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Distance Learning: Access and Inclusion Issues

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Abstract: *This paper critically examines the rhetoric of business, government and post-secondary institutions promoting distance learning as accessible to anyone, from anywhere at anytime. Three themes are examined in providing an alternate perspective to the dominant rhetoric: inclusivity and democracy, accessibility and flexibility, and cost effectiveness.*

Introduction

Distance learning, and more specifically online learning, is promoted as learning that can be accessed from anywhere, at any time, by anyone. Distance learning is also presented as being a cost-effective option for post-secondary institutions, which are being run more like businesses as they face reduced government funding and increased competition for students in the global marketplace. Business organizations are also recognizing the profitability of offering distance learning. Furthermore, government and governmental organizations are promoting distance education and the use of other information technologies as important approaches to education. This positive view of distance learning is illustrated in promotional materials and research texts presented by government, business and post-secondary education. Three themes emerge in the rhetoric of this trio in their descriptions of distance and online learning: it is inclusive and democratic; it is accessible and flexible; and it is cost effective. For example, these themes are illustrated in materials from Canadian, European and American universities:

Athabasca University makes it possible for you to earn a university education regardless of where you live or work, or your commitments to careers or families. The University strives to remove the barriers of time, space, past educational experience, and, to a great degree, level of income. (Athabasca University, 2005)

Everyone's 'local' university - OU courses are designed for students studying in their homes or workplaces, in their own time, anywhere in the UK, Ireland, throughout Europe and often further afield. (Open University, n.d.)

Now you can enjoy the quality of UCLA Extension right in the comfort of your home or office. (Regents of the University of California, 2005)

Through a critical examination of these three themes, I will present an alternate view of each theme. Currently, there are a limited number of sources that provide a critical examination of distance and online learning. Drawing on my masters' thesis research and literature review, I will present materials that question the three themes from democratic, ethical and social justice perspectives.

Theme 1: Online Learning is Inclusive and Democratic

Barriers to Participation. While distance learning is promoted as a viable means of participating in education for disadvantaged students, in reality, its policies do not serve all of its learners equally. In the case of women working in the home, participating in distance learning, rather than serving as a way of expanding their horizons, limits them by keeping them isolated (Spigel, 1992 as cited in Shade, 2002). Arger (1990) echoes women's dissatisfaction with distance learning and its failure to meet the expectation of equality. Similarly, Giddens (1991) states that while distance learning "[holds] out the possibility of emancipation, modern

institutions create mechanisms of suppression, rather than actualisation of self” (as cited in Tait, 1994, p. 34).

Secondly, in the case of disadvantaged groups of learners such as women, part-time students, students from different racial groups and social classes, and students with disabilities, distance learning is perceived as the only means of education in situations where on-campus courses are not accessible due to institutional and physical barriers. These learners, when excluded from other forms of education, accept distance learning, but only as a less appealing option (Perraton, 2000). However, Perraton explains that by accepting distance courses, learners allow governments and institutions to continue to ignore barriers that discourage, and even prevent, disadvantaged learners from participating in on-campus programs. Upon graduation, these learners are further disadvantaged by the second-rate education they have received and by the stigma associated with their perceived inferior training.

Geographically, distance learning is more prevalent in developing countries and in rural areas of industrialized countries in industrialized urban centres. Perraton (2000) relates that, in developing countries, it is the disadvantaged groups who rely on distance learning: “It is not surprising that most students at [the] tertiary level come from socially, educationally or geographically disadvantaged groups: more favoured students have pursued a conventional education” (p. 181). There is clearly a parallel between disadvantaged students who rely on distance learning when on-campus courses are not accessible and students in developing countries who rely more on distance learning than those in industrialized countries.

The Myth of the Great Equalizer. A popular myth exists that the Internet is a “Great Equalizer” (Wolf, 1998). This myth, which promotes the Internet as inclusive and democratic by allowing all people equal access to the wealth of information available online, is a gross misconception. Wolf’s research describes “the typical Internet user as overwhelmingly white, male, and well educated, with a higher than average income in a white-collar professional career” (p. 17). Similarly, Gray (1999) states that the “vast majority of Internet users are well educated, young, white males in first world countries” (p. 123). Both of these descriptions obviously exclude approximately half of the population, specifically women, as well as persons of different races, social classes, educational levels, and abilities. In the case of American women, current estimates of female use of the Internet range from 20 percent to 43 percent (Wolf). In Canada, men form the majority of Internet users (56%) compared to women (45%) (Reddick, 2000 as cited by Shade, 2002).

Replicated Communication Patterns. Similar to the myth of the great equalizer, the Internet is neither inclusive nor democratic. In reality, it perpetuates the communication and social patterns of traditional, face-to-face learning. First, the levels of participation in on-line discussions and Internet forums indicate that many women feel uncomfortable expressing themselves. In addition to the studies showing that women feel threatened by the dominant masculine forms of communication on-line (Wakeford, 1999), research also indicates that those students who were unlikely to participate in face-to-face discussions feel even less motivation to participate in on-line exchanges (Mason, 1991 as cited in Light & Light, 1999). In addition, the perceived anonymity and equality of on-line communication is deceiving because different communication styles often make it possible to distinguish between male and female participants (Herring, 1994 as cited in Wolf, 1998). Similarly, only visual cultural markers are made invisible online; other methods of distinguishing class, race and gender persist.

Secondly, in on-line discussions, participants are expected to adhere to the rules of 'netiquette.' In order for a discussion to proceed, the participation of multiple members is required and those who monopolize are as much a problem as those who do not participate (Norman, 1999). Similarly, the facilitator's tolerance for students demanding excessive time and attention should not be imagined to be any different from the degree of tolerance in a face-to-face setting.

Finally, usage patterns and participation rates of students in distance learning programs do not support the theory that women can, and will participate, in this type of learning environment. Thompson (1998) looks at a number of sources that indicate that women's enrollment in distance learning varies from country to country. She reports that in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Israel the majority of students are female; in Britain enrollment numbers for men and women are equal; and in Germany, India and the Netherlands, male students are in the majority. However, statistics for women's levels of enrollment in distance learning classes in Germany are not significantly higher from their enrollment in traditional classes as would be expected. In fact, in some cases, women's enrollment in distance learning programs is lower than their enrollment in face-to-face offerings (von Prümmer, 2000).

Theme 2: Online Learning is Accessible and Flexible

The Digital Divide. Online learning requires the use of specific hardware, software and Internet resources as well as specialized skills, yet many institutions do not "provide alternatives and 'work-arounds'" (Anderson, 2001, p. 31) for students without the equipment and skills for success in this setting. Overall, Anderson states that there is a "hidden curriculum" in distance learning, an implicit or hidden agenda that presupposes learners have certain skills. First, he acknowledges the existence of a "digital divide" which separates those who have high-speed Internet access, the equipment necessary to view multimedia productions, and the skills to use computer equipment and software, from those who do not. Trend clearly illustrates the depth and breadth of the divide:

it is important to recognize that Internet users represent less than four percent of the world's 6 billion people.... Reports indicate that households with incomes under \$25,000 were 20 times less likely to have Internet access than those with higher incomes, and people with little education were 25 percent less likely to be netizens than college graduates. (2001, p. 124)

Other sources identify characteristics for the digital divide in the United States: "[D]ifferent levels of income and education, different racial and ethnic groups, old and young, single and dual-parent families, and those with and without disabilities" (United States of America, Department of Commerce, 2000, p. xvi). Canadian statistics show that age, educational level, income, gender and language of communication all influence Internet access (Pastore, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2003). At an international level, 580 million people had Internet access from home at the end of the year 2002 (Nielsen/Netratings, 2003), representing only about nine percent of the world's population (Population Reference Bureau, 2002).

Second, as Anderson (2001) identifies, some learners are excluded from distance learning because of their lack of experience and confidence in using technology, which is a particular concern for female students (Spender, 1995; Taylor, Kramarae, & Ebben, 1993 as cited in Burge, 1998). Anderson identifies independent study skills as a third component of the hidden curriculum. Gibson (1998b) confirms there are unique skills required for success in distance learning that learners may not have acquired elsewhere. Women, in particular, feel pressured for

time when studying; therefore, they require efficient study skills to be successful. Burge (1998) states that the format of distance learning courses may “drive [women] into inappropriate academic street-smarts (e.g., ‘anything to get my degree’)” (p. 32). A fourth aspect of the hidden curriculum is overcoming the separation in time and space that requires “both teachers and students to make their knowledge more explicitly public” (Anderson, p. 33). A fifth aspect of the hidden curriculum involves students working with fewer support services (Anderson). Again, learners are forced to make do with a second class education system.

Theme 3: Online Learning is Cost Effective

Cheaper and Lower Quality Education. The lower cost of distance learning allows governments to present the appearance of providing education without any actual increase in spending on education. Based on policy statements from developing countries, Perraton determines that “despite all the concerns about [distance education’s] quality, higher education is expanding in response to demand and that distance education offers a way of meeting that demand without a commensurate increase in the budget” (2000, p. 183).

Student advocacy groups have spoken out against online learning. First, the Canadian Federation of Students (2000) has expressed their concern with the increasing costs to students, the commercialization and privatization of education, and the “ongoing erosion of quality” (p. 2) resulting from the shift towards online learning. The Canadian Federation of Students-National Graduate Caucus also expressed concern about implications for graduate students and teaching assistants: namely, those issues related to intellectual property, workload and “choice of technology” (2001, p. 2). For example, faculty are losing control of the online courses they develop, which are being offered by less skilled instructors or without any live faculty support, thus reducing costs for the institution (Noble, 1998). In addition, faculty teaching courses online require more administrative time to communicate with distance learners (Noble).

Higher Costs to Students. Lower costs for institutions and government are not always passed on to students. In some developing countries, the perception is that students enrolled in distance learning should be more responsible for their own expenses (Perraton, 2000). In fact, Perraton confirms that governments in developing countries fund distance students at a lower rate than traditional students. Similarly, in industrialized countries, distance learning students face more challenges in financing their education. As Gibson (1998a) explains, distance learners are disadvantaged when accessing student aid, thus facing financial challenges beyond those of on-campus students. At Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), students pay their own costs for mailing, Internet access, and long-distance phone charges for teleconferences, as well as administrative fees, which are doubled for students living outside of the province (MUN, 2005). In 2001, distance learning students also enrolled in courses on campus were advised their materials would no longer be mailed at the university’s expense (MUN, 2001).

According to the National Centre for Education Statistics, as many as one-third of American institutions charged distance learning students additional fees at least part of the time (Lewis, Snow, Farris, Levin, & Greene, 1999). In fact, many distance learning programs, in both developing and industrialized countries, intend to generate profits (Noble, 2001; Perraton, 2000). “In short, students are expected to pay more, and governments are willing to pay less, for an education that both will regard as inferior” (Perraton, p. 188).

Concluding Perspective: The Needs for Deliberations about Distance Learning

To date, there has been little critical exploration of online learning in general. Despite the arguments of researchers and educators that distance-learning opportunities are available from anywhere, at any time, for anyone, there are clearly more complex issues to consider. Distance learning is not as inclusive as promoters would have one believe. It disadvantages some groups by excluding them from traditional educational settings. Moreover, distance learning is not as accessible as it appears. Many potential learners are excluded because they cannot access appropriate computer resources due to a lack of equipment, skills or confidence. Thus, as this paper indicates, there is a definite need for extensive discussion of distance learning that presents an alternative to the rhetoric provided by government, business and post-secondary education. With a more complete understanding of the issues surrounding distance and online learning, adult educators can see beyond the rhetoric to focus on the needs of the learner.

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