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DISTANCE LEARNING AND EDUCATION AS PLACE

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Abstract — In this article we examine the role of the educational environment as a place with unique characteristics. By examining distance education, or distance learning, we can make assumptions about the effectiveness of correspondence education and the contemporary desire to privatize the educational experience, thereby changing the nature of schools as public places. The physical dimension of the concept of distance and the social-psychological dimension of distance is important for evaluating the individual's educational experience. The sensory involvement of face-to-face communication is greater than in the context of any form of mediated communication; therefore, education by means of technology will be a qualitatively different experience. A basic definition of distance education is the delivery of the educational process to receivers who are not in proximity to the person or persons managing or conducting the process (Lewis, Whitaker, & Julian, 1995, p. 14).

How did distance education or distance learning ever evolve? Why distance learning? Learning ought to be intimate, involving, sensual, absorbing, sometimes chaotic and unpredictable, but never **distant**. Why distant? Why the stress on detachment, separation, division, and gap? Why not emphasize uniqueness, imagination, individuality, and growth? Why distance learning? How significant is the choice of appellation?

This is not meant to be prolegomena against innovation or an opposition to the stimulation of educational accessibility for those individuals unable to inhabit campus halls, offices, and classrooms. It is however a gentle questioning lament about the values of a traditional education and the need to embrace the magic of new learning technology.

Educational innovators never have had an easy go of it. The potential of combining the latest in media technology with the classroom experience always met with resistance and ultimately gave in to economic realities which limited the illuminating and insightful dimensions of instructional media technology.

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It was once thought that television might be a useful and exciting learning experience but the traditionalists fought its intrusion because it threatened their egos and viability. The pragmatists were concerned that costs would outstrip values. The experimentalists lost in their effort to capitalize on the unique capabilities of the medium. Twenty five years ago the soul-searching raged.

The spectrum of instructional uses of television is not completely known. It is clear that there are some teaching acts it can do superlatively well. It can let a large number of students look into a microscope at the same time, or watch surgical procedures from close at hand. It can let a class watch an activity that would be spoiled by direct observation. But there are also some things it cannot do. It cannot conduct a seminar discussion efficiently. It cannot give specific and direct personal help. These uses and limitations are clear, but how, how much longer the list may be is not known (Maloney, 1967, p. 15).

Ultimately, a middle course won out: Educational television evolved into an uninspiring extension of traditional classroom teaching but at minimal cost and accompanied with even less imaginative effort. Until recently the reality was that if all instructional media were to suddenly vanish from the face of the earth, little effect would be felt in daily educational life. But technological development did not cease, nor is it reversible. We are now at another transitional point in time where decisions will be made as to how the new technology will be incorporated into the educational experience. The new technology bound together by the computer, and potentially linked within another medium, will undoubtedly have an impact. The computer will alter the nature of learning. But once again, the nature of the "new" and the "traditional" learning experience needs to be assessed.

The stress on "distance" in "distance learning" is disconcerting. It is a bothersome notion, because it emphasizes not the intellectually transcending assets of the "new media," but rather stresses the overcoming of distance. We suspect that part of the allure of "distance learning" is market driven, that it is an appealing domain because it provides for an educational audience at a time when the economics of traditional education is strangling a large majority of American educational institutions. The danger is that motive of connection may stifle the extraordinary potential which utilizes the intrinsic properties of the new medium and, at the same time, the glamour of the new technologies devalues the relational dimensions of the classroom and the serendipitous nature of learning through interpersonal discovery.

The concept of distance has clearly been invoked to highlight the physical dimension, the ability to educate without limitations of remoteness. Yet the social-psychological dimensions of distance cannot be overlooked when considering the implications of distanced learning on the individual. Distance is a concept which is fundamental to interpersonal relationships in which "closeness" and "removed" are descriptive of relational patterns rather than proximity between individuals. Social distance as a dimension of interpersonal and small group communication is implied by terms such as group cohesiveness, group attraction, group polarization, primary groups and reference groups (Brockriede, 1980).

The philosophical basis of Kenneth Burke's rhetoric encompasses the concept of distance as his concepts of identification and consubstantiality suggest that "one of rhetoric's functions is to reduce man's interpersonal distance from man" (Brockriede, 1980, p. 199). The social-psychological dimensions of distanced learning reveal that access to information is a replica rather than an identical experience. Classroom

participation via typographical and electronic means of communication are alternative learning environments but can only imitate not replicate face-to-face interpersonal interaction. In the process the traditional role of each form of learning experience is being transformed. The primacy of face-to-face communication is founded in its full sensory involvement, while mediated communication only uses, by definition, one or more of the senses, never the complete sensorium. Thus, while specific educational tasks may be successfully completed, the degree of sensory involvement, particularly feedback will be limited. In addition, mediated interpersonal communication is generally task oriented thereby limiting the degree to which unpredictable interaction might occur because circumstances are circumscribed. The excitement of an educational environment cannot be confined to the preplanned, prepackaged or preordained. While electronic communication may be more efficient and convenient than face-to-face teaching in many cases, we maintain that in a well adjusted society some portion of social interaction be reserved for the less programmed, less private activities that occur in the public realm of the classroom.

In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* the character of the archdeacon boldly states that "the book will kill the church" eloquently voicing the assertion that each medium leaves its mark by altering institutions and personal attitudes and values. The book unchained the worshiper from dependence upon the institution of the church and created the individual supplicant. Victor Hugo (Hugo, 1947) understood the power of print to delineate the new spiritual relationship to be found in the church as others have recognized that the evolution of communication technologies permeates all social institutions (McLuhan, 1964), not the least of which serve educational missions (Frick, 1991). Clearly the technology of writing and reading, the move from orality to literacy, altered educational methods as well as goals with the impact of printing on education thoroughly addressed in the literature of education (Berge & Collins, 1995).

Zane Berge and Mauri Collins in *Computer Mediated Communication and the Online Classroom* (1995) argue that "as new technology enables shifts at the level of delivery, old technologies are *augmented*, not totally replaced. Even though many of us have computers at our disposal, we still use books, speech and pen or pencil writing in education" (p. 2). One underlying assumption made is that "we still require educational environments." The medium of print functioned to complement rather than supplant traditional interactive learning between teachers, students and peers. The site-based physical environment served as a conduit for creative and unplanned interaction.

Classroom learning begins with *situs*, a place where the educational process occurs implying a learning paradigm in which there is shared physical space between educator and student, an environment traditionally controlled by a teacher. Communication technology long capable of **delivery** of educational information offered alternatives. Teachers could use technology to enhance the classroom experience by drawing different materials into the learning environment within the classroom. Technology also offered the option of dissolving classroom walls facilitating delivery of information to off-site students thereby marking a shift away from a teacher directed approach to education. Information rather than interaction could be reconstructed beyond classroom doors.

Several models of media facilitated distance education emerged. Lewis, Whitaker, and Julian (1995) have catalogued these variations on a theme of instructional media. The correspondence model "attempts to reproduce the content of classroom teaching in the form of course notes for solitary individual students who are not expected to have any interaction with each other" (Lewis, Whitaker, & Julian, 1995, p. 14). **Correspondence education** may utilize various media, typically print or television transmission, offering

little interaction between teacher and student. Limitations of time and space were overcome through books or educational media but the classroom experience was bypassed rather than reconstructed.

Combining print, audio, and video, with telephone, tele-conferencing or computer conferencing the **multimedia model** offers a greater opportunity for interpersonal interactivity between and among students, and teachers but may also be used by isolated students.

The **tele-learning model** attempts to reproduce the classroom environment making use of yet another multimedia approach which emphasizes audio or videoconferencing and broadcast television to reconstruct a teacher-directed model of classroom learning making use of technology to overcome limitations of space while structuring time through required simultaneous attendance.

The computer, at the apex of media technology, as the trigger of interactivity combining other media, will further re-define not only off-site educational opportunities but the classroom and schoolhouse itself. Computer mediated communication has been looked to for its potential for conversational interaction overcoming barriers of time, distance, money and perhaps even culture. Under the general rubric of distanced learning, variations on a theme of computer mediated communication are being explored. Personal electronic mail, group-directed electronic mail, and group conference electronic mail offer public and private opportunities for learning in electronic space which all imply a shift in emphasis from teaching environments to learning environments (Berge & Collins, 1995).

With the development of all prior communication systems, except for the telegraph, the stress was placed upon place rather than upon the movement of data. The spatial relationship of radio was between listener and station, of television between viewer and channel. But the virtual community is a construction existing in our vision and imagination and it is significant that geographical and architectural terms are the primary metaphors used to describe the emerging electronic environment in which place and location are de-emphasized in favor of speed of transmission.

Social interaction of both private and public nature have entered the realm of *electronic space*, interaction located in a placeless vacuum where two or more people can link via telephone or where one or more persons can become involved with the program of a distanced computer (Gumpert & Drucker, 1992). Face-to-face communication in physical space and mediated communication may serve the same purposes but are experienced in very different ways. Every media development alters the availability and nature of traditional private and public place. The newspaper influenced and defined, in part, the barbershop, the village green, and the café. The telephone shaped the nature of courtship. Radio altered the experiences of the living room, the car, and the doctor's office. The computer keyboard opens up distant retrievable vistas. Distance learning will alter the nature of traditional pedagogical relationships.

And so we retreat inward where we can control at least some of the threats. And so we find ourselves in a quandary, no one wants to hand in the facsimile machine, answering machine, telephone, television, CD ROM, cassette player, radio, beeper, video games, cellular phone, laser discs, VCR, etc. Ironically, the myriad of exciting and seductive educational options may attenuate the significance of the traditional classroom experience.

Schools are public places offering a unique education from a qualitative if not quantitative standard. Education, while influenced and shaped by the place in which it occurs, is no longer restricted by the limitations of place but the educational experience, rich as it may be in an electronic environment should not be mistaken as being

replicated or replaced. Distance learning offers exciting options for presenting lessons and conveying information but becomes counterproductive when it is mistaken for the experience of being in a school environment. Schools are public places and function on many social and political levels beyond the task oriented presentation of a defined lesson.

We can now relocate education in “non-place” or “**media communities**” where involvement is encouraged by the marvels of media technology. The safer world of connection syphons us away from the riskier arena of the public place. Is there a connection between the emergence of distance learning as a contemporary concept and the dire, often dangerous, circumstances of public education or education housed in schools located in threatening crime riddled streets? We prefer the predictability of the home to the unforeseen encounters of the chaotic street and the threatening serendipity of the public place. Now the value of lessons learned from unprogrammed, unplanned interaction with others in classrooms, cafeterias and even bathrooms may well be underestimated, forgotten in the rush toward the shared realm of the keyboard. More and more time is being spent in electronic public space. Sites of commerce, once significant for interaction as well as transaction, have become relics of “time gone by” as mail order, faxed and computer mediated sales flourish and virtual community ties are created in the MUDS and chatrooms which know no physical borders.

While distanced learning allows the home to become the center of each person’s educational universe, it further privatizes the educational experience. Increasingly modern lives are lived in private spheres, as we move from home divorced from neighborhood and neighbors to work enjoying the sanctuary of the car. Public transportation is privatized via portable walls of print or sound which are pulled around the commuter upon entering bus or train.

We live in an age of de-populated, deserted, neglected public spaces — spaces which commerce no longer requires, which socializing has left as productive and safe leisure time became associated with the sphere of privacy. Distance learning may enhance and enrich education for some but it must remain an alternative rather than a marketing ploy or a substitute for an educational system gone awry.

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