Paradigms, Distance Learning, Education, and Philosophy

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Abstract

The premise of this brief opinion piece is that the fundamental paradigm of education appeared with Plato. It is that there is a co-location in time and space of learners, teachers, and resources. The absence of any of these elements can lead to shortcomings in the meaning of the term "to be educated". Recent events such as COVID-19 demonstrate that the paradigm is subject to challenge but that its premises are firmly established. It is recognised that there are complex philosophical and theoretical arguments surrounding distance education debates. It is not possible in a short article like this to canvass all the possible philosophical positions that affect education. Pointers to these debates are referenced in the article. For the purpose of this article, "philosophy" is taken to mean that department of knowledge or study that deals with ultimate reality, or with the general causes and principles of things. More narrowly, it is the study of general principles of some particular branch of knowledge, experience, or activity—in this case, distance education or flexible learning. "Theory" is taken to mean a scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account of a group of facts or phenomena.

Keywords: educational philosophy; distance education

Introduction

The article will focus somewhat on the Australian and New Zealand experiences of correspondence education because, when migrants arrived in these countries in the nineteenth century and moved into already inhabited land, there were no schools in the European sense. Nor were there sufficient numbers of migrants to warrant the construction of schools or provision of teachers to remote or isolated places; therefore, governments needed to find a pragmatic solution to meet legislated requirements for students' education. Readers may wish to look at McCumber (2009) and Gookol-Ramdoo (2008) for a wider context.

Purpose

The purpose of this opinion piece is to illuminate some of the difficulties experienced by distance educators in the philosophical sense. It will show that distance learning practice is still a highly pragmatic enterprise that is academically effective. However, despite its academic success distance learning is not accepted generally by the education profession because it challenges the most fundamental paradigm of western education; namely, the co-location in time and space of teachers, students, and resources. Distance learning challenges the need for a place or institution (e.g., a school) for study. It appears to disrupt the social and economic imperatives of having a place to work. Finally, distance learning challenges the socialisation purposes used by society through schools to enculture young people.

The COVID-19 lockdown involved shutting schools in many western countries, leading to the widespread use of "distance learning", and the consequent questions about its efficacy. Many

parents and teachers looked forward to a return to normal classroom activity. Why did distance learning provoke so much angst?

The practices of distance education, in the form of correspondence education in the school sector, have been understood for more than 100 years. Some have argued that correspondence education has existed in the post-school sector for much longer (Holmberg, 2003, p. 9). Similarly, Peters (2003) pointed to well-known distance education understandings. It's not the purpose of this article to conduct deep contradictory analyses such as "Peters wrote this" or "Fullan wrote that". The main aim is to start to explore why so many educators, especially in schools, believe that distance learning is inadequate or inappropriate.

Under the heading "Priority of Paradigms", Thomas Kuhn (1962, pp. 45–46) wrote, "paradigms may be prior to, more binding and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them".

He suggested the following reasons:

1. The severe difficulty of discovering rules that have guided normal science tradition.
2. Theories are accompanied by their application during their exposition to the scientific community. Therefore, rules have little use in such circumstances.
3. Paradigms guide research by direct modelling and through abstract rules.
4. Paradigms provide more reasonable flexibility than rules in handling scientific research problems.

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973, vol 2, p. 1507) defines a paradigm as "pattern, exemplar or an example".

Paradigms

If we were to substitute "education" for "science", the debate about distance learning might take on another light by posing the question: Is there, or are there, paradigms that govern "normal" educational traditions?

Much of what we do in education is governed by the notion of co-location of students, teachers, and resources in space and time. Educational philosophers looked to Aristotle and his mentor, Plato, for a model of education. Here we find guidance for a curriculum, the trivium (grammar, dialectic, rhetoric) and the quadrivium, (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music), who were the most suitable people to receive this curriculum, and how it might be taught (Socratic dialogue). However, in the pre-Socratic Greek dialogues and myths, we find stories about Prometheus and Epimetheus. Epimetheus, gifted by the gods with hindsight, created the animals. Prometheus, gifted with foresight, created man (humans) and stole fire from the gods to help man overcome the animals. Guthrie (1962) elaborates on the use of allegory in Greek philosophy and, in particular, his work in volumes 3 and 4 explains much of the Promethean / Epimethean dichotomy.

Plato

One of Plato's allegorical stories informing education is that of the cave in which people can see only shadows of reality as reflected by a fire (Plato, n.d.). Only those who escape the cave (in which they live) come into the light of reality. Because Plato was influenced by Socrates, he used dialectic discussion to arrive at the "truth" of the matter being discussed. The term "truth" emerged in disagreements Socrates had with earlier philosophers, the Sophists, who believed that rhetoric would illuminate truth. Plato believed that the perfect form of anything (in his tale, a perfect horse) could be found through logic and examination. Plato's philosophy was essentially

Promethean and could be compared with European post-Renaissance values. Meanwhile, the Promethean belief was expressed in other ancient philosophies; for example, in the apocryphal Book of Esdras: "Great is truth and mighty above all things". Similarly, words in the Christian *Bible* "I am the light of the world" (King James, John 8:12), arguably hark back to Plato's light beyond the cave of myth and unfounded belief.

The importance of these Greek and Christian allegories about moving from darkness to light, from perception to truth through knowledge created by logic and reason, cannot be overstated. Its conjunction with teachers and schools forms the paradigm of western education. The Platonic model required belief in a highly structured society, but this belief became impossible to maintain as the Middle Ages evolved into the European Enlightenment.

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (vol 1. p. 630) identifies the origin of "education" as being from "educatio" or "to lead from" (harking back to the cave allegory), which today relates to systematic instruction or training. An educator, therefore, is someone who leads others (usually children or young adults) from a state of less knowledge to one of more knowledge and understanding. In Plato's allegory, they were leading students towards the light. These ideas are further elaborated in Guthrie (1962). Post-Greek Roman schools followed the Greek model in both curriculum and structure. Their continuation in some form appeared in post-Roman monasteries and nunneries, in which people received education that was suited for Church purposes. It was still given by scholars to students using a curriculum and books in a fixed place.

The Enlightenment in Europe

The Enlightenment's rediscovery of Greek and Roman educational practices and philosophies led to the writing of educational tractates from various western thinkers and writers. In his *Rights of Man* (2012 version), Thomas Paine stimulated a major move towards a more democratic (Athenian Greek, "demos", meaning the common people: and "kratos" meaning strength) form of society with the aim of giving more people some voice in their own government. This stimulated a new kind of philosophy influencing education. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) espoused a philosophy that today is called "Utilitarianism".

Its basic axioms are:

- Pleasure (or happiness) is the only thing that truly has intrinsic value.
- Actions are right insofar as they promote happiness; wrong insofar as they produce unhappiness.
- Everyone's happiness counts equally.

These views influenced subsequent writers such as John Stuart Mill. In the educational and social context of the industrial revolution in the United Kingdom, unrest—arising from the consequences of the French Revolution—sparked concern about the safety of society. Examples of this unrest were evident in Peterloo in 1819 and the famine in Ireland, which was exacerbated by the harsh Corn laws. The governing bodies began to fear internal revolution. Even "Corresponding Societies" who wrote to members about democratic ideas were thought to be seditious, and Sunday School literacy classes were thought to be suspect (Simon, 1960).

Educationally, the late-Enlightenment philosopher, Jean Jacque Rousseau, espoused the role of nature in forming pupils' values (*Emile,*1762), but his philosophy lacked any machinery to generate the kind of outcomes he sought. In *How Gertrude Teaches Her Children,* the Swiss philosopher Pestalozzi recognised those shortcomings. He believed there would be a need for state intervention, which was often opposed by Churches; nevertheless, his view was "child-centered" (Dewey, 1916, p. 93).

Social reform

Increasing the number of people who could vote was a way to reduce societal tensions. The 1832 Reform Act did just that. James Mill (father of John Stuart Mill) and other reformers used the Utilitarian arguments to extend the franchise and to seek educational reform. The Church of England opposed education reform, largely because groups such as the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge supported non-conformist views, and the Church feared the rise of secularism. In reforming English (not Scottish or Irish) education, one leader, Robert Lowe (Viscount Sherbrooke) applied the Benthamite pragmatic principles and said in Parliament, "it will be absolutely necessary to compel our future masters [those newly enfranchised] to learn their letters". (Simon, 1969, p. 355). What the English Pragmatists provided, through consequences of the Reform Act, was a machinery to bring about literacy and numeracy among people via the Education Acts of the 1870s.

Effect of British social reform on antipodean education

The digression above is relevant to distance education because many migrants left the British Isles between 1840 and 1900 with a clear expectation of receiving an education in their countries of destination—such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa. In the case of Australia, the churches of various denominations sought to control education even in the most remote communities but did not have the wherewithal to do it. Thus, for example, Australia and New Zealand adopted new Education Acts in the 1870s, making education free, secular, and compulsory for white children. For example, in New Zealand the Education Act 1877 stated that education was to be free, secular, and compulsory. (Because it was compulsory, it had to be free—and because the churches were unable to provide education, it became secular. Here again the Benthamite principles of Utilitarianism were at work.)

To meet the compulsory aspects of the legislation, newly established education departments dispatched young male teachers with horses and buggies to teach pupils on remote stations and properties, or in communities too small or too impermanent to establish schools. Teachers often visited families only two or three times a year. Under these conditions, education progressed very slowly, if at all, especially if the parents were illiterate. Recruitment of young men into the military in World War I and the subsequent losses then made it too difficult to employ young itinerant male teachers, and the social mores of the time precluded the dispatch of single young women to isolated places.

Origins and performance of the corresponding schools

Some education departments used the mail service and correspondence education to enhance pupil-teachers' skills; for example, through the University of Western Australia. Correspondence became a pragmatic alternative. By 1921 most Australian State Departments, and New Zealand, began withdrawing regular teachers from classrooms to prepare learning materials for isolated students. These materials were dispatched to pupils with activities to undertake. Pupils returned their work, which the teachers corrected and sent back with the next mailout.

So, did correspondence students learn?

The Australian Council for Educational Research commissioned Dr K. S. Cunningham (1931) to research the performance of Australian correspondence students in 1930 (i.e., when the first tranche of students began to graduate). This became the first comprehensive study undertaken professionally across all states. Cunningham wrote, "the administration of public education in Australia presents a striking picture of uniformity of general plan and almost complete centralisation" (p. 11). This confirmed the success of the intentions of the 1870s Acts.

Cunningham noted that all the Australian states received enquiries from many parts of the world.

Table 1 Correspondence pupils in Australia in 1930
(adapted from Cunningham, 1931, p. 19)

State	Total number of correspondence pupils enrolled 1920–1930	Number of correspondence pupils in 1930	Total number of pupils enrolled in school (face to face and correspondence) in 1930	Percentage of correspondence pupils in 1930
NSW	17,646	4733	295,378	1.6
QLD	15,300	4700	164,532	2.85
WA	10,039	1900	66,000	2.9
SA	3,610	875	82,333	1.1
VIC	5,817	756	225,946	0.3
TAS	1,891	320	35,409	0.9
Total	54,353	13,384	869,598	1.5

The table shows that in 10 years Australia educated 54,353 pupils by correspondence education, although some of the enrolments may have been temporary pupils.

Similarly, in New Zealand, the Correspondence School (now Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu or Te Kura) commenced work in 1923 with 218 students and, by 1934, had 1,800 students. In recognition of the terms of the Treaty of Waitangi, Te Kura began teaching in te reo (the Maori language) in 1949.

Cunningham reported the following information about pupil attainment. These pupils, "do the same work as children in ordinary schools" (p. 45). Some of these students would have attended regular schools in the past but there is no evidence that this change affected their performance. In rates of progress (e.g., in Queensland), correspondence pupils advanced at a rate of 88% of that of school-based pupils. In terms of examinations, at the end of primary (elementary) school, each state reported that Correspondence School pupils did well. For example, the Director of Education in NSW stated, "those ex (correspondence school) pupils who have passed on to high schools after receiving all their primary education by correspondence have done remarkably well" (p. 49). Similarly in New Zealand, Bewley (1996) reported that "approval for distance education comes more readily from the NZ public and political sources than some educational ones" (p. 17).

Cunningham's general summary (pp. 68–71) outlined the key principles for success as:
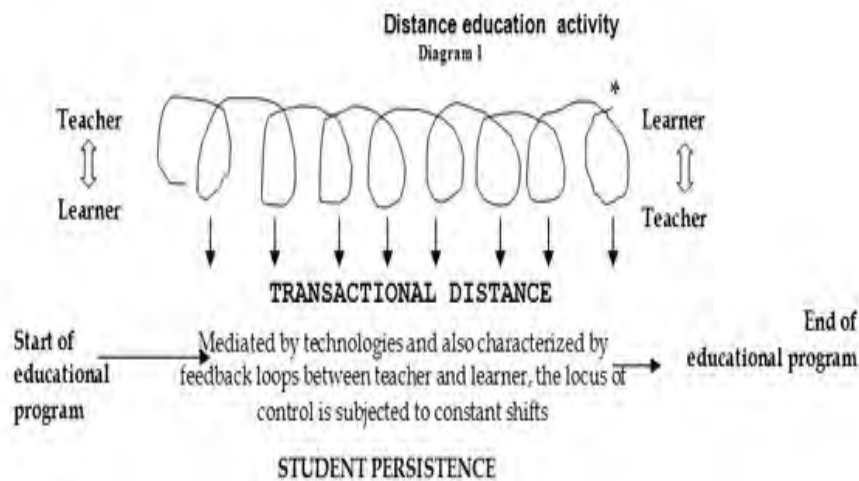
1. co-operation between parents and teachers
2. literate parents
3. use of a timetable
4. emphasis on quality of work
5. ensuring achievement
6. use of corrected assignment method
7. diagnosis of learning issues and employment of special needs teachers
8. using flexibility to enhance individual grading, instruction and advancement).
9. choosing English as a determinant for classification and advancement
10. encouraging reading

11. use of school newspaper or magazine
12. use of children's local environment.

Correspondence theory and methodology

Moore and Kearsley (cited in Gookol-Ramdoo, 2008) proposed the following transactional theory for distance education operations. Methods like this have been used by distance education teachers in the school sector, mostly in correspondence schools, and are part of the correspondence success story (Higgins, 1984).

Figure 1 Moore and Kearsley's systems model of distance education. From Gokool-Ramdoo, "Beyond the Theoretical Impasse: Extending the Applications of Transactional Education Theory", 2008. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Distance-education-activity_fig1_26544859 CC 4.0 licence.

Distance education activity
Diagram 1

Teacher ⇕ Learner ... Learner ⇕ Teacher

TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE

Start of educational program → Mediated by technologies and also characterized by feedback loops between teacher and learner, the locus of control is subjected to constant shifts → End of educational program

STUDENT PERSISTENCE

There's no question that distance learning is academically effective (Cunningham, 1931). It also functions beyond the normal education paradigm. Nevertheless, in Deweyan terms the social purposes of schooling remain a high priority for making a cohesive society. Perhaps the structure of society reinforces the educational paradigm.

The obvious success of the correspondence system should be seen in the context of the prevailing educational philosophies affecting schools at the time. The main Platonic paradigm of co-location of students, teachers, and schools determined what should be, but many teachers wanted to move away from the strict formalism and rote learning methods of the 19th-century classroom towards something more child focused. The American philosopher John Dewey provided the philosophical rationale to do this.

John Dewey, the American influence

Concerning correspondence schooling, Dewey (1916) wrote, "we have seen that a community or social group sustains itself through continuous self-renewal . . . by various agencies, unintentional and designed, a society transforms its uninitiated and seemingly alien beings into robust trustees of its own resources and ideals" (p. 10). Dewey recognised the environment of

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learning in his desire to see the general function of education as direction, control, or guidance, of which he preferred guidance (p. 23). The purpose of the direction or guidance arose in the context where the natural impulses of the young did not conform to the life customs of the group into which the children were born (p. 39). Dewey's philosophy played a major role in teacher preparation from the 1930s to the 1960s and beyond. It would follow (from Dewey's perspective and the influence he had on the teaching profession) that to engage in the craft and act of teaching, a school needs to engage the social purposes of teaching and, therefore, that teaching in the absence of a school would be somehow deficient (i.e., the pupils would not be "schooled" or socialised appropriately.

Ivan Illich

In the 1970s the philosopher Ivan Illich challenged the Deweyan perspective in the South American context. Illich openly challenged the need for traditional schools and was one of the most radical proponents of a different way of educating the young. He believed that teaching contributed to learning in certain circumstances, but that most people acquire knowledge beyond school. In his introduction, Illich (1976) wrote that, "universal education through schooling is not feasible" (Introduction, p. 1). He advocated instead for educational webs that heighten the opportunity for each individual to transform each moment of their living into one of learning, sharing, and caring (p. 2). His polemic attacked not only schooling but also hospitals, where reliance on institutional treatment renders independent accomplishment suspect (p. 3). Yet western democracies long regarded education as a way out of poverty and ignorance. Illich defined school as an "age-specific, teacher related process requiring full time attendance at an obligatory curriculum" (p. 25–6). Illich referred to Kuhn (1962) believing that the ritual of schooling hides a dissonance about schooling in society (p. 51). Kuhn's work recognised that identifying dissonance precedes the dissolution of an inadequate paradigm and the establishment of a new one. Illich's plea for the recreation of Epimethean man is directly opposed to the Deweyan notion of enculturing students into society's norms through schooling.

Illich (1976) discussed the characteristics of his de-schooled society and proposed that it would involve channels of learning, namely:

1. reference services to educational objects such as libraries, laboratories, museums, and so on (p. 79)
2. skill exchanges such as apprenticeships (p. 87)
3. peer matching, such as partnering (p. 91)
4. reference services to educators; that is, non-institutionalised teachers (p. 97).

It would be fair to say that these outcomes might be valued in the South American context but not in the western democratic one. Nevertheless, within 50 years it became possible to envisage and even implement the four channels of a de-schooled society.

How did this occur? During the 1920s distance educators adopted a range of technologies to reach out to students. For example, they used motor vehicles instead of horses and buggies, and one-way radio broadcasts for educational purposes. School broadcasts commenced in Australia in 1933, reaching the most remote places. Personalised radio teaching commenced in 1951, when a base at Alice Springs used the radio frequencies of the Royal Flying Doctor Service that were allocated to various Schools of the Air. A much more revolutionary approach that would affect teaching (but unrelated to education or its philosophies) began in the scientific community.

Effect of digital technology

During the 1960s the United States Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPAN) allowed multiple computers to interact. In 1989 Tim Berners-Lee invented a system of transmission control protocols (TCP) for ARPAN. He also developed a domain-naming system, called internet protocol (IP) addresses. These conjoined to create the World Wide Web. Anyone with the right kind of computer and access to "bandwidth" could transfer information to anyone else with an IP address. Berners-Lee's underpinning philosophy was based on a belief that information was a common good. In some ways the modern open education network and the open source movement reflect this ideal as well as a network free of governance. However, events intervened—forcing Berners-Lee to accept the need for some oversight to establish a digital rights movement (a version of digital Copyright Law) and to prevent abuse of the internet.

From a distance learning perspective, the technology driving the World Wide Web and its belief in the philosophy of openness made it possible for students to access educational objects via digital libraries, to engage in skill exchanges, to meet digitally with peers anywhere in the world, and to meet educators. These are the categories that define Illich's de-schooled society.

Traditional schooling gradually adopted the World Wide Web (largely through library services) to give students access to all kinds of digital information to enhance their learning and research. Library systems maintained security and digital rights management to ensure that schools could meet their legal obligations. In less than 20 years, such digital access in regular schools, and Schools of Distance Education (Australia), and Te Kura (New Zealand) became normalised but still operated in the "bricks and mortar" paradigm.

So, what changed the standard education paradigm? Philosophy and technology played a part, but a virus (coronavirus disease 2019, or "COVID-19") caused governments and agencies to close schools, educational facilities such as tertiary education institutions and other places of learning, to protect society from infection. But western democracies insisted that people should continue to learn. So although students weren't attending school and were not in the presence of a teacher, they required guidance and access to digital information. They also needed to draw on the skills of their colleagues, communicate with peers, and have access to regular teachers.

Communication technologies have transformed the act of teaching in as much as they have broken the nexus of:

1. time of learning
2. place of learning
3. pace of learning.

One of the greatest challenges to the traditional schooling approach has been the use of face-to-face live interactions between students and teachers, using applications such as Zoom. However, for these to be successful in a home setting, teachers replicated the classroom. They did it by having morning class meetings online, and then having teachers take classes as if they were in a classroom together. The schools often insisted that learning be undertaken to the usual school timetable. This approach provided the necessary structure for online teaching and learning to occur without having to undertake the preparation necessary for comprehensive teaching in a digital mode. In some respects, it re-enforced the standard educational paradigm.

Social theory

Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) wrote "the most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation which is the prototypical case of social interaction.

All other cases are derivative of it" (p. 43). Berger and Luckman discuss three phases leading to socialisation, namely:

1. externalisation
2. objectification
3. internalisation (p. 149).

Their view arises from a belief that society has both objective and subjective reality. "To be in society is to participate in its dialectic" (Berger & Luckman, 1966, p. 149). Here we take "dialectic" to mean critical inquiry. It follows that, for young people to become members of society, they must engage in some form of face-to-face interaction and some form of intellectually honest age-related level of dialectic transaction with others. This process is expected to be brought about and moderated by knowledgeable others (such as teachers) in a controlled environment (such as a school). There is a clear link through Dewey to the Socratic method, and even back to Prometheus.

Distance education, which is academically effective, successful and sustainable does not appear to meet Berger and Luckman's necessary state of face-to-face dialectic; nor do they appear to believe that socialisation of the young occurs effectively in isolation from the control of teachers in an institutional environment. Is this why teachers (at the philosophical level) feel that distance education is not "genuine"?

Effect of COVID-19

The first calls to reopen schools in the COVID-19 lockdowns came from business communities in New Zealand (although they knew that relaxing the rules would result in the virus spreading more widely) so parents and caregivers could return to work to meet the economic imperatives of earning a wage or making a profit. The second call to open schools came from parents or caregivers who felt unable to support their children's learning as a teacher might, especially when trying to supervise several children simultaneously.

These calls for a return to schooling demonstrate that there is not significant support for a de-schooled society in the Epimethean sense. The main thrust from the public demanded that the social functions of school, as highlighted in the Benthamite pragmatism or the Deweyan perspective, take priority. There appeared to be no argument that distance learning failed academically, except from those schools that feared students had not done sufficient schoolwork to complete mandatory certification requirements—such as for practical and examinations—all of which could have been completed online.

The consequence of COVID-19 for the paradigm of education and the co-location of students, teachers, and schools in time and space, is that the social functions of schooling (as opposed to the learning or academic purposes) demonstrate the triumph of Prometheus over Epimetheus.

Significance

Teachers working in rural and remote education quickly learned the importance of careful curriculum planning and thoughtful teaching strategies to help remote and rural students succeed. Many of these strategies and techniques work just as well in the classroom setting. In pre-school and special-needs settings, having family or home tutor support is invaluable. In fact, without this support, learning is almost impossible. In remote and rural secondary schools, having a formalised and well-implemented student-support system can be the difference between success and failure. In the tertiary sector, communication between teachers and students needs to be open, transparent, and timely to help busy people do well in their studies. Planning and

scaffolding make all the difference. It is not often possible to access in-class learning if students have to travel long distances to attend sessions.

Distance educators used the following headings to describe the circumstances of their students:

- those at a distance (too far to travel to a facility)
- overseas students who are required to study by law (e.g., in embassies)
- students whose families travel extensively (e.g., showground workers, itinerant workers)
- students having lengthy stays in medical facilities (e.g., in hospital)
- approved students (often in prison)
- students in the military (serving overseas or on ships)
- professionals needing updates for continuing registration
- professionals and workers who cannot leave their communities easily (e.g., for religious reasons)
- students learning "on the job".

All of these students have different learning needs. Teachers working in a distance or flexible mode develop strategies to meet learning needs, many of which originate with a "correspondence" model, even when it is outdated by the use of technologies. Only recently have the technologies developed to the point where they can be used digitally and educatively.

Nevertheless, students who live on remote islands, for example, find that paper-based learning is robust, even if the humidity destroys the glue that holds the pages together. Poor or unreliable digital communication technologies means that transmission is not guaranteed. If the electricity supply is insecure or uneven, computers will not work. Those planning for teaching in a distance mode must take all these situations into account. Curriculum considerations are also more complex when religious or cultural differences impinge on what can be taught and who can participate in particular aspects of learning. Teachers in conventional classrooms rarely deal with these issues, but they are the concern of distance and flexible learning institutions.

Those engaged in distance learning probably think infrequently about theories of learning—and even less about the underpinning philosophies—because they are dealing, every day, with the pragmatic business of teaching their students.

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