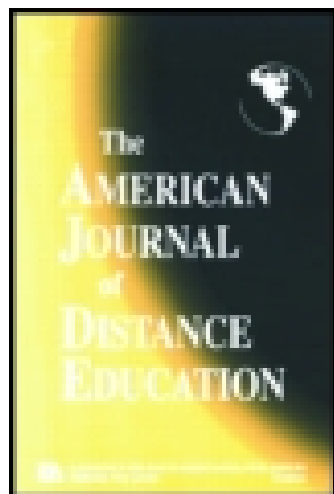




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Editorial

Autonomy and Interdependence

When I began to write about learner autonomy—the potential of distant learners to participate in the determination of their learning objectives, the implementation of their programs of study, and the evaluation of their learning—it was at a time when teaching at a distance was heavily dominated by the ideas of behavioral psychology. Since learners were beyond the immediate environment of the teacher, the main problem of distance education became how to optimally control them. Instructors were urged to identify their goals in very specific behavioral terms, to prescribe a regimen of presentation, practice, and reward, and to test and measure the achievement of all students according to the precise standards built into the objectives. The challenge for the educator was to produce a perfect set of objectives, techniques, and testing devices that would fit every one of a large number of learners at a distance: no one would deviate, no one would fall between the cracks.

While there were, and remain, many useful design techniques in the behaviorist approach, a correction was needed that regarded the idiosyncrasies and independence of learners as valuable resources rather than as a distracting nuisance. To replace the model in which passive subjects—the learners—were trained by irresistibly elegant instructional tools, distance education had to be reconceptualized as a more open partnership of teachers and self-directing learners in which individual learners initiated, conducted, and controlled much of the learning process.

My 1972 presentation to the conference of the International Council for Correspondence Education (the predecessor of the International Council for Distance Education) was called “Learner Autonomy: the Second Dimension of Independent Study.” In that presentation I suggested that learners have different capacities for making decisions about their own learning and that designers of what we would now call distance education programs should take into account those abilities and work with them. The ability of a learner to develop a personal learning plan in some ways different from that of other learners, or the ability to find resources for study in one’s own work or community environment, or the ability to decide for oneself when progress is satisfactory, should not be treated as extraneous and regrettable noise in a smooth-running,

instructor-controlled system, but rather should be seen as powerful energy to be engaged by the instructional designers. Further, learner autonomy should be a goal of distance education. We should consider it good for learners to be self-directing and should try to devise ways of encouraging and supporting them. Not all learners are self-directing; however, since each has an ability and a potential to be self-directing, the educational program should attempt to identify and build on these. Unfortunately, devising a program that supports learners' self-direction is even more difficult than is producing one that controls.

In the years since I first wrote about learner autonomy, we have experienced the telecommunications revolution, as well as the Open University movement, in distance education. Because of these technical and organizational innovations, distance learning is not, or need not be, the individual, lonely activity it used to be. The Open Universities have invented study centers and have built networks of tutor-counselors and learner self-help groups, which are organizational structures that provide for peer group activities. A similar effect has been produced in North America by the development of audio, audiographic, computer, and video teleconferencing. These technologies give us the ability to link instructors with groups of learners, as well as with individuals, and to link individual learners into virtual groups. Distance educators still face the important challenge of engaging with individual students in ways that build on and develop personal learning autonomy.

Equally exciting is the process of developing and engaging interdependence among individuals in distant groups, developing group interdependence within a total system, and developing distant-group autonomy. Problems of autonomy and interdependence center on curriculum, instruction, and interpersonal dynamics (I assume that technologies work!). In a typical United States course that uses teleconferencing technologies to link, let us say, six sites, the curriculum problem is how to integrate the local interests and needs, as well as the local knowledge that lies at each site, into the content to be taught. The instructional problem is how to involve each distant site in determining and implementing objectives. I have not yet heard of any better strategy than to devise local group projects.

In teaching my courses I depend heavily on having each local group decide on a topic or task for presentation to the larger group, i.e., the virtual "class." In teaching research, for example, I have each group decide on a research question to develop locally and present to the "class." In teaching design, I have each group design a module that they teach to the

rest of the “class.” Simple though this sounds, a great deal of care must go into managing the process as distant groups struggle, sometimes flounder, and eventually become organized to accomplish their goals. Generally, I have had happy results with this strategy. Students acquire insights into the distilled wisdom of the literature from the experience of working on their tasks, and they become attached to each other as group members as a result of the mutual struggle.

Predicting which groups will be more successful seems to have little to do with what I have done as an instructional designer. The likelihood of a local site becoming a successful learning group is primarily a result of individual personalities, the level of learner autonomy of group members, and the interpersonal dynamics within the group. Given identical assignments, some groups respond with an extraordinarily high degree of competence, commitment, energy, and creativity while others do not. The former give time far in excess of what is expected, are task oriented, productive, and continue to communicate informally by electronic mail and in other ways, seeming to have fun working together. Surely there can be no better indication that a virtual class has succeeded than that the students do not want to dissolve it when the course ends.

A class that I teach, comprised of nine sites, has petitioned to keep its computer bulletin board active during the summer break; the members wish to continue their interdependent, peer instruction informally during the vacation period. As an instructor it would be nice to claim that this creative environment is part of the plan, but what needs to be explained is why the local environment is much more positive in some sites than in others of the same “class.” To a large extent, it seems to depend on the personalities of the group members, in particular on the degree of personal autonomy of the individuals. Successful groups exhibit a high degree of interdependence among relatively autonomous individuals. In many groups the interdependent members cluster around an informal leader, who acts as a local chairperson, guiding discussion and decision making in an environment characterized by a high degree of participation, division of labor, and collaboration. Sometimes there are no particular leaders, but group members devise ways to share leadership responsibilities. Being relatively autonomous learners, the members of the successful group are likely to have sufficient understanding of the instructional process to be good collaborators with the distant instructor. Problems seem to occur when someone wants a leadership role and is rejected, when two or more people compete for leadership, or when the level of autonomy among the group members is so low that no one is

able to lead the decision-making process. If there are individuals who have difficulty in collaborating with others or who, instead of accepting informal local leadership, look for control from the distant instructor, the situation might become volatile.

The interdependence of the instructor's role and that of the learners is nowhere more evident than in the working of local study groups. The distant instructor can do everything possible to design and encourage an environment that allows for productive activities locally, but, in the end, students must make the environment work for themselves. Much research is needed to find out more about the characteristics of effective distant learning groups in order to train both instructors and students in the knowledge and skills needed to make such groups successful.

Michael G. Moore

Afterword

At the end of every "virtual class" we experience the bitter-sweet emotion of separation from people with whom we have communicated very intensely, perhaps emotionally, for many weeks. This is perhaps surprising to those who think that distance education is impersonal; in fact, the very opposite is often true. At the end of a recent course, one of the participants expressed his thoughts in the form of a poem posted on the class computer bulletin board. I hope you will agree that it is worth sharing with a wider audience than his "classmates."

Poema de Despedida

Esta ciudad inmensa y rotunda
 por cuyas avenidas
 avanzan soledades repletas de gente,
 por cuyos callejones
 las historias anónimas trascienden
 cada umbral de vida,
 cada umbral de muerte.
 Donde he aprendido que los minutos valen
 tanto o más que el oro,
 que la velocidad no importa,
 siempre es tarde...
 tarde para vivirla,
 tarde para nombrarla.

A Poem of Farewell

This immense and sprawling city
 along whose avenues
 march lonely voids full of people,
 through whose back alleys
 nameless stories pass over
 each threshold of life,
 each threshold of death.
 Where I've learned minutes are worth
 as much or more than gold,
 that speed doesn't really matter,
 it is always too late...
 too late to experience it,
 too late to give it a name.

Entre la piedra y la huella lacustre,
 inmensa, ciudad de bruma oxidada,
 asida, immemorial,
 al colonial gris de España
 que sepulto de Aztlán la senda,
 perviven, eco de voces conectadas
 a vínculos de cobre que atan esperanzas
 con nudo de culturas,
 lo que obliga a la pregunta:

Fuimos la aldea global que profetizó
 McLuhan?
 O fuimos dialogadores eléctricos
 emuladores de Homero?

'Mid stone and lakes of memories,
 immense, city of rusty mist,
 fettered, immemorial,
 above the gray of Spain
 entombing the path from Aztlan,
 there persists an echo of voices connected
 to copper links which knit up hopes
 into their knots of cultures,
 which makes us ask:

Were we the global village McLuhan
 prophesized?
 Or were we electronic voices
 emulating Homer?

Rodolfo Calderon Vivar
 (Translated by Diana Jenkins)