Distance Learning as Seen from the North and the West: Points to Ponder for the World at Large

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The Need to Look at the Issue in Context

"The early 90s have spawned technological breakthroughs that will come of age by the mid-90s and will provide a virtually seamless world communications network capable of reaching every inhabitant on earth." These are the opening words of a chapter on *Distance education around the world* by Brown & Brown (1994, p. 3) in Willis's (Ed., 1994) *Distance education: Strategies and tools*. The authors continue by referring to the daunting challenge faced by distance educators during that decade to find the means "to create infrastructures that will harness this network's power to provide education, training, information, and cultural programming in developed and developing countries" (p. 3).

The task emanating from the above mentioned daunting challenge is still a long way from being completed. Yet it is clear, and it was already clear at the beginning of the past decade, that no part of the world can see itself as working in isolation on its specific portion of the challenge or as being the controlling entity in the worldwide development context. "If we are to create a powerful vision for distance education and open learning in the future, we have to view the system as a subtle whole with dynamic and complex interrelationships" (Pacey, 1992, p. 7). In our interconnected world, what individual states and countries do is likely to be relevant for and to have an impact on other states and countries. Western Europe and North America are no exceptions. The development of distance education worldwide has benefited from the early experience in Western Europe and North America. What has meanwhile matured in many other parts of the world can now greatly benefit Western Europe and North America.

Pacey's (1992) observation relates to more that the need to look at Western Europe and North America, or indeed any part of the world, as pertaining to a wider geographical context. It is equally relevant and important, as I have argued elsewhere (e.g. J. Visser, 2000; J. Visser, in print), to be sensitive to the integrity of the world of learning as a whole. Distance education does not exist in isolation; it is an integrated

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component of the wider learning ecology. The extent to which it functions effectively depends considerably on what happens elsewhere in the learning landscape. Conversely, a well functioning distance education system can greatly enhance the functionality of other components of the learning environment. Defining distance education as part of the wider world of learning also allows to raise fundamental questions about the purposes of education and the meaning of learning, as well as about the role played by distance education, in conjunction with other modalities, in responding to those purposes and in making learning meaningful. Raising such questions is not a mere cosmetic exercise. An extensive range of world conferences – many of them organized by, or with the participation of – UNESCO, have put persistent issues on the agenda of the peoples of the United Nations and sought to understand their implications for education. It is important, in a debate about distance learning raised as part of a "UNESCO Learning Workshop," to be fully cognizant of those overriding issues that are important at this particular junction in time.

The Western European and North American Experience

The remainder of this brief paper will highlight some of the key trends as well as issues of concern in the development of distance education in Western Europe and North America. The extent of the exercise – I have been asked to limit my paper to some five pages, a criterion that I will violate anyway – cannot be but rudimentary. It will thus be impossible to present anything even remotely representative of the richness and diversity of the distance education experience in these parts of the world. The reader who is interested in these issues is referred for more detail to the relevant literature, such as Bates (1995); Chute, Thompson & Hancock (1999); Moore & Kearsley (1996); Willis (1994); and the forthcoming Handbook of Distance Education, edited by Moore & Anderson (in preparation). Many relevant and useful sources can also be consulted online. Following the reference section at the end, a small number of relevant Web-based resources is listed.

While limiting myself, in referring to the Western European and North American experience, to key trends and issues, I shall aim at bringing out aspects that I believe provide worthwhile food for thought for educational leaders and planners around the world, and not just Western Europe and North America. In our world of diverse and a-synchronous development it is often possible and useful to look at what happens in one society and draw lessons from it, either to avoid things from happening or to promote them, or sometimes to choose an entirely different course of action, based on critical discussion of what one sees.

Distance education has come of age and is here to stay

Both Western Europe and North America have witnessed an enormous growth in their clientele for distance education. While several decades ago it was still an issue of discussion whether learning via the distance education mode could be as effective, and cost-effective, as learning through the face-to-face mode, that question has sometimes been answered in favor of distance education and sometimes not. More importantly, it

has largely become irrelevant for large groups of potential users of these services for whom distance education provides the best way – or at times the only way – of meeting their learning needs. Increasing numbers of the population of the two continents have become knowledgeable consumers of the services of diverse providers. They make their choices in accordance with their needs, the perceived quality of the provider, their financial capability and willingness to invest in their education, and the appeal of a variety of attributes of the providing institution and its products. On the other hand, distance education providers – as well as other providers of educational opportunities – have become aware of the economic necessity to be continually responsive to demand. More than at any time before has the solution of learning needs by choosing from alternative structured learning opportunities become part of a process in which supply and demand mutually seek to maintain a dynamic equilibrium. Distance education has in no small way contributed to this development.

Market forces drive the development of distance education

The above is to say that market forces have become responsible for what happens in at least a significant portion of the learning environment at large. In an economic sense, that market is huge. The "EU distance education market could be worth one billion ECU" is the title of a starter document for the Project on the Development of Knowledge in the Field of Vocational Training at a Distance in the European Union (conducted by VOCTADE; available online at http://www.shu.ax.uk/virtual_campus/ligis/11/lead.htm). The same document estimates that 2.5 million people are studying at a distance for vocational purposes in the European Union. That figure excludes those who engage in in-house training (likely another very significant number) and students of hobby-type courses. The total enrolment in six European open universities (Spain [two], Germany, The Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom) is quoted as 450,000 with at least another 150,000 distance learners enrolled with conventional universities (mainly in Finland, France, Sweden and the UK). An additional 1.2 to 2 million distance learners are thought to be more or less evenly divided between government and proprietary providers in the non-university sector.

Figures that can be found for the US market are at least as striking. A document available at http://www.bizresources.com/learning/de_deskguide.html refers to estimates by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), founded more than 70 years ago, that "100 million Americans have taken distance study courses in the last hundred years." The same source speaks about "five million people [who] are getting an education through some type of distance learning medium." It also quotes "projections of up to 10 million students by the year 2000 and 20 million by 2005." A report by the Institute for Higher Education Policy (2000) attributes the current dramatic growth in the use of distance education to the increase in access to the Internet among the US population. The claim is supported by data in a survey of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) of the US Department of Education (Lewis, Farris, Snow & Levin, 1999). That report also indicates that public postsecondary institutions were more likely to offer distance learning than private institutions. It also reported that most of the growth between 1994/95 and 1997/98 was in courses in higher education institutions that use

asynchronous computer-based technology (primarily over the Internet) rather than two-way or one-way video. Most of the growth was in institutions that already offered distance education courses in 1994/95. The tendency was also much greater in larger institutions (more than 10,000 students) than in smaller ones (less than 3,000 students).

The above data indicate another link with market forces. Not only is the provision of educational opportunities an economically viable activity, increasingly the intervening technological infrastructure is also a considerable economic factor, which is being pushed by early exposure to the technology. In the US, 90 percent of public elementary and secondary schools are connected to the Internet and 49 percent of schools are equipped with high-speed connections such as T-1 lines, according to the report Technology in Education 1999, cited in the CHEA Update Number 3 on Distance Learning in Higher Education (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2000).

The free play of market forces works well to support the organic integration among different portions of the learning environment at large. However, a caution is in order. While there is no doubt about the extent to which market forces drive the development of structured learning opportunities in Western Europe and North America, it is important to recognize that the overall purposes of education and the related meanings of learning have to do with much more than economic factors and economic development. The reasons why we learn are multiple. They should not be held to be restricted to those things, like the acquisition of particular skills or pieces of knowledge, for which there are short-term economic benefits. UNESCO has been in the forefront to draw attention to key global issues (such as related to the environment, sustainable development, eradication of poverty, our ability to live together in harmony and to foster a culture of peace) that are intimately related to how we learn and the conditions that societies put in place to promote and facilitate learning. Distance education is an increasingly important part of these conditions. Yet, there is strikingly little debate in the field of distance education about its role vis-à-vis the purposes of education and the meaning of learning in a sense that goes beyond immediate economic benefit. It is high time that such a debate should start.

It is also important to recognize that the developments in Western Europe and North America, with great emphasis on the free play of market forces, are the product of the prevailing circumstances in that part of the world and that not necessarily the same emphases would be equally beneficial in other parts of the world nor that the current patterns of development in North America and Western Europe would necessarily be unalterable. Complex adaptive systems, such as the distance education environments created in different regions of the world, increasingly start to interact with each other, allowing them to 'learn' from each other and constructively contribute to each other's co-evolution.

Convergence of two traditions

Distance education in Western Europe and North America has a long history. It started piecemeal, whence it is difficult to identify its exact starting date. Most sources

agree that it is at least some 150 years old. For a long time it developed as a rather minor event in the much broader learning landscape, catering for specific audiences or regular audiences in specific circumstances, often offering a 'second chance' to those who missed out on earlier opportunities offered in the traditional context. This trend started off initially as correspondence education and gradually evolved to include other media as well (radio, TV, audio cassettes, video, computer software, etc.) The mode of thinking behind it was that of mass production of a product that, once produced at high cost, could be delivered to large audiences in order to bring the cost per user down to a level usually far below that of traditional education. The name of Otto Peters (1994; originally published in 1967) is inextricably associated with the interpretation of distance education as a process of industrial production.

A second tradition started to evolve quite recently as a consequence of the proliferation of the Internet. The ease and low cost of communication via that medium prompted its discovery, so to say, as an environment in which everyone could teach everyone and every user could learn from every user. Early developments of distance education via the Internet were thus in the first place inspired by the technology as such. They thrived on the entrepreneurship and creativity of those who bought into the optimistic vision that the Internet would change the world forever and who were enticed by the unheard of opportunities it seemed to offer. For others, and slightly later, following the success of early explorers, their motivation may well have been their anxiety not to fall behind in the race.

Initially, many of the initiatives to develop Web-based learning were undertaken by people who were unaware of the earlier tradition that started out as correspondence education. This lack of awareness had the obvious negative consequence that mistakes could be made that the developers of the previous generation of distance education were only too well aware of. On the other hand, not being part of the intellectual tradition of the past had the positive effect that distance education was being reinvented from scratch, allowing a kind of rethinking of basic principles to occur that is often absent in those who merely follow through on an established tradition.

The two traditions now start to meet and learn from each other. It is quite widely recognized that distance education will never be the same since the advent of the Internet and, particularly the World Wide Web. The Web-Based Education Commission, in its recently released report to the President and the Congress of the United States, therefore calls upon the new Congress and Administration to "embrace an 'e-learning' agenda as a centerpiece of our nation's federal education policy."

Not only will distance education no longer be the same, the world of learning at large will fundamentally change as well. In fact, the distinction between distance education and classroom-based education is already blurring and may totally disappear. Whether they like it or not, traditional universities and education providers at different other levels feel the wind blowing and increasingly large numbers of them start making at least a portion of their offerings available at a distance, i.e. usually using the Internet as the preferred vehicle for delivery, communication and community building. At the same

time, even courses that are still being offered mainly via the traditional face-to-face mode, start including to an ever greater extent elements of learning that are purely Web-based or Web-enabled. All these developments result in forms of hybridization that make the concepts of the past obsolete. More fundamentally, change being in the air, this is a great time to reconsider the very basis on which the existing schooling tradition is built, allowing the world of learning to be rebuilt in accordance with the parameters of our time. The now extinct Learning Without Frontiers coordination unit in UNESCO (see http://www.unesco.org/education/lwf) has initiated this task during the last half decade of the past century; the Learning Development Institute (see http://www.learndev.org) has been created to continue that line of work. The worst that can happen is that we replicate the modalities of the past with new means.

The blurring distinction between learning, work and leisure

Above I have referred to the blurring distinction between the different modalities through which learning is facilitated, making it increasingly irrelevant to look at distance education as something distinct from other forms of education. Another distinction is fading. No longer are people being prepared, during the initial stages of their life, for the rest of it. An increasing part of what, in the past, used to be included in preparatory education and training now shifts to becoming an integrated component of the work setting. Similarly, the job, the lifetime career, as it used to be known, is also gradually disappearing as a dominant model of occupation in favor of one that has people build up a portfolio of, often diverse, activities (e.g. Handy, 1995). In the process of doing so, the separation between time dedicated to work proper and the time one keeps for oneself as leisure time becomes less sharp. Learning, which may be engaged in for clearly work-related purposes as well as for self-improvement in general, may overlap with both former concepts. The development of distance education has played no small role in allowing that blurring of distinctions to happen. It has introduced flexibility in organizing the conditions of learning, allowing them to be adapted to the individual learner, making learning time, place and age independent. It has also, and very significantly so, opened the way for a change in perceived emphasis in the instructional context away from the teacher – even the teacher at a distance – as the main actor to the learner. There is every reason for that shift of emphasis to become expressed in a change in the roles traditionally assumed by teachers and learners (e.g. J. Visser & Jain, 1997).

Distance education and learning along the lifespan

The above changing set of social and personal circumstances, which is perhaps most clearly expressed in the Western European and North American cultures, but certainly not restricted to them, has also given rise to renewed notions of lifelong learning. The meaning of that concept has evolved over time (e.g. J. Visser, in print). It would be poorly interpreted if it were simply seen in terms of taking courses every now and then while one progresses through life. Distance education, and the way it has changed people's perceptions about their autonomy as learners, is part and parcel, in conjunction with many other factors, of the development of a learning society.

Distance education and learning across borders

Particularly in Europe – not just Western Europe, but rather the European Union as a whole – distance education is part of a set of evolving strategies to share resources and markets. Similar developments take place on the American continent and there is no reason any longer why course offerings should remain restricted to a particular part of the world. Western Europe and North America being strong players, the rest of the world should be well aware of the trend. The world's nations together should strive for the development of conditions of learning that are distributed around the globe in such a way that diversity, rather than uniformity would be fostered. The European context may be an interesting one for the world to look at, considering that plurality is one of the overridingly interesting features of it.

More than technology alone

I have indicated above that technological developments have been an important factor in the expansion of distance education in Western Europe and North America. One of the possible negative tendencies in that context is that developments are driven by the technologies that become available. What gets invented must be used. The need to compete among different providers may sometimes encourage them to do so by showing off their use of the latest technological fads. In other cases there is sometimes the naive perception that what is newer is also better. The two continents on which this paper focuses have no resource-related reasons to limit themselves in introducing ever newer technologies. Quite to the contrary, their economies – but not the world at large – benefit from the tendency to consider obsolescent what can be replaced by a newer invention.

There are valid environmental reasons to be critical of this tendency. There are valid economical reasons to question the tendency, should more restrained economies feel anxious about their capacity to keep pace with Western Europe and North America. Most importantly, such technocentrism (Salomon, 2000, June) "totally ignores some crucial social and human factors." Without taking these factors into account, "virtual distance learning . . . is in danger of yielding virtual results." To avoid this from happening, Salomon urges an emphasis on two things: *tutelage* and *community of learners*. The former aspect has received particular attention in the work of such authors as L. Visser (1998) and Gunawardena (1995). The latter aspect has been particularly emphasized by the group of people who gathered initially around the work of Learning Without Frontiers (2000) in UNESCO and later the Learning Development Institute (2001).

The need not to be complacent

In this paper I have tried to identify a number of trends and issues that characterize the development of distance education in Western Europe and North America and that I feel are worth discussing in a wider context. I started off by saying that distance education has come of age. That being the case, there is a risk also to become complacent and simply take for granted that what has been achieved is good

enough and need not develop further. When that happens, one starts indulging in one's achievements, replicating existing experience, no longer being creative, and becoming intellectually obese. This is to be avoided. While much has been achieved, most things still need to be done in pursuing the overriding purposes of education. Those purposes have everything to do with the deeper reasons why we, as humans, learn. As noted earlier, some if these profounder reasons have been elucidated by the work of world conferences such as the ones held during the past decade or the two major reports developed under the auspices of UNESCO during that same period (Delors, *et al*., 1996; Pérez de Cuéllar *et al*., 1996). The debate about the educational implications of recommendations of these world conferences and reports has merely begun. Their translation into practice, among other ways through distance education, still has to start.

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Selected Web-Based Resources for Further Consultation

Abundant reference material is available on the World Wide Web. By way of example, a small list of interesting Web-based resources follows hereafter. No attempt has been made to be either complete or representative. Interested readers are urged to conduct their own Web searches.

- http://www.naruto-u.ac.jp/~nisinohr/distancedu.html (this site features links to major distance education institutions around the world, including, for that matter, Europe and North America);
- http://www.uidaho.edu/evo/distglan.html (covering many of the issues also covered in Willis's 1994 book mentioned above);
- http://earthvision.asu.edu/~laurie/mcisaac/distance.htm (particularly the short segment about the history of distance education);
- http://www.otan.dni.us/cdlp/distance/home.html (including a good overview of reference materials);
- http://www.bizresources.com/learning/de_deskguide.html (a guide for teachers, instructors and trainers with useful and effective links to many other web-based sources)
- http://www.learner.org/edtech/distlearn/topten.html (listing the Annenberg/CPB's Top Ten Distance Education Sites);
- http://ccism.pc.athabascau.ca/html/ccism/deresrce/institut.htm (with links to virtual campuses; open and distance learning institutions; distance education departments within conventional institutions; and distance learning networks);
- http://cuda.teleeducation.nb.ca/distanceed/ (a site with resources on distance education available in both English and French);

- http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~lsherry/pubs/issues.html (an extensive article by L. Sherry [1996] on Issues in Distance Learning, published in the *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*);
- http://olt-bta.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/ (Web site of the Office of Learning Technologies in Canada [bilingual site]; emphasis on building a culture of lifelong learning);
- http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/ZIFF/VOCTADE.HTM (Web site of the project on the Development of knowledge in the field of vocational training at a distance in the European Union; the site includes an extensive final report);
- http://www.fernuni-hagen.de/ZIFF/welcome.htm (home page of the Central Institute for Distance Education Research at the Fern Universität, Hagen, Germany);
- http://www.eden.bme.hu/ (home page of the European Distance education Network);
- http://www.eadtu.nl/ (home page of the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities);
- http://www.usdla.org/ (home page of the United States Distance Learning Association);
- http://www.cade-aced.ca/ (home page of the Canadian Association for Distance Education [bilingual site]).