

A Rose by Any Other Name: Still Distance Education—A
Response to D.R. Garrison: *Implications of Online and
Blended Learning for the Conceptual Development and
Practice of Distance Education*

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Randy Garrison is a long-time teacher, collaborator, supervisor and friend of mine. Thus, I approach my critique of his recent article in the *Journal of Distance Education* (Garrison, 2009) with some considerable unease. I am however reassured from many discussions, that he likes a good argument. His recent article seems to have missed many important developments relating to distance education and obscures the evolution of distance education in its use of online technologies.

The central focus of my concern is that Garrison equates distance education with its earliest instantiation and the technology base that was first used to provide education at a distance. Distance education has always been to a great degree determined by the technologies of the day. This is necessitated given the basic requirement of distance education to be mediated—using some type of technology to span the distance between students, teachers and institutions. As these technologies have developed, distance education has evolved in parallel to support new forms of interaction, pedagogy and support services. To characterize this broad field as limited to one type of technology or pedagogy denies the reality of fundamental changes in our conceptions of knowledge and the ways in which it is constructed by learners and teachers.

Garrison begins the argument by surveying classical distance education and its history. He writes “The theory and practice of distance education appears to continue to hold to the assumptions and challenges that defined the field in the 20th century; that is, independent study to cope with the structural constraints that restricted access to education.” In fact very little distance education offered today is still independent study. For example, the most recent Sloan Consortium survey (Allen & Seaman, 2007) reported that 3.94 million students (annual increase of 12.9%) in the United States took distance education courses delivered online in 2007, and that 20% of all postsecondary students were taking at least one online course. Unfortunately, the Sloan survey did not ask if these online distance education courses were delivered as independent study or in cohorts. However, the vast majority of online courses are offered by

traditional campus institutions which, as Garrison knows well, have never been sympathetic to independent study models. I think it is fair to assume that most of these online courses are not delivered as independent study, but to cohorts who start and stop on the same schedule as campus students. Thus, they may have rich dialogue, group work, collaboration and many others forms of synchronous and asynchronous interaction.

But are these online courses distance education? I don't want to reignite the definitions of distance education debates of the 1980s but I think it is useful to clarify what we mean by distance education. Garrison himself, writing with Doug Shale in 1987, argued that:

- distance education implies that the majority of educational communication between teacher and student occurs non contiguously;
- distance education involves two-way communication between teacher and student for the purpose of facilitating and supporting the educational process;
- distance education uses technology to mediate the necessary two-way communication. (Garrison & Shale, 1987)

By these criteria I conclude that what Garrison now calls 'online education' is but one form of distance education. Barker, Frisbie & Patrick wrote that "the use of new and emerging technologies in distance education that foster live, teacher [to] student and student to student interactivity will allow distance education to assume its rightful and respected role in the educational process" p. 29 (1993). Obviously this has happened.

Garrison then continues the argument that independent study is the defining feature of distance education—both in the past and present. All forms of education—and especially distance education—are defined, to at least some extent, by the affordances of the technology used to deliver them—from the technology of lecture theatres to that of online learning. Distance education first emerged in an era when the only technology available for delivery was mail correspondence. This technology did not support group or real time interactions and thus the pedagogical and administrative models evolved to meet these constraints were based on independent study. In the second generation of distance education, the mass media of television and radio broadcast was used to deliver distance education and, again, pedagogical and administrative solutions to maximize the effectiveness of this mode of delivery evolved. In third-generation models of distance education video, audio and text conferencing evolved—and much online learning uses these models today. Immersive models of distance education have also emerged

(McKerlich & Anderson, 2007) as cyberspace expands the range of possibilities. Each of these generations has used different technologies and evolved different pedagogical learning designs, but they are all instances of distance education. Arguing that distance education is inherently about independent study is akin to arguing that operating an automobile means cranking the engine by hand—just because engine cranks were once a feature of all automobiles.

Garrison then goes on to argue that only conventional education offers protection from “an idiosyncratic interpretation of some subject matter.” He charges that only the conventional campus university offers means to address this challenge—the first being the word of mouth to avoid certain classes and the second, a reference to the power of the institutional community to guarantee balanced assessment of program curriculum. I am not convinced that the academy should only support “balanced views”, which seems a prescription for mediocrity. But it is ridiculous to assume that distance education “is limited by definition in an independent self-study approach inherent in industrialized distance education.” At Athabasca University, we are one of the very few educational institutions offering distance education using independent study models. Courses we develop are scrutinized to a much greater degree (by reviewers, instructional designers, editors, etc.) than those delivered behind the closed door of any campus lecture theatre. This insures academic quality as well as “balanced views”. Responding to his first concern, I assure Garrison that word of mouth certainly works in all forms of distance education, including those operating with self-paced models. For proof of this look at the 23 groups related to Athabasca University on Facebook or some of the reviews of Athabasca professors and tutors on RateMyProfessor.

Garrison continues to try to position online learning as being distinct from distance education. He quotes Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt (2006), saying that online learning “is a direct descendant of instructional technology and computer-assisted instruction” (p. 572). However, distance education shares a similar pedigree, as it is directly related to and influenced by the various educational technologies that have been available—most recently the Internet. Garrison goes on to stress the communicative and collaborative nature of online education. I agree entirely and that is why most distance education practiced in Canada today uses online techniques with the interaction affordances they provide. There has been considerable debate about the cost effectiveness of these interactive models of distance education (Annand, 1999, 2007) and consequent limitations on access, but this model of distance education, often referred to as online or e-learning, is now mainstream distance education.

Garrison next argues that “In recent years there appears to have been a distinct lack of theoretical development in distance education to accommodate technological advancements and pedagogical innovations.” This is not true. Zawacki-Richter (2009) reports on a Delphi study of 19 distance education specialists and found that theory development was the 6th highest of 15 major issues in distance education. Zawacki-Richter, Baecker, & Vogt (in press) in a followup study found that theory articles accounted for 3.5% of articles published in the 5 largest distance educational journals, with the largest number (8) published in 2008 alone. Much of this distance education theory relates to the collaboration and communication afforded by current technologies—those being largely online technologies.

Garrison next questions if Moore's (2007) seminal transactional distance theory can provide underpinnings for collaborative learning, and argues that it is inherently connected to independent study. Recent works using transactional distance based on Moore's work (for example Murphy & Rodríguez-Manzanares, 2008; Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom & Wheaton, 2005; Dron, 2007) assume that a high level of collaboration and communication is used to decrease transactional distance. In fact, Moore first realized that increase in the structure of a distance education course—often associated with earlier correspondence models, was conversely related to amount of dialogue. The less structured model of course design is the hallmark of much distance education developed and delivered online today.

Garrison next ponders “the possibility of convergence in distance and online learning” The question is quite meaningless to me on one level, given that most distance education in Canada is online learning. However, even in few independent study models of distance education still being offered, such a convergence is happening. My own research (Anderson, 2008; Anderson, 2006; Anderson, Annand & Wark, 2005), and that of Poellhuber et al. (2008) and Paulsen (2008) focuses on the use of social software in self paced study. We are developing cooperative (not collaborative see Paulsen (2008) learning activities in which students in self-paced models are provided with compelling but not compulsory interaction opportunities via online technologies. Certainly some students choose this type of distance education to maximize their freedom and in preference for independent study, however, many others look forward to being able to “have their cake and eat it too” by working cooperatively with others and joining in study buddy and study group interaction—within self paced courses.

Garrison concludes by noting the absence of references in the online education literature to distance educators. I assume this continues the problem of definition, as Garrison and I are both well quoted in the online

and distance education literature—indeed our 2003 book has been translated into Arabic and Chinese and has been cited in other educational literature. I consider myself a distance educator-Garrison obviously does not. Yet we are both well cited in the online learning, distance education, blended and traditional education literature.

In sum, distance education has and will continue to adopt the technologies and the pedagogies that are most effective at creating quality learning—wherever students wish to learn. Online education, when it happens at a distance is a form of distance education. Distance education at one time was defined by the necessity of supporting only independent study, but those times are long past. Emerging now are new models of distance education based upon connectivist pedagogy (Downes, 2007; Siemens, 2005) that once again break away from structured groups and utilize the affordances of networks and collectives (Dron & Anderson, 2007).

I'll end by quoting Garrison himself from 1999 when he wrote "What is missing is a sophisticated appreciation of the diversity of educational purposes, audiences, and outcomes as well as the increasing range of affordable and accessible distance education technologies and options." (Garrison, 1999) As distance educators, we have come to appreciate the affordable and accessible communication and information processing technologies—most especially the Net, and we continue to innovate in the development of more effective learning opportunities and outcomes.

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