

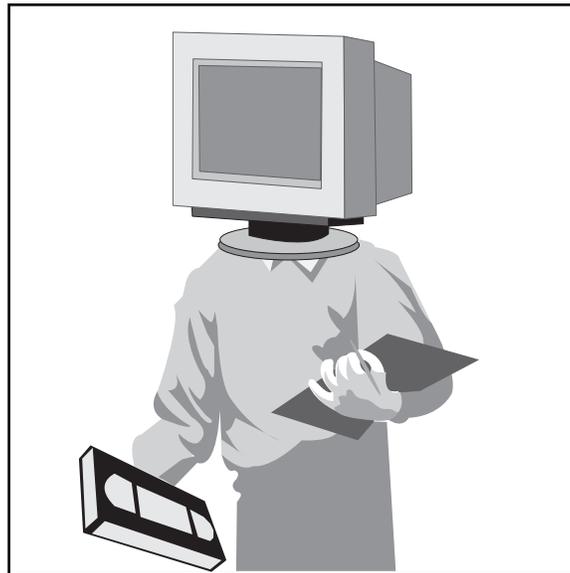
DISTANCE LEARNING: EDUCATION'S NEW OEDIPUS

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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 considerable 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 education. Distance Learning has many supporters who are generating a kind of Oedipal tension between the conventional classroom and distance learning. In Oedipal terminology, these proponents are placing the "child" — distance learning — as intent upon eliminating its "parent" — 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 obvious 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 rejection of the conventional classroom. Only when proponents finally embrace in distance learning 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 education.

The reliance of proponents of distance learning pedagogy upon progressive education theory, while unstated, is pronounced. Progressive education, most pointedly associated with the educational theorist John Dewey, originated formally in the early decades of the twentieth century as a protest against a perceived "restricted" education available to students 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 pedagogical device, on the harmonious development 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 highlights 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 environments 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 situation and previous understandings."

Further these proponents of distance learning portray the "land-based" conventional classroom negatively and in direct contrast to the promise of technologically-enhanced learning from a distance. The conventional classroom is defined exclusively as the focus of a mere transfer of "content" from "the sage on the stage", the instructor, to "passive" students, 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 that 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.

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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

	Conventional Classroom	Video Conference	Satellite (KeyPad)	Web IBT	CBT/ CD ROM	Video Tape	E-Mail
Name	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES
Appearance	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Voice	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
Preferences	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
Thoughts	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Ideas	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES
Abilities	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	NO	NO
Community	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO
Purpose	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	YES

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.

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