Pessimism and Reality: A More Up-to-date Look at Distance Teaching in the Third World

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In a book published in 1980, my colleagues and I from the International Extension College argued that distance education held promise for the Third World:

> There is a contrast between the uses to which distance teaching has been put in Europe, North America and Australia and what it is now being asked to do in Africa, Latin America and Asia. In the West it has been used mainly to extend education to fairly small and well-defined groups of people who could not get access to ordinary education. In Africa attempts have been made to use distance teaching on a relatively much larger scale. The aim has been not to expand education to embrace the last 5 per cent of the population, but to offer something to the half of the population who never get to school as children, or the three-quarters or more who receive no adult education. Can it be done? (Young, Perraton, Jenkins, and Dodds; 1980)

We went on to examine the experiences of distance education throughout the Third World and to consider how the techniques might be further used to accelerate educational change.

Geoff Arger's article, *Promise and Reality: A Critical Analysis of Literature on Distance Education in the Third World* (Arger, 1987), is timely in its review of progress. Arger claims that "the promise of distance education was portrayed as its ability to offer mass, quality, cost-efficient education which could effect social change" (p.43). He examines literature available in Australia, with our book as a key source of material and of references, and concludes that today the promise "remains unfulfilled."

However, Arger bases his conclusion on out-of-date evidence. A look at the list of sources he has referred to shows that in a five-page list of references, only nine — among these, admittedly, some collections of papers — were published after 1980. In his article he reiterates the arguments of our book, claims to consider recent progress, but bases his conclusion that there has been little change on sources that predate the book.

In his article he seems to assume that the Third World is an unchanging unity. He mentions, for example, lack of electricity and poor postal services as problems that have often been ignored. That is no longer true, as efforts are made today to design distance learning systems to suit local environments.

Arger is interested in the idea that distance education can bypass certain factors that constrain the development of the formal education system, but he argues that this has not happened because the necessary infrastructure and conditions are absent. He overstates the case. In particular, he is concerned that much distance education is inappropriately influenced by donor agencies from rich countries, quoting Carnoy to support his case:

> Ultimately, the role of aid-giving, international education agencies within low-income countries is, "to influence the change in certain directions consistent with the interests of the transnational bourgeoisies" (Carnoy, 1980, p. 280). It is within this perspective that the promise of aid for distance education must be seen. (Arger, 1987, p.51)

It is perhaps understandable that a researcher without first-hand experience who reads materials that originate largely from rich countries, rather than from the Third World would be attracted by such a view. The fact is, however, that the majority of distance education initiatives, including some that have endured now for 20 or more years, are indigenous. Few of them receive foreign aid, and that aid is usually only a small contribution. Institutions, such as the government correspondence colleges in some African countries, have steadily provided education for thousands of their citizens, in spite of scarce resources.

Arger is right to draw attention to the relative failure of distance education to fulfill its promise. It is true that not as much has been achieved as we hoped when we wrote our book. But much progress has been made. In the remainder of this article I will look at the directions of this progress and argue that we have reached a turning point: distance education is now achieving far greater recognition than it has previously.

Any consideration of distance education in the Third World needs to be set against the background of education. Third World countries are still unable to provide schooling for all their children. Compare the figures for a few key countries. Canada and the United Kingdom, for example, can provide primary and secondary schooling for every child, and higher education for 42 per cent and 20 per cent respectively of those aged 20 to 24 (1983 figures). Kenya provides primary schooling for virtually every child, but secondary school for about 20 per cent and higher education for one per cent. Other countries, such as India, do not yet provide primary education for all; there most boys go to school, but only about two-thirds of the girls do so. The situation elsewhere is similar.

Yet education has expanded dramatically since the late 1960s. Then, only half of Kenya's children and three-quarters of those of India's went to primary school. That expansion has been partly at the expense of quality. Arger, understandably, is disappointed that the style of education is still traditional, based on rote learning. While all serious educators share this view — and recent developments include attempts to move away from restricted traditional modes of schooling and

to integrate formal and non-formal education — it is important to recognize that basic education of any kind has top priority. It is distressing that education is of low quality, and it is arguable that poor primary schools are of no use; on the other hand, the sheer achievement of not only keeping schools open but also expanding education, when national economies are struggling, is remarkable. Kenya, for example, has moved from half of its children in primary education 20 years ago to near universal schooling, even though its actually population is growing faster than anywhere else.

Expansion of schooling means more money must be allocated to education budgets, and when no more can be spared, less resources can be spent on each child. In such circumstances, where even schools struggle to survive, it is impressive that governments are able to spare anything for distance education. Many, however, are committed to providing some facilities, however meager, for those who drop out or are left out of formal school.

Against this background, it is remarkable that the distance education institutions founded in the 1960s and 1970s have survived and made progress and that many new projects have been started in the 1980s.

What are the Most Significant Recent Developments?

First, distance education is widely used as a complement to the formal education system, both for expanding access and improving quality. Few applications of distance teaching have such an impact on the school system as schemes for training primary teachers, and the last few years have seen important initiatives. In 1980 we reported on a new scheme in Tanzania to train at a distance 15,000 new teachers annually, in an effort to contribute to the country's drive towards universal primary education. Not only were 45,000 teachers trained, but subsequent research indicated they might be better teachers than their conventionally trained peers (Chale, 1983).

Meanwhile, in newly independent Zimbabwe, the government used distance teaching to launch an emergency teacher training programme, ZINTEC (Gatawa, 1986). This was so successful that plans were made to incorporate a distance component in all subsequent teacher training.

Both of these were indigenous, government initiatives that had a profound effect on primary education. At the secondary level, developments were less dramatic, although there has been some expansion of both supervised study centre schemes at the secondary level for out-of-school young people and of distance schemes for adults, such as the Open School in India (Dewal, 1986). A notable development has been the interest of international agencies in learning from such indigenous developments and encouraging new countries to take them up; the initiative was taken by the World Bank with a major research study (Perraton, 1982).

At the university level the main initiatives have been in Asia, with some developments in Latin America and the Caribbean and a very few in Africa. In rich countries, open universities cater mainly to adults re-entering education; in poorer countries, open universities are an alternative for school leavers to overcrowed conventional universities. The new open universities in Asia are very big: in Thailand and Indonesia they have well over 100,000 students, while the Chinese television universities have more than a million.

Over the past few years, the most spectacular developments in distance education in the Third World have been related to formal education. Our hope in 1980 was for more use of distance education for non-formal education. All the same, there have been several modest but interesting initiatives, such as national radio study campaigns for cooperatives in Zambia, audio study group campaigns about health and water supply in Tanzania, and in-service training for health workers in East African countries. In Pakistan, the Allama Iqbal Open University has set up the Basic Functional Education Programme, a particularly interesting outreach programme using audio cassettes, flipcharts, and study groups to teach subjects like electricity, agricultural credit, and child care to rural people, the majority of whom are illiterate. While this project, like most of the other non-formal projects listed above, started with foreign assistance, it is now self-sustaining[1]

These may be modest successes, but in the new climate of interest in distance education - and of course the initiative of the Commonwealth Heads of Government is an important expression of this - we can expect much more. My hope is that as new plans are made, the wide experience of the Third World will be considered alongside that of the richer countries.

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Note

[1]A full account of the first years of this programme will shortly be published by the International Extension College under the title *Distance Teaching in the Village*.

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