

## Democracy in Distance Education and the Role of Tutorial and Counselling Services

*Alan Tait*

The theme of this article concerns the extent to which distance education is allied to democracy. The industrialised model of distance education first advanced by Peters (1983), accurately identified the nature of the operation that, through its ability to fulfil large scale educational plans in the most cost effective way, made it very attractive for governmental planning. Although much of Peters' model has subsequently been revised and criticised, in this it remains accurate. For example, the Peking Television and Radio University has approximately 1,000,000 students, while the Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Thailand, has some 350,000 students.<sup>1</sup> The British Open University has over 75,000 degree level students. These are massive educational undertakings initiated by central governments in order to increase access and opportunity to a far wider range of people and to meet national needs. It is thus not inappropriate in discussing an educational enterprise of this scale to relate it to the political systems of the countries concerned, and in terms of popular participation to refer to the concept of democracy.

The importance of distance education in providing opportunity is associated in many instances with the word *open*, and indeed open learning has come to prominence in the United Kingdom as a term over and above distance education. The characteristics of openness which are widely important include:

- i. The institution is open without entry qualifications to those who wish to apply.
- ii. The home-based nature of study, together with the<sup>2</sup> expectation that the part-time mode will be available, allows much wider access.
- iii. The opportunity in some institutions to enrol and start at any time, without a waiting period also increases access.

The above characteristics potentially allow people to gain access to education on a greater scale than ever before, with fewer of the barriers of geography, class or gender. In other words, educational opportunity is more democratically available through distance education and open learning than through other conventional methods.

The wide variety of political systems of the countries mentioned above suggests that, while distance education undoubtedly provides access, commitment to the concept democracy must be so variable as to render it meaningless. The example of the now defunct Free University of Iran, established under the Shah (Perraton, 1983), is a reminder that distance education was introduced not for students who could not meet, but to provide a system where students should not meet. In addition, Perry (1976) noted that by 1960/61 some 40% of all graduates in the Soviet Union had followed at least a part of their course by correspondence, a forerunner of distance education. The example of political regimes cited here are not in any way intended to equate them, but to show that distance education can be adopted principally to meet national needs because of the scale of operation it can offer. The purpose of the educational experience may not necessarily be democratic in any shared sense.

The dimension of democracy which I wish to raise here concerns the quality of the learning experiences, the ability of adults to participate in the relation of knowledge to their own situation, and in the challenge to, as well as the assimilation of, knowledge and ideas. I would refer in this context to the concept of adult status in adult education developed by Knowles (1978).

In this paper I argue that there are aspects of Peters' (1983) model of industrialised systems of teaching which are nearer to a closed system of education than an open one. In fact, the potential exists for what could be termed totalitarian educational practice to be implemented with a minimum of opportunity for student participation.

This is of particular relevance in Britain at present where what is termed open learning is expanding enormously, principally in the field of vocational education, business education, and training. There has been an explicit policy at the governmental level to replace public funding with corporate sponsorship, and to replace the consensus around liberal education values, which has been previously influential in British education. There has been a new challenge to educationalists to meet needs determined by government and business, rather than to offer courses derived from academic tradition and individual academic interest. Neither approach is in itself necessarily student-related at the micro level, or democratic in the larger sense.

In considering the question of democracy and distance education, I would like to refer to an article by Thorpe, in which she writes:

a course is not the correspondence units, texts and course related materials produced by course team; it is not a set of products, but a process, which 'happens' every academic year through the interaction of students, tutors and the course team, based on the course materials produced by the centre (Thorpe, 1979).

Thorpe's argument concerns the importance of using tutor and student experience in evaluating courses. Her argument can also be used in a different way, to suggest that the mediation and interpretation of course material by the tutor (or facilitator, or counsellor) represents a central function in promoting the independence of the learner, and in supporting educational practice which can be termed democratic. This is not, to use Thorpe's words,

an infringement of the role of an OU part-time tutor; it does not represent a replacement of course materials by the tutor's own version (Thorpe 1979).

The above argument does not assume that course materials do not attempt to offer, indeed engender discussion, if only of an internal nature. In contrast, there are some course materials written with the assumption that students are empty vessels to be filled. In addition, some tutors adopt the empty vessel approach to adult learning. Nonetheless, there seems to be increasing recognition that as Kelly (1987) put it, "however well designed, course materials are not truly interactive and cannot be interrogated." Garrison and Baynton (1987) have addressed a similar range of issues around the concepts of independence and control, and argue that control on the student's part may realistically, if paradoxically, depend on tutorial and/or counselling support.

The main argument I want to present concerns the nature of tuition and counselling, and the role they play within distance education. I would propose that they have an essential role in individualizing mass produced course materials and encouraging students to make sense of knowledge and information on their own terms. Tuition and counselling oppose the potential of distance education for totalitarian practice where a monopoly on what is allowed as knowledge can be enshrined in the course units. I would argue, therefore, that tuition and counselling are not only important for distance education as an option in the years when the budget is good, or for students with special needs, but as an element of the learning experience which virtually concerns adult status, and democratic values.

This argument differs from many discussions of student support services which base their rationale on the prevention of drop-out, assisting weaker learners, or counselling for personal problems. Such an approach limits support to a minority of students, with an emphasis on problem-based or pathological characteristics.

The same concern is approached from a different perspective by Boot and Hodgson (1987), when they write of the difference between a development orientation (concerned with the development of individual students) as opposed to the dissemination phenomenon (where open learning allows for the more effective dissemination of knowledge). The models of knowledge are described for development as "knowing as a process of engaging with and attributing meaning to the world, including self in it," while for dissemination, as "knowledge as a valuable commodity existing independently of people which

can be stored and transmitted." The dissemination approach tends to reflect "a hierarchical image of society in which authority and power reside with those who are the holders and regulators of expert knowledge."

The dissemination model, developed in the context of open learning, relates closely to Peters' (1983) definition of distance education as an industrial function. Peters (1983) sees distance education providing for the objectification of knowledge and that the best course material will replace all the variety of individual lecturers working in conventional universities. He writes

the advantages of objectifying the teaching process in the form of a distance study course lie in the fact that the teaching process can then be reproduced, thus making it available at any time, and above all that it can be manipulated.

Peters (1983) reveals the very danger I am trying to point out, that of manipulation. In arguing that distance education can avoid the hierarchical personal relations in university education, Peters fails to see that this hierarchy can be incorporated in a way that is far more dangerous, and which because of the scale on which it operates, may be potentially undemocratic. The extent to which we have moved from Peters' model is revealed in the most recent contribution by Sewart (1987). He asks whether the study centre is "the dustbin of distance education" (ie. is it where everything that is difficult in terms of educational technology must be located). Would it be an improvement to do away with the study centre? Sewart resists this, arguing that opportunities for face-to-face meeting (and this can be replicated by telephone) are vital if "students as individuals are to fit new knowledge into their own pre-existing intellectual framework, even into their everyday attitudes and behaviour."

In conclusion, I would summarize with three ideas;

1. That the dissemination model of knowledge is dangerously influential in distance education;
2. Because of the scale of operation of distance education<sup>7</sup> institutions and their closeness to direct governmental planning, it is appropriate to examine their political characteristics;
3. That tuition and counselling in distance education and open learning, acting to individualize the mass product, have an essential role, that at the micro level accords with notions of adult status for adult learners, and at the broadest level is supportive of democratic educational practice.

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### Note

<sup>1</sup>Figures obtained from the International Centre for Distance Learning, Milton Keynes, England

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Alan Tait  
The Open University  
United Kingdom