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ABSTRACT

Driven by the inability of traditional higher education institutions to accommodate the increasing number of people demanding postsecondary education, community colleges are implementing new modes of access to their programs. One of the most popular means of access is distance education, which promises education beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. This paper questions the use of distance education as a substitute for traditional learning. It discusses employing new technological methods such as telecourses, multimedia conferencing, and interactive video programs, and the potential burdens on faculty as well as the disadvantages to students. The student-teacher relationship and the subtler elements of live teaching, such as voice intonation, nuances of body movement, and cues coming from instructors and other students, are lost in distance education, as is the notion of designed instruction. And since technology currently becomes obsolete much more quickly than buildings and live instructors, the cost-effectiveness of distance education and its required components remains in question, especially since, in higher education overall, distance education students compose only five percent of total enrollment. The author asserts that distance education defined as any type of non-campus learning opportunity will take its place as a parallel form of learning, a supplementary, not primary, instructional form. (EMH)

The Hopeful Marriage of Community Colleges and Distance Education: True Love at Last

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ERIC Clearinghouse for Community Colleges

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By Arthur M. Cohen

Each remarriage of a divorced person reiterates the triumph of hope over experience. Like a much married person, the higher education system walks toward the altar once again. It tried film in the 1920s, radio in the 1930s, television in the 1950s, autoinstructional programs in the 1960s, and multimedia instruction in the 1970s. Most recently the computer has served as the matchmaker between higher education and interactive media, holding the promise of education beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. Will this be the one?

The Driving Forces

Despite all the rhetoric about the need to expand educational opportunity for students who cannot come to traditional campuses and the importance of enhancing learning through methods familiar to a generation reared on computer games, one force alone stands out as primary in the nationwide rush to embrace distance education: the American population is expanding more rapidly than the resources available to educate people beyond the age of compulsory schooling. As only one example, in the 1960s, fifty new community colleges were opened each year; in the 1990s, two new community colleges per year have appeared. And yet the drive for education increases as 65% of the high school graduates enroll in college during the year of their graduation, up from 42% just a decade ago. Furthermore 250,000 additional 18-year-olds will be in the population each year over the next ten years. Put together, these forces place demands on college

entry that would be difficult to fill even if the colleges used some of the slack in the existing system by providing a full range of collegiate experiences for 18 hours per day, year round.

The drive for distance education is a departure for higher education, which traditionally has been more likely to seek additional subsidies as costs and demands rise than to seek ways of cutting costs. Public funds bailed out the colleges previously, first money to build additional facilities, then subsidies to students wishing to attend. These sources seem unlikely to expand and the scene has shifted now so that the cost-cutters are in command, a shift only thinly veiled by the pleas for new learning paradigms.

The Media

Expansion in the availability of media combinations has been explosive. Interactive media is a broad term used for several technologies including video and audio tapes or live broadcasts, and various computer-based forms. These media combine several features. They make it possible for people to speak readily with each other wherever they are; here they are like telephones but more like conference calls in that they allow people to speak with more than one other person at one time. The media are like answering machines with infinite storage capacity, allowing for retrieval at any time. They are like autoinstructional programs allowing students to create their own learning paths. The internet enables searching of dictionaries, encyclopedias, abstracting services, and all types of databases and related information sets. Using the available media requires no special skills. E-mail is as easy to use as the ubiquitous telephone. People can be connected with each other and people can learn with or without the intervention of designed instructional programs. Media use has outstripped instructional applications.

Hurrying lest they be left behind, most colleges have adopted some types of interactive media, merging it with their traditional instructional forms. Interactive video programs have been introduced, some of them such as those developed at Miami-Dade Community College dating from the early 1980s. A 1997 inventory of distance education in Washington community colleges listed correspondence courses, telecourses, audio teleclasses, two-way video teleclasses, online computer conferencing, and multimedia conferencing, all of which were in place in at least some of the state's community colleges and technical institutes. However the list was dominated by the now-standard telecourses and correspondence classes enrolling ten times the number of students as the other media combined. All told, distance education accounted for around 2% of FTE enrollment (Baker, 1997).

It is reasonable to assume that in an institution dedicated since its inception to good teaching, new instructional forms will be tried. Over the years interest in these technologies has waxed and waned. Johnson (1969) surveyed community colleges around the country, tabulating the incidence of programmed instruction, audiotutorial teaching, dial-access audio systems, instruction by telephone, multi-student response systems, gaming and simulation, computer-assisted instruction, and a host of other techniques ranging from electronic pianos to a classroom in the sky. A 1992 national survey found 60% of the colleges using video-based instruction for distance learning (Lever, 1992), and even more recent reviews find ever-new combinations of forms, even though the telecourse remains the most popular distance education application. Some form of distance education is now in place in most of the colleges. In higher education overall a 1995 survey found distance education accounting for more than 25,000 different courses provided to over 750,000 students, five percent of the total higher education enrollment.

Distance education changes form continually but the innovations in media combinations are not the most striking departure. More significant has been the cross-institutional collaboration that has expanded to include statewide and regional consortia. As one example the Florida Community College Distance Learning Consortium has been formed to link the state's colleges in providing instruction through various media combinations. By 1997 seven percent of the state's students were enrolled in college-credit distance learning classes and a statewide instructional network was being developed to link all the colleges, allowing them to share instructional programs and to participate in various types of video and computer-based conferencing (Florida Community College Distance Learning Consortium (1998). Larger-scale networks have been built to reach across states and across sectors; most notable are the Western Governors University and the California Virtual University. The networks allow the cost of development to be spread so that the hardware and software, staff development, and transition technologies are not overly burdensome on any single institution.

Merging Form and Structure

Few would question the likelihood of distance education's growing so that the 5% or so of students involved in such classes increases to 10 or perhaps 20% over the next decade. Undoubtedly the percentage of students who graduate from college with credits from other colleges on their transcripts will grow as it becomes easier to find a needed course presented at some institution other than the one in which the student is physically enrolled. Controversies over quality, certification, and accreditation for these courses will continue for the foreseeable future but they will be overcome gradually. More difficult to reconcile will be the cost of constructing distance education within the colleges as they are presently organized. To date the only savings

have come from passing costs along to the students in the form of rapidly accelerating tuition and by the imposition of technology fees. The colleges themselves have found greater savings in employing increasing numbers of part-time, low-wage instructors; in short, co-opting the tactics of the for-profit institutions that operate at lower cost primarily because they have no campuses to maintain and because they can deploy staff as needed, much in the fashion of agriculture employing migrant workers.

The expansion in distance education has occurred for the most part outside the confines of the traditional college form. Not only do the statewide and regional compacts reveal changed structures, within the colleges the various directors of distance education and instructional technology typically involve only a minority of instructors in preparing and presenting their wares. This is a natural consequence of the power of inertia. Anything that lessens direct contact with students or that demands more of an instructor's time stands a good chance of meeting resistance. The ad hoc lecture requires the least preparation time and is the most gratifying to the people who have dedicated their professional lives to interacting with students. Teaching as a profession has not developed to the point at which the process of instruction can be defined and enforced in the face of individual deviation. Few colleges reward or provide incentives to instructors who develop reproducible instructional materials. Distance education tends to arise outside most instructors' classrooms and there is serious doubt whether more than a minority of the faculty as presently constituted will participate. More likely, the growth of distance education will see different types of professional people employed, those with a particular charge to develop and monitor distance education in any of its numerous forms. The expectation that they interact with students in classrooms will not be part of their contract.

Thus the growth of distance education proceeds alongside reform in the structure of the colleges themselves. Up to now it has been feasible to expand media applications by engaging a few faculty who choose to be so involved and by circumventing the others. However the costs of distance education suggest that this process cannot long endure. The colleges will not be able to support a corps of full-time instructors working under contracts that allow them to interact with a few hundred students per year and at the same time build and maintain distance education networks that demand constant renewal as technology evolves. Furthermore, the cost of managing what is in effect a parallel system of instruction, a college organized and maintained as a separate entity whether or not so-called, must be added to the equation. The technology becomes obsolete more quickly than buildings and live instructors. Once built, a classroom typically remains intact for a half-century or more; once trained, an instructor may demonstrate worth and even grow for a third of a century at no additional cost to the institution. No known reproducible instructional form has yet been able to make similar claims. The long-derided professor lecturing from yellowed notes has more than a match in the reproducible program whose content is not only outmoded but in which the method of transmission, the hardware, has become obsolete.

The Broader Implications

Distance education as a supplement to school-based instruction bears numerous implications. Within the colleges, interactive media must contend with several traditions, particularly the core of instruction itself. The live learning situation involves more than information transmission on the part of the instructor or responses to students' questions. It has nuances of body movement, voice intonation, expression, and cues coming from the instructors and other students through the communally-breathed air. What tone is being employed? How

important is the message that is being transmitted, as indicated by the speech pattern or body language of the person transmitting it? What needs to be repeated because the respondents indicate by their faces a failure to understand sufficiently? Most critically, can these verbal and non-verbal cues be duplicated in interactive learning situations? Perhaps so when the promise of interactive video becomes sufficiently economical and widespread; perhaps not if the less expensive personal computer remains the medium of choice. Nods, frowns, smiles, the shifting of bodies in chairs, all have meaning that cannot be duplicated readily through long distance media.

An even more basic issue confronting the future of distance education is the romantic notion that people can learn all they need to know without the intervention of designed instruction. Centuries ago arguments in favor of universal literacy centered on the notion that all people should be able to read the Bible for themselves without waiting for religious leaders to interpret it for them. Applied to education, similar thinking suggests that people should be empowered to learn independently of the schools. The ultimate in interactive media would allow the learners to form their own questions, find their own answers, construct their own texts, and develop their own knowledge. The more sanguine proponents of interactive media project the form's effect on freedom, responsibility, and individuality. Heretofore, teachers, editors, critics, and publishers have screened the various products, thereby controlling access to ideas. But by placing the individual in a position of searching all databases, interacting with everyone on the internet, interpreting and idiosyncratically reforming all types of communication, the experts will be circumvented. All to the good, proponents say, because no one should have to suffer the biases of someone else's selection.

These notions, with their roots in Rousseau's Noble Savage, have persisted. In the 1960s and 1970s Illich proposed means by which people with similar learning desires could be put in

touch with each other outside the bounds of schools. "Each man, at any given moment and at a minimum price, could identify himself to a computer with his address and telephone number, indicating the book, article, film, or recording on which he seeks a partner for discussion" (1972, p.28). In the 1990s the Internet and the Web have emerged as means capable of fulfilling Illich's prescription. They make possible distributed distance learning at a vastly greater scale than television, the telephone, and postal correspondence could have done. Illich's ideal was learning enabled outside the institutional and formal monopoly of schools altogether.

Certainly the internet and the Web are being used very much in the manner that Illich proposed and in doing so expose two of the chief social purposes of schools as institutions that have long been known: context and certification. School as context brings people into association with each other within and outside the classroom. The importance of peers in enhancing learning has long been documented; the small liberal arts colleges have built most of their reason for being on that premise. The credentialing aspect of college has been no less important. Consider what goes through a personnel director's mind as he or she peruses the credentials of an applicant revealing graduation with honors from a prestigious college versus one who attempts to document a set of learning experiences obtained through courses taken at random from a number of institutions along with hours engaged in informal dialogue in chat rooms.

With the growth of user-controlled media, the colleges become more important than ever because education, critical thinking, and functional literacy are essential for sorting out the messages. No one can now be called information-deprived. But just as reading a book has always required the intelligence to decode print as well as to differentiate arguments, interactive media require the ability to vet information, to determine which signals are important, which are

true, which are relevant. Every generation must be instructed; autodidacticism has never worked for more than a few fortunate individuals.

The community colleges face yet another challenge as they expand their distance education. What does the attempt to create global networks mean to the locally governed and funded institution? By what stretch can the "community" in community college be modified to include a global aggregation? Here is the college, symbol of community pride, provider of instruction, entertainment, and opportunities for learning within and outside the formal program. What is it to its supporters and neighbors when it is ever-increasingly a part of a network presenting instruction to people anywhere in the world?

In summation, a cultural lag in many areas must be overcome in order for distance education to reach what its proponents argue as its greatest potential. The nature of depreciation in content of pre-existing programs and in the equipment used to present them has to be calculated and reconciled before the hoped-for savings are realized. The cost of technology that becomes obsolete more quickly than buildings and live instructors is an issue. And collaboration with the corporate sector where profit is the objective may prove to be a Faustian arrangement as the specialized applications, particularly those showing no promise of immediate utility are set aside. Will the colleges be the main providers in distance education? Can they find the money to install and update the programs as needed? Will their communities accept the change in form? Or, as is more likely, will distance education take its place alongside all the other innovations that have been introduced in the community colleges' first century?

The rapidity with which new media and technologies appear on the one hand and the immovability of the academic culture and the way that people perceive their colleges on the other are at odds. Five hundred years after the introduction of moveable type, the book and the lecture

still share the territory of instruction. The inexpensive, readily available book did not replace the lecture in transmitting information, it became an additional form. Each has valuable features that the other cannot duplicate. In this respect the academic culture resembles its societal context. Cinema did not replace live theater, nor did television replace radio. For that matter, the ascendancy of science over the past three hundred years has not fully displaced belief in the supernatural, and visions of rationality, logic, and authority based on superior training must continually contend with a stubborn reliance on folk wisdom. Distance education defined as any type of non-campus learning opportunity will take its place as a parallel form; it is not a panacea. And unless the collegiate experience is to be completely debased, with responsibility for learning turned over to the popular media, the corporate sector, and people's own wit in finding ideal learning paths, it will yield no monetary savings. Watch for it to take its place as another instructional form, entering with great promise, aging along with all the others that preceded it.

Second or even third marriages sometimes prove best. Perhaps the colleges' flirtation with interactive media will prove the long-sought relationship between more learning and less money. Eventually the media may even prove more cost effective than contemporary efforts to replace full-time, tenured instructors with part-timers who work at one-third the cost. But don't try to stand on one foot until that day arrives.

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