

1 : WHAT IS DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Man has learnt at a distance for many generations. Books have carried information across the barriers of time and space. The development of writing and then of print mean that we can all learn from the distant words of Socrates or St Paul, of Gandhi or Marx. But distance teaching has come to mean something more than the distribution of books. Although we can learn from books, and the existence of the textbook industry depends on that fact, many learners need more than a book as a teacher. They need more, too, than a correspondence course, until recently the most usual form which distance teaching has taken.

What do we mean by distance education? It has been defined as "an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner". Usually, somebody who studies at a distance receives much of his teaching through a correspondence course. He* works at home, rather than going to school or college. In many distance-teaching programmes he will follow radio, or possibly television, programmes which are linked to the correspondence lessons. The correspondence lessons will include work for marking, which the student sends to a tutor and receives marks and comments on it. And in some programmes, particularly in teacher education, there are limited opportunities for face-to-face study so that the student is not left to study alone the whole time. The University of Nairobi, for example, used printed

* Here, and elsewhere we use the word "he" but assume you will read it as "he or she" or "she or he".

correspondence courses which were linked with radio programmes and backed by occasional residential courses in a programme to upgrade primary school teachers. There are advantages in combining media in this way. It enables us to capitalise on the strength of each medium and use those strengths to balance each one's weaknesses. Radio's liveliness can compensate for the coldness and impersonality of print. The permanence of print can compensate for the speed with which a radio signal, or our memory of it, disappears. Occasional face-to-face sessions allow for dialogue of a kind that is impossible in any other medium.

Is it education?

It may be objected that teaching of this kind, with much of the material written or recorded in advance, adds up to instruction but not education, that it amounts to a centralised system of instructing and controlling the flow of information which is appropriate to a nation of slaves but not to free men. Education, surely, is about the liberation of the human spirit, about the development of individual judgement and response, and not about learning a pre-selected set of facts which the teacher considers good for the pupil. Mechanised, mass-produced education, on which distance teaching essentially depends, is a contradiction in terms.

There are two defences of distance teaching, with its dependence on mass-production, against this criticism. First, in practice, much conventional education does, for much of the time, involve a transmission of information from the teacher to the student. While that activity is far from being the whole of education, it is something which takes a lot of time and which can be done in print or through broadcasts. It does not have to be done face-to-face. Indeed, by recording information and handing over the transmission job to mass media, it may be possible to release the limited and precious time and energy of teachers for dialogue with their students. In other words, where teachers are scarce, so that their time is a precious resource, distance teaching may make possible a better use of that resource and one which encourages rather than inhibits dialogue.

The other defence is more practical: it is to look at the results of distance teaching projects and see how far they have contributed to solving our near-universal problems of teacher quality and teacher shortage. While the evidence is limited, as few projects have been thoroughly researched or evaluated, the range of projects using distance teaching for teacher education suggests that many ministries of education have thought it worth trying. Whether distance teaching should play a permanent role in our armoury of educational techniques may be an open question. But its practical advantages, and the results which have been achieved through it, make it look important and defensible at a time of rapid educational expansion. We look at some of the experience in this and later chapters.

Why use distance teaching?

Distance teaching has been used most widely to expand education. In many third world countries it has been seen as a way of making educational resources go further. By recording the work of one teacher, and distributing what has been recorded, it makes it possible to reach large audiences and reach them quickly, despite the shortage of teachers. Distance-teaching methods have been adopted to deal with emergencies where there is an immediate need to increase the number of teachers. In Zimbabwe, for example, a large-scale programme called ZINTEC was launched after independence to train large numbers of primary school teachers. Distance teaching can reach audiences without the need to build new schools or colleges to house our students. There are practical advantages, for the administrator if not for the learner, when students can learn at home.

At the same time distance teaching has been used not simply to widen educational opportunities but to raise the quality of education. It has been used to introduce new subjects into the school curriculum. It has been used to raise the quality of teachers who are already at work in schools.

For teacher education it has two particular advantages. First, it can provide education on the job. Where a ministry of education is employing a large number of untrained teachers, then it may be unrealistic to take

them out of school and give them conventional full-time training. If they are to be displaced by teachers even less experienced and less trained than themselves, then there is a high price to pay in terms of the quality of education by removing them from school. Correspondence and radio can reach them while they continue to teach, (although it has sometimes been suggested that teachers then neglect some of their class work in order to work on their correspondence lessons). Second, distance education can do something to overcome the problems of remote schools and remote teachers. While it is not as easy to send printed lessons to the most distant school as it is to the nearest, the barriers in the way of radio signals and printed lessons are less than those which prevent teachers in remote schools from attending regular up-grading sessions at a teacher centre or a college of education.

Distance teaching has also proved attractive to ministries of education for financial reasons. As the costs of making and distributing printed lessons or broadcasts do not rise with the number of students, it may be possible to achieve economies of scale. (This does not mean that distance teaching is always cheaper than the conventional alternative: in the Kenyan example quoted, for example, the costs per student were probably higher than for those attending orthodox classes.)

But under some circumstances distance teaching may be a cheap way of expanding education or improving it.

We can sum up:

1. Distance teaching makes it possible for a few teachers to reach a large number of students.
2. It makes it possible for education to be expanded without building extra schools or colleges. It can use existing buildings when they would otherwise be standing idle.
3. It makes it possible for students to learn while they continue to work. Teachers do not need to be removed from their schools in order to study and qualify.
4. Distance teaching can achieve economies of scale.

Once teaching materials have been produced and the system established the cost of enrolling additional students is relatively low.

Of course it does not follow that distance teaching is a panacea, offering a solution to every educational problem. Along with its advantages go a very real set of drawbacks. It can be cold, remote and didactic, everything that we associate with the word 'distant' as it applies to human relations. It lends itself to rote learning; where teaching is based on a printed text it is all too easy for the students' activity to degenerate into rote learning and an excessive reliance on the printed word. Distance teaching has also often been marked by high drop-out rates, themselves a measure of student dissatisfaction with learning and the difficulty of studying by oneself. And it is more difficult to build a dialogue into distance teaching and stimulate the individual responses and judgements by students which mark a good classroom or a good seminar.

A good distance-teaching programme will therefore try to overcome these drawbacks in order to reap the practical benefits which we have already discussed. The drawbacks are real enough. A possible working assumption is that distance teaching is neither inherently superior nor inherently inferior to other forms of education, provided that it balances that which is mass produced and centralised, against at least a minimum of discussion and dialogue. And that means that we need to consider it along with other educational approaches before deciding whether it is suitable for a particular educational task. The aim of this book is to make that a better informed choice.

How has distance teaching been used?

Over the last twenty years distance teaching has been used for purposes which range from university level education to basic health education for some millions of participants. Even within the narrower field of teacher education, distance teaching methods have been used for students with different backgrounds and different aims.

The educational expansion of the 1960s and 1970s meant

that many countries were employing primary school teachers with little more than primary education themselves. After some years, however, such teachers have often acquired a reasonable experience in the actual process of teaching and managing a class. What they may lack is adequate knowledge of the subject matter which they are teaching - the kind of knowledge which they would have obtained by going to secondary school, or going there for longer. Some of the earlier distance teaching schemes were designed to fill this gap. The University of Nairobi programme, for example, was designed to provide the equivalent of a secondary level course for teachers which they could follow while they were working.

Distance teaching was used with a rather broader aim, for a very similar group of untrained teachers in Botswana. Here, in contrast with the University of Nairobi scheme, teachers received correspondence courses which aimed both at raising their subject knowledge and increasing their skills as classroom teachers. The Botswana courses tried at the same time to teach experienced but untrained teachers about geography, for example, and about techniques for teaching geography in the primary school classroom. They combined correspondence with radio and short spells of residential study.

By the late 1970s in widely different countries the pressure for universal primary education was becoming irresistible. In both Nigeria and Tanzania, for example, government decisions were taken to adopt Universal Primary Education as a national priority even though there were not anything like enough trained teachers for it. In both these cases the countries adopted distance teaching as a means of providing in-service training for inexperienced trainee teachers. The teachers were recruited straight to the schools where they started work under supervision and at the same time began work on their training courses.

Distance teaching has been used for teaching one other group of teachers. Teachers, like others, need new skills as time goes on and new skills as they move into jobs with new demands. New curricula, for example, present teachers with new problems. The Mauritius College of the Air, the National Extension College in England and others have, used distance teaching for

introducing new approaches to the teaching of mathematics for serving and experienced teachers. The UNWRA/Unesco Institute of Education, whose function since 1964 has been to provide education for Palestinian refugees, launched a distance teaching programme to provide basic training for its own unqualified teachers. In time, all its teachers were qualified and trained and it began instead to use the same methods for training head teachers and heads of department, concentrating on educational management rather than subject expertise.

Just as the purposes for which distance teaching has been used have varied from place to place with differing needs and differing audiences, so programmes have been organised by a variety of different kinds of institution. We can distinguish four. First, some countries have established distance-teaching units both for teacher training and for education of other kinds. In Lesotho, for example, the Lesotho Distance Teaching Centre runs a variety of formal and non-formal programmes for adults and also co-operates with the National Teachers Training Centre in running programmes specifically for teachers. The focus of that institution is thus on the techniques of education which it uses. Second, some universities have run distance-education programmes. We have mentioned the one at Nairobi where the Institute of Adult Studies set up a distance teaching unit. A different approach was adopted by the University of the South Pacific where distance-education programmes for teachers were organised within the School of Education. Then, third, some colleges of education have run distance teaching programmes alongside their regular work. Finally, as we saw in the case of Botswana, some teacher education colleges were established with the running of distance teaching programmes as their central activity.

One feature is common to all these approaches to teacher education: distance teaching is not something to be run separately from the rest of the educational system. Thus distance teaching is a tool to be used along with others, which depends for its success on the wise use which it makes of local resources.

The links between a distance-teaching programme and the wider educational system are both educational and financial. Where distance-teaching programmes have led

their students to new qualifications and increased pay, they have tended to be successful, if we measure success in terms of the number of students completing the course or passing their examinations. In contrast, in some programmes trainee teachers have expected promotion as a result of their study, only to find their parent ministry unwilling to make the promotions at the end. The effect on morale is disastrous. The major determinants of success and failure are often not the organisation of distance education, discussed in this book, but issues like pay, promotion, status.

How does it work?

For distance teaching to be successful, the student needs to receive materials appropriate to his needs, he needs to get them regularly and to have his work encouraged, supervised and marked. To make all that happen, the administrator and teacher need adequate information about their students and an efficient system for communicating with them. To know whether their work is successful, they need some mechanism for evaluation. We look at these elements in chapter 2.

Summary

1. Many recent distance-teaching projects have used a multi-media approach, combining correspondence lessons with radio and some face-to-face study.
2. Distance teaching can be criticised as a mass-produced and centralised system of instruction which is not education, but it can be defended if it allows and encourages dialogue and if, in practice, students learn effectively.
3. For teacher education it has the advantages that:
 - 3.1 a few teachers can reach many students;
 - 3.2 education can be expanded without building extra schools or colleges;
 - 3.3 teachers and trainees can learn on the job;

- 3.4 economies of scale may be possible.
4. Distance teaching has been used for:
- 4.1 upgrading experienced but unqualified teachers;
 - 4.2 initial training of teachers on the job, as with the Universal Primary Education training schemes;
 - 4.3 specialist courses, e.g. for head teachers and heads of departments.
5. Distance-teaching programmes for teachers have been run by: distance-teaching institutions; universities; colleges of education alongside their regular work; colleges of education established to specialise in distance teaching.
6. Pay, conditions of employment and promotion of trainees are at least as important as the quality of organisation and teaching in making a project succeed or fail.