is a readily understood concept. It is achieved by a number of factors: a multiplicity of distribution sources, student awareness of these sources, language that invites participation, cost that lowers economic barriers to enrollment, proximity of students to instruction, and a medium of instruction than can conform with the students’ learning styles and schedules. It is access that is most often the driver of distance learning’s development and appeal — how to reach as many people as possible as conveniently as possible — often at the expense of impact. The privileged position of access over impact results in distance learning far outstripping the conventional classroom’s ability to provide students extensive, “on-demand” and “anytime, anywhere” learning.

The question of why distance learning has not yet replaced the conventional classroom cannot be attributed to access. The answer is most likely to be found in the area of impact. This element is more elusive than access, even through ostensibly impact can be measured through concrete means, such as testing or through overt results in the academic environment — term papers, essays, portfolios — or results in the workplace such as improved productivity. Impact’s elusiveness resides not so much in the question of how to measure impact as it does in a far greater question: “What creates impact in education?”

Impact is a compelling effect based on the ability to measure and hold a student’s attention and interest. In education, it is the successful assimilation of knowledge and skills from the source of such materials to students and then in many cases, the further application by these students of the acquired knowledge and skills in yet another venue — a term paper, a verbal presentation, performance in the workplace or at a more advanced level of study.
A critical component of impact in the conventional classroom is the affirmation of a learner’s identity both by the instructor and by a student’s engagement in the materials to be studied and/or applied. Ideally, each learner’s identity is respected and given directed attention by the instructor and by other students. Identity is normally defined by those factors which are the same about an individual regardless of circumstances. The sense of self changes and grows in a learning process but it cannot be arbitrarily violated or ignored if learning is to be effective. Factors which are significant in establishing an individual’s identity, all of which have been consistently confirmed in the best of a conventional classroom, include: name, appearance, thoughts/ideas, abilities, participation in community, sense of purpose and recognition of individual preferences and values. Assuming that content is appropriate, people are prepared to learn and stay motivated over a sustained period of time regardless of delivery system if as many as possible of these factors are present. People want to be addressed by their own name, to be recognized and thus differentiated by a positive appearance, by the distinctive patterns of their speech or gestures, as well as their written word. They also desire that their thoughts and ideas are received, discussed and reformulated by others, thus providing the external recognition that these thoughts have value. Additionally and perhaps most importantly, since human beings are “affinity” animals, they want to learn ultimately among people—to see them, to hear them, to exchange ideas, to share food and drink, even to have enough stimuli to fantasize about them. The capacity of a learning delivery model to create and sustain community is, in fact, the highest measure of the combined effect of impact and access in any learning environment. Community is formed by interaction among people underscored by constant access of individual-to-individual and sustained affirmation of all discrete identities among a group of learners. The results of a recent controversial study (“HomeNet”) of the social and psychological effects of the Internet by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University are relevant to an understanding of the virtual classroom and the need for community. The researchers hypothesized that relationships maintained over the Internet in a home environment without real-time face-to-face contact between instructors and learners and among learners ultimately do not support the sense of community that people need to maintain a sense of psychological security and happiness. Heightened depression and loneliness are the result.

A comparison of existing models of delivering knowledge and skills via distance learning and the conventional classroom reveals that all technologically-enhanced models are significantly deficient in varying degrees to meet the identity components of impact needed for sustained, motivated learning (See chart on following page).

Video conferencing permits the affirmation of name, appearance, voice, thoughts, ideas, community and purpose, yet can’t achieve a recognition of an individual’s preferences and abilities. Keypad satellite systems affirm name, voice, thoughts, and ideas but can’t affirm appearance, preferences, abilities, community or purpose. Internet instruction affirms name, thoughts, ideas, abilities and community (though this is questioned by the above-mentioned Carnegie Mellon study) and yet, it leaves unattended appearance, voice, preferences and purpose. And a video tape delivery system affirms absolutely none of the key factors in affirming identity.

The challenge then to establish distance learning as a viable supplement to, or even a replacement of, the conventional classroom is not to disparage or eliminate the long-standing virtues of impact and identity embedded in the conventional classroom delivery model, but rather to create imaginatively a single, integrated, technologically-enhanced learning platform that approximates the maximum number of those identity-producing capabilities provided fully in the conventional classroom. No one technology can achieve this today.

Such a strategy will require technologies that when combined offer both synchronous
and asynchronous instruction and that permit technologically-assisted contact among instructors and learners as well as live communication. Anything less will perpetuate distance learning’s inability to compete with the conventional classroom by its non-commitment to identity as a significant factor in educational value.

The Oedipal impulse of numerous proponents of distance learning to repudiate what has given birth to the medium, the conventional classroom, must be replaced by affirmation of distance learning’s forebearer if it is to serve as a viable, competitive delivery system for sustained academic coursework and to compete successfully for students with the best of the conventional classroom.

The challenge for achieving educational value through distance learning is to meld carefully and creatively various delivery systems — technological and non-technological — into a single platform which furthers technologies’ privileged ability to achieve access and the conventional classrooms’ advantage to achieve identity.

Note: The authors wish to thank Jeanne Allert, Director of Program Design, the Caliber Learning Network, for her valuable contribution to this paper.