

4: Further to the Question of whether Distance Education is a Discipline

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It has been very gratifying to see that my article in the first number of the *Journal of Distance Education* in 1986 about distance education as an academic discipline has met with great interest and has caused some discussion. I refer especially to the contributions of Greville Rumble (1988) and Malcolm Tight (1988).

One basic question is to what extent an area of research and academic teaching to be called a discipline must be "independent of any 'foundation discipline.'" To Greville Rumble this is a condition. To him, then, phonetics cannot be a discipline as it is based on the study of languages, anatomy, acoustics, and other "foundation disciplines." And what about biochemistry and comparative linguistics, for example? In Rumble's view none of these should be called disciplines. Most of what he says in the second part of his conclusion when describing a discipline otherwise seems to apply to all these areas, including distance education.

Tight in his Dialogue contribution claims that there is "no dividing line between distance and conventional, face-to-face education," whereas Rumble finds a difference in the circumstance that distance education is more often concerned with adults than is face-to-face education. To both, distance education seems to be only a substitute for conventional education, to be applied when found practical. This is an interpretation of its character that well agrees with much practice. The most typical example is no doubt the Australian so-called New England model, which implies perfect parallelism between distance study and on-campus study (the same tutors and study materials, the same pacing and timetables, the same examinations, and so on). This is what I have elsewhere called a small-scale approach which sometimes even means that students are treated "as members of a class, although that class is distributed geographically" (Leslie, 1979).

Regarding distance education as a mode of education in its own right has very different consequences. It implies using its full potentials in addressing

individual students (not classes), but by developing courses for large target groups. The educational activity is adaptable not only to geographical conditions, but also to the content, periods, and length of the study acceptable to students. Students' ability or willingness to follow timetables and specified curricula, to take part in face-to-face sessions, and so forth is of little importance. Their needs, inclinations, work, and family conditions are the decisive factors. While one student can give 20 hours a week to his or her study, another may have (or wish) to limit the study to 3 or 4 hours a week. The individual student thus decides on goal, pacing, and length of study. Distance education as seen as a mode of education in its own right is evidently a paradoxical combination of mass communication and individualization.

To somebody who does regard distance education as a mode of education in its own right—as, for example, Otto Peters (1983) does in his discussion of distance education as an industrial form of teaching and learning—it is natural to stress both its specific character and what makes it different from conventional education. The consideration of its special characteristics evidently paves the way for regarding the academic study of distance education as a discipline.

One of Rumble's arguments against accepting the disciplinary character of distance education is that its research methodology differs little from that of behavioral science. To Rumble, education, psychology, and, perhaps, sociology seem to be behavioral sciences with similar research methods (which will be accepted by some and rejected by others). The point, however, seems to be that the research methodologies must by definition be very different to allow the recognition of these subjects as separate disciplines. I get the impression that Rumble recognizes behavioral science but not an individual subject of a behavioral type as a discipline. I doubt if this is a common interpretation.

In his article Rumble also discusses the theory concept and the character and level of theories of distance education. While accepting that my theory attempts are explanatory, he criticizes them for being only partially predictive. It is perfectly true that I only claim limited predictive power for them, but surely this limitation must apply not only to mine but also to all theories concerning human action involving emotional and cognitive aspects?

The old epistemological discussion of understanding and explaining may have been what Rumble had at the back of his mind when referring to the study of history, in which naturally no predictive theory is possible. Here understanding and hermeneutical interpretation are usually stressed. It would be misleading to reject these activities as irrelevant to the study of distance education. My theory attempts to include elements of this kind, but they are chiefly based on the research methodology of Popper's critical rationalism. It

is thus evident to me that they—like all other theories—are of an ad hoc character. To have scholarly value they must be testable, however. What I call the discipline of distance education includes such theories.

Whether distance education is a discipline or not is a matter of definition. I have given my definition in my article of 1986 and have on that basis come to the conclusion that distance education as a well-defined area of research and academic teaching is to be described as a discipline. My critics have come to other conclusions on the basis of a different understanding of the discipline concept—and, possibly of the concept of distance education. I am grateful to them for their contributions to the discussion.

References

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