

## **Editorial in English:**

### **Meeting of Two Worlds: Distance Education in Latin America**

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This special issue of the *Journal of Distance Education* is dedicated to the 500th anniversary of what some have called the greatest event in the history of the Americas and Europe, perhaps even in human history. The arrival of Christopher Columbus's caravels in the West Indies in 1492 heralded waves of European and African immigration and initiated most of the good and some of the very worst that has happened ever since. Mario Vargas Llosa (1995), author and politician, notes that Columbus's voyages and those that followed served to shake up: "geography, economy, religion, morality and the imagination of humanity. And it changed the course of history like probably nothing before it except, perhaps, the biblical flood" (p. 31). In this century many have angrily claimed that Columbus's arrival merely led the way for European imperialism, colonialism, and now neocolonialism in the Americas. It is also fashionable five hundred years later to assume a state of "political correctness" by practising historical exorcism and pretending that much of what has happened should be forgotten. The pre-Columbian world cannot be re-established, and, after all, the peoples of the New World, including those with the most highly developed civilizations, were involved in wars of conquest long before the Europeans arrived. Since 1492, the histories of peoples widely dispersed and isolated from each other have become interconnected and finally inseparable. This Latin American issue honours this significant event in history and makes its own small step in the irreversible march of humanity towards universal commonality by breaking down the barriers of language for distance educators in the Americas.

Even though North Americans are aware that there has been a wide use of distance education in Latin America, there has been limited contact between practitioners there and their Canadian and American counterparts. The main reason the work of Latin American educators is relatively unknown is that most of their work is published only in Spanish or Portuguese. When opportunities to transcend the language barriers occur - for instance at the International Council for Distance Education (ICDE) XV World Conference in Venezuela (1990) - they have led to greater and more meaningful contacts between the Americas.

The Canadian Association for Distance Education (CADE) agreed to publish this special issue as an opportunity for our Latin American colleagues to present their ideas in their own languages. The Inter-American Distance Education Network (CREAD) helped by disseminating the call for papers. Compiling the special issue has not been easy and it has taken longer than the editors ever anticipated. But in the process we received the assistance of many individuals, and we consider the effort worthwhile. The articles represent a good sample of distance education practices and development in Latin America, and we hope they will foster more interest in inter-American co-operation.

Luisa Figueroa presents a descriptive study that compares students' approaches to learning in two settings: one group of students was in a face-to-face course, and the other was in a distance education course. Distance educators may be surprised to note that her findings reveal that the distance education students were more interested in their own learning than the regular students and that they valued the role of tutors and the system of education in the National Autonomous University of Mexico as a whole more. The students in the regular university courses showed less involvement and were more negative or had more negative attitudes regarding the context in which their learning occurred. While Figueroa's results reveal evidence of distinct approaches to learning in the two groups, there was no significant difference in the level of comprehension of the content materials. Her study also shows the methodological difficulty of analyzing qualitative data and the complexity of students' learning in both distance and face-to-face instruction.

Juan Meléndez Alicea's article derives from his study of the effectiveness of distance education as a methodology for developing thinking skills. The study began with the premise that it is impossible to teach thinking skills to students if the teacher has not mastered these skills beforehand. A course was developed to teach instructional methodology to pre-service teachers so that they could improve their own thinking skills. This model of cognitive development is the official methodology of Puerto Rico's Department of Education. It was developed for a multimedia distance education experiment that compared a distance education group and a control (face-to-face) group. Its major findings were that it is possible to develop thinking skills through distance education if the courses are designed to do so and that non-traditional means of evaluation are necessary in order to assess development of thinking skills.

Maria Christina Zentgraf argues the need for educators to contribute to improving the quality and credibility of post-graduate distance education courses (specialization and upgrading) taught in Brazil. Her article begins with a review of experiences in distance education and describes the modalities of distance education most frequently used in the country. She reports her consultations with specialists and summarizes how they deliver and supervise graduate education courses. The article concludes with a recommendation that distance education courses have to be planned, executed, and evaluated according to the specific characteristics of teleeducation to ensure their quality and credibility. Finally, she calls for greater university involvement in the

training of human resources and in the development of research in the field of distance education.

The article co-authored by Guiselle Bolaños-Mora, Jesusita Alvarado-Blanco, Giuseppa D'Agostino-Santoro, and Mayra Segura-Loaiza reviews how contact is established between student and knowledge. Communication for distance education delivery may use several media, such as telephone, mail (postal and electronic), written text, video text, and audio-visual material. Developing courses creates the need for a system of control that, among other things, determines the developmental quality of instructional media and its use. The article proposes a methodological model based on criteria that permit evaluation of both written materials and their design and production. Didactic, communicative, graphic, and visual aspects of the content are included in the criteria.

Marta Mena analyzes the problems involved in producing materials for distance education. Her article raises some concerns about the traditional model of designing materials, questioning the rigid formats, vertical communication, and lack of dialogue style. She also questions the production methods because they often seem more appropriate to a publishing company than a distance education unit. She proposes to diminish distance by creating materials that are not intended to be self-sufficient, that provide information for analysis and discussion, that consider the receiver as belonging to a group, that create space for participation, that provide twoway and multi-directional communication, and that require production and not reproduction of answers. The author reflects on the need to undertake research within the method itself in order to set aside ritual and routine behaviours in preparing materials. The article proposes a model that recommends the inclusion of well-defined distinct moments or "strips" in material design. She challenges all of us to make the dream of producing materials that provoke in our students an authentic rejoicing in knowledge a reality.

In addition to these research articles, this issue also contains two special features. The first, by Antonio Miranda Justiniani and María Yee Seuret is on the background and development of distance education in Cuba since the revolution in 1959. The article describes how guided education (Distance Education) began in Cuba in 1979-1980. The authors believe that distance education in Cuba has become an ideal complement to their education system, which has as a principle equal opportunity and access for all Cuban citizens who want to have a higher degree. The article gives the details of organizational structure (there are 15 centres throughout the country) and the study plans available, describing the current 5 degrees. Today there are more than 20,000 students taking degrees offered in all the centres, with about 50 per cent of the students enrolled at Universidad de la Habana.

The second special feature is a co-authored article by María del Carmen Malbrán, María del Rosario Cédola, Viviana Raquel Pérez, and María Alejandra Zangara. The authors describe a project in Argentina that is designed to transform a semi-traditional system into a distance education system. The project's expected outcomes are capturing a larger audience, increasing

retention and graduation rates, and reorienting practising teachers. The feature article describes three key aspects: course grouping in content and skill "circles," assigning new roles to professors, and the presence of local tutors. The authors' key outcome from the project consists of being able to guarantee its ecological viability and its efficiency for training teachers of the mentally retarded in a distance education system.

Like all issues of the *Journal*, this one was a collaborative effort. The guest editors owe a special debt of thanks to the authors and to those who reviewed their work in such a thorough and constructive manner: Miguel Casas-Armengol, Jane Cowan, Nelson Giannini, Monique Layton, Jennifer O'Rourke, and Lucio Teles.

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### **References**

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