

1: What is distance education and how does it work?

This book is to help people who want to know whether distance education is useful for them. It is neither a blueprint nor special pleading. Instead it suggests what questions to ask in considering whether distance education makes sense in a particular context, and examines the different ways in which it can be organised.

The argument of the book can be stated succinctly. Experience has shown that distance education can be used for various different purposes. In considering its use we can start by asking who it can teach, what it can be used for, and how well it works. At that stage you may decide that distance education is irrelevant to your needs and go no further. But if you do go on, the question changes subtly: chapters 2, 3 and 4 together ask, 'given that we may try distance education, how can we best make it succeed?', examining the resources needed for distance education and its working methods. Once we have devised an educational and administrative strategy, it is possible, in chapters 5 and 6, to examine what it will cost and how to move from plan to implementation.

We can define distance education 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. In practice much distance education has used a combination of media – often print, in the form of correspondence courses, with broadcasts and with some face-to-face sessions. Thus it includes correspondence teaching, some of what has been labelled open learning and the activities of open universities. It has been used at most levels of education, and to teach many different subjects.

Distance-education programmes have used more than one medium in order to balance the advantages and drawbacks of each. Studying by correspondence alone can be a byword for boredom: radio or television broadcasts offer a stimulus and a sense of personal contact to the isolated student. If we can use face-to-face study along with print or broadcasts we can aim for the best of both worlds – the economies of mass production achieved through printing or broadcasting together with the humanity and individualism of personal contact.

Distance education, as defined here, is more than making broadcasts or publishing books. It necessarily involves feedback from the learner to the teacher. For centrally produced educational materials cannot meet the individual needs of every student. Some kind of individual contact is necessary if students and teachers alike are to assess how successful they have been and if the learner is to get individual help and support. It is necessary, too, whenever education is seen as a process in which learner and teacher are together asking questions; unless feedback 'is built into the system, the hidden curriculum of a distance-teaching system is that the educator already possesses all the knowledge relevant to the student,

and the latter's knowledge and understanding is of no importance to the educator' (Perraton 1982, p.7).

The systematic use of teaching materials and methods in a variety of media has significant administrative consequences. The task of teaching, usually the responsibility of a single teacher in the classroom, is shared between various different parties whose work therefore needs to be carefully planned and articulated. A new division of educational labour brings new administrative challenges and these are the main theme of this book.

1.1 Who can it teach?

Distance education has been used for many different audiences. It has for many years offered an alternative route to secondary level qualifications to students in America, Australia and Europe. Most of the newly independent Commonwealth countries of Africa launched programmes for the same purpose in the 1960s and 1970s. It has been used at this level, too, to widen the curriculum of schools, bringing in subjects for which there is no teacher in remote schools in New Zealand, for example, and in urban schools in London. Over the last fifteen years, its use in higher education has attracted most attention as over twenty different countries have set up open universities. But university courses are not the only kind of education for which it has been used. Many third-world countries have used distance education for the inservice training of teachers, often on a large scale. It has been used to support technical and further education, sometimes backing up practical on-the-job training.

All these audiences share two common features. They have a high enough level of literacy for students to be able to work without difficulty from printed texts, and they have enough maturity to study without the support that comes from attending a school or college. In contrast, distance-teaching methods are of limited use for teaching literacy, or for teaching primary-level children. (School broadcasts, whether for direct teaching or for enrichment, can be useful and effective and may be regarded as a form of distance education. But they raise quite different organisational questions and are not considered further here.)

Distance education has also been used to provide nonformal education to adults in agriculture, health and politics. Botswana, Tanzania and Zambia have all used group discussion meetings, planned around printed texts and a radio programme, for large-scale educational campaigns. Development support communication, or distance education to support rural development, forms part of the regular work of many ministries of health and agriculture. Again, these nonformal uses are not discussed at length here, except insofar as they have a bearing on the organisation of distance education more generally.

1.2 Why is it used?

Distance education has most often been used for one or more of four educational purposes, although any one programme may have several ends.

1.2.1 Is it to widen educational opportunity and reduce inequality?

As distance education does not require attendance at a campus, it may give opportunities to students who would not otherwise have access to education. Some may have missed earlier opportunities for education; for some there may have been no such opportunities while for others the shortage of school or college places today means that distance education provides the only available route to education. Thus distance education has the potential to reduce some of the differences between the educationally advantaged and deprived, overcoming the handicap of distance by reaching those who live far away from school or college, or the handicap of time for those who cannot attend full-time.

1.2.2 Is it to meet manpower needs?

Distance education has been widely used to meet specific demands for manpower training. The Soviet Union, in the 1920s and 1930s, used correspondence teaching on a large scale to train engineers for its programme of industrialisation. Many countries in Africa and Asia have used distance education to provide part-time in-service training in order to overcome a shortage of teachers. Pakistan, for example, has reached 80 000 primary-school teachers in this way. Programmes of continuing education, which may also widen educational opportunity, can help update and improve the skills of a work force, and can do so without taking members of the work force off the job.

1.2.3 Is it to stimulate curriculum change?

Distance education has sometimes been used as a stimulus to curriculum change and to bring new ideas, methods and even subjects into schools. The combination of broadcasts with print and occasional seminars makes it possible to reach large numbers of teachers in a short time. The Mauritius College of the Air, for example, was able to introduce technical and practical subjects to the school curriculum by developing course materials for use by teachers and their students.

1.2.4 Is it to reduce costs?

As we shall see in chapter 5 distance education can, in some circumstances, offer educational opportunities at a lower cost per student, and produce graduates at a lower cost per graduate, than is achieved in conventional education. At secondary level, distance education's ability to offer a cheaper route to formal qualifications led the governments of Malawi and Zambia, for example, to set up government correspondence colleges.

In various ways, then, distance education may be relevant to some of today's educational problems of quality and quantity.

For its main advantages relate directly to the source of the problems. First is its economy: school buildings are not required and teachers and administrators can be responsible for many times more students than they can accommodate in a school. Its second main advantage is its flexibility: people who have got jobs can study in their own time, in their own homes, without being removed from their work for long periods. Its third advantage is its seven-league boots: it can operate over long distances and cater for widely scattered student bodies.

Dodds et al. 1972, p.10

1.3 How well does it work?

There is no single measure of educational quality or efficiency. Three measures have been used to compare distance education and more conventional forms of education: examination pass rates, completion or dropout rates, and costs per student or per graduate.

Where students working at a distance complete their courses, a number of distance-teaching institutions or programmes have found that their examination pass rates are similar to those for full-time students. Motivation is often all-important here: teacher-training programmes that use distance education have had very high pass rates where students were guaranteed promotion or qualified teacher status on graduation.

Pass rates may, however, conceal a high drop-out rate. Part-time study of any kind often presents difficulties to the student; the British Open University, for example, has found that between 50 per cent and 60 per cent of those who finally register on degree courses eventually graduate. This is much lower than the 80-90 per cent achieved by full-time students but is probably comparable to that of other part-time students. Australian universities, which offer part-time courses both on and off the campus have found that the graduation rate for students studying at a distance is very similar to that of part-time students studying on the campus. These programmes have in common that they provide well-developed tutorial support for students. In contrast, some studies of programmes at secondary level, using correspondence courses with little other support for their students, have found that drop-out rates rose as high as 80 per cent.

The cost of distance education is examined in more detail in chapter 5 where it is argued that under appropriate conditions students learning at a distance can succeed in passing their examinations and in doing so at a competitive cost. Reasonable success rates, and with them reasonable costs per graduate, depend on an effective distance-teaching system; much of the discussion in chapters 3 and 4 is designed to help design such a system.

There remain, however, more difficult questions about the quality of distance education as compared

with the quality of conventional education. Students, educators and citizens alike can, and do, ask whether the process of distance education can be as valuable as the process of more conventional education. There is no simple answer. It is possible to argue, on the one hand, that well-written distance-teaching materials are often of a higher quality than the run-of-the mill university lecture. (They should be: their preparation demands more resources.) A distance-education course should encourage independence and autonomy in the learner: students who have learned to work by themselves and at a distance may be at an advantage in pursuing learning independently after they have graduated. Against these advantages we need to balance the reduced opportunities for dialogue in much distance education and the danger that students will develop an exaggerated respect for and undue dependence on printed authorities because they have been forced to rely heavily on their texts.

Once a distance-teaching institution becomes established its reputation begins to rest on the quality of its graduates and the extent to which their degrees are respected and recognised by employers and by other universities or colleges. But at the

outset this is impossible and the only advice for the planner is to suggest that the monitoring of quality should be part of the information system of the new institution from the very beginning.

Summary

Distance education can be 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.

It is likely to be most effective where it uses a combination of media including print, some arrangements for face-to-face support, and where possible broadcasting.

It has proved useful for a variety of educational purposes but requires a reasonable standard of literacy and sufficient maturity on the part of learners for them to study by themselves. It has been used to widen educational opportunity, to meet manpower training needs, to support curriculum change, and in the interests of holding down educational costs.

Students studying at a distance can satisfactorily work through their courses and pass their examinations.