

Theory and Practice of Distance Education

Börje Holmberg.
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240 pages, hardback.

Holmberg's work in the field of distance education spans more than 35 years. Once a practitioner of correspondence education at Hermods in Sweden, he has in recent years been a professor at the FernUniversität in Germany, building up a unit that carries out research in distance education. He is now at the point of retirement. The present book, building on previous ones, is a compilation of his views.

Holmberg sees the book as a vade-mecum for "both colleagues in distance education and scholars chiefly interested academically in the subject." Despite the growing popularity and importance of distance education there are still very few general books on the subject, and the publication of this one is, therefore, welcome. It is arranged in five chapters amounting to about 200 pages of text:

1. Prolegomena
2. The practice of distance education
3. Theoretical approaches to distance education and their practical consequences
4. Evaluating distance education
5. The academic discipline of distance education.

The chapter titles give an indication that the book ranges widely; the contents page, however, reveals a striking imbalance in the weight accorded to the various topics. Over half the book is taken up with chapter 2, whereas chapter 5 consists of 5 pages; the remaining chapters are approximately equal in length.

This immediately suggests that the theme of practice is given more serious treatment than that of theory. Indeed, the main component of chapter 2 is an extensive discussion of questions relating to the development of distance teaching texts. There is a great deal of useful formation

here, which may guide the practitioner who wants to learn how to teach effectively at a distance.

The chapter, however, lacks clarity. Many readers new to distance education may find it difficult to extract the useful. The chapter offers a presentation of research findings so comprehensive that conclusions and insights are sometimes swamped by data. A reference supports almost every point. The references are curiously dated given the rapid recent growth of distance education; a quick count indicates that among a total of about 450 items in the book's bibliography, almost half, about 220, were published before 1980. The reader may be left wondering not only what conclusions to draw from the evidence, but also whether it is reliable and up to date.

Chapter 2 also lacks balance. The discussion of text is at the expense of other media. There are barely nine pages on the functions and choice of media, and the design and development of audio and video materials gets a further half page, the main advice being to apply what has been said about text to other media. The chapter, in effect, provides a description of correspondence education, with passing recognition for the potential of other media.

The academic may find the book of greater value than the practitioner. Those who are interested in the history of distance education will find much interesting detail, drawn mostly from Europe and North America. Holmberg is thoroughly conversant with the evolution of correspondence study, though those who wonder how open universities came about and where the idea of combining print and broadcasts came from will need to look elsewhere.

The treatment of theory, perhaps, has most to offer. Chapter 3, though much briefer than chapter 2, carries more weight. It avoids the compendium approach. A brief summary of earlier work on theory precedes a presentation of the author's own position. Holmberg has clear views, firmly rooted in liberal traditions. He values distance education for its potential to provide the adult individual with opportunities for independent study. He concludes that:

Distance education is a separate kind of education, which cannot be regarded as a substitute for conventional schooling because of its openness to adults gainfully employed and/or fully occupied with family life, its independence of face-to-face meetings, classes, and generally of time and place, its combination of mass-communication and individualization, its potentials for student autonomy, and its special methodology.

There is much that is contentious in this paragraph. The description of distance education does not reflect what actually occurs in many instances, and many would argue that the future of distance education lies in its gradual integration with the mainstream of education rather than in its separation. The value of the chapter lies in the presentation of firm views that provide a stimulus for debate and discussion.

In conclusion, the book is a useful addition to the author's works, but is at the same time something of a disappointment. The best parts are chapters 1 and 3; chapter 2, which forms the bulk of the book, would benefit from disciplined pruning. Overall, the book lacks structural unity, and it requires a committed reader to extract the nuggets from the ore.

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