Adult education on-line

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Abstract: Does the addition of the electronic classroom change distance education from individualized study to social education? Experience suggests that it does, but computer-networked distance education needs to be critically evaluated by adult educators.

Introduction: Distance and Adult education

Although forms of distance education (DE) have been associated with adult education from the outset (correspondence schools, Frontier College, university extension, Farm Forum Radio), DE has not been a major area of interest within adult education discourse. This omission is perhaps understandable given the individualized focus of most modern DE. Borje Holmberg, a leading exponent of DE, opens his *Theory and Practice of Distance Education* with the sentence:

> Distance education is practised in all parts of the world to provide study opportunities for those who cannot -- or do not want to -- take part in classroom teaching (1995:1).

He goes on to state that:

> Usually students learn entirely individually and at their own pace. They then neither belong to a group or class, nor feel that they do so (1995:1).

While he notes there are many "exceptions to this rule" (and some of them are mainstream, for example tele- or video-conferencing) it nonetheless helps explain why adult education scholars, concerned with adult education as a dialogical and social activity, have ignored DE. If we accept Lindeman's comment that "true adult education is social education" (1947:55), then a form of learning which is individual, usually print-based, and verbally non-dialogical, cannot be considered as a viable form of "adult education". Even a looser definition of adult education that accepted multiple and diverse purposes for adult education, such as education for economy (vocational training) or liberal arts education, would not readily recognise the legitimacy of such an individualized and often technologically dependent form of education as "adult education". For example Collins' (1991) plea for all those engaged in adult education to recognise their "vocational commitment" makes scarce mention of DE. Collins goes on to question technocratic

innovation and therefore he can be read as a critic of DE with its formulaic instructional design and delivery and its obsession with technology.

However, given the development within DE of the electronic classroom, we need to revisit this issue. The questions to be resolved include: does DE, particularly the electronic classroom enable open, critical, liberal adult education? Does it facilitate authentic dialogue: the blending of experience with other knowledge: and the pursuit of social educational aims (such as the promotion of participatory democracy and citizenship)? In order to explore these questions this paper will review and critically evaluate the potential offered by the addition to individualized print-based courses for adults of the "virtual classroom", that is the classroom made possible by computer-networking.[1]

The Virtual Classroom

Adult education requires interactive learning between both students and students, and students and tutor, which may be best achieved face-to-face. However, it is also the case that some of these elements can be achieved electronically. An argument can be made as to the relative merits of traditional classrooms and computer-network classrooms, but the first emphasis here should be on adult DE without a classroom compared to adult DE with a virtual classroom added. The virtual classroom goes beyond the limited possibilities for dialogue with the text, and perhaps a telephone tutor, offered by traditional DE to embrace interaction with other students, small group discussion, and open dialogue with the tutor. The computer-network can also aid individual contact between students and between students and third parties (for example by using "hot-links" to other sites embedded within the electronic course materials). Thus the educational experience is no longer isolated and individualized: the learning can become social and diverse. The very nature of DE -- as described by Holmberg -- is changed.

Electronic communications allows for easier contact within existing community or interest groups, or it can be a means by which contact can be maintained once the group is established. It can also be argued that electronic communication has called forth new social groupings but whether these are equivalent to new social movements or narrow interest groups has still to be determined. Our interest here is not so much with the informal learning possibilities of the Internet (the "Information Super Highway" could in any case be viewed as essentially a corporate transmission conduit [2]) but the non-formal and formal educational opportunities provided by computer-mediated conferencing and learning.

Some might claim that newer technologies can completely replicate the classroom but in my experience the type of interactions are different [3]. It is too early to be definitive about the strengths and weaknesses of the virtual classroom, sometimes it may appear to be "better" at others "worse" than a traditional seminar classroom, but it should be noted that the interaction achieved electronically is simply not the same as that achieved "face-to-face". For example, short comments seem to work best in computer conferences, more expansive and punctuated presentations do not, this is particulary accentuated in synchronous conferencing -- while some readers might welcome brevity, the point is that it results in a different mix, it changes the educational experience.

Limitations and Strengths of Electronic Delivery

The asynchronous nature of some conferences (with students entering comments on different days) works against focused discussion as individuals take up and reply to different points; the structure of an argument and the key issues can get lost. A contradiction that can develop when using computer conferencing is that easier access to the debate may not result in an issue being more fully explored: it can lead to students discussing only the "easier" aspects of a problem and deflect from the tougher questions which would have been dealt with in a classroom. Also a general invitation by the tutor to discuss a particular issue may go unheeded by the students; as Taylor has commented the skills required to moderate a live and an electronic conference are different (Spencer and Taylor, 1994:236).[4] It should also be acknowledged that computer conferencing privileges those with typing and computer skills over those without (a bias favouring women?), it favours written not oral communication and therefore discriminates against those with writing disabilities, such as dyslexia. This discussion is focusing on some of the limiting aspects of computer-mediated courses as a counterweight to the gushingly enthusiastic embrace of new technology and exaggerated claims made by some educational administrators and practitioners. For example, the claim that "computer-mediated communication traverses the oral/written continuum and encompasses qualities associated traditionally with both forms of communication" (Harrison and Stephen, 1995:25, drawing on Wilkins, 1991) is simply unsupportable since the form of communication used at present is "written" it is not "oral" and therefore the many qualities of oral communication cannot possibly be present.

There are, however, many positive aspects to the adoption of computer-networking techniques, for example:

* Class discussion is not cut off by the end of the traditional class meeting or by a coffee break

* The student does not have to gain the tutors eye in order to make a contribution

* It is more difficult for one person to dominate the debate as all can enter a comment

* Many traditional classrooms are non-dialogical, to be contrasted with an electronic course with a conferencing component

* Students gain from not being stereotyped by visual clues and may find making a presentation easier on-line than in front of a class

* Students with speech defects are not disadvantaged.

The types of interaction are also simply different, a written comment in a conference can be read and re-read, a comment made verbally in a traditional classroom has to be remembered or noted if it is to be recalled.

A lot of the "benefits" of an on-line classroom have been claimed but not carefully researched: for example, do "shy" students find it easier to contribute? Or are shy students in a classroom

also likely to be shy (a "lurker") in the conference? Is the quality of contributions greater (reflecting the fact that students have more time to construct an answer before posting it) than those made in a traditional classroom? Or are they in fact shallower (reflecting the ease of adding a quick comment when at the screen)? Can students easily amend a position as they gain more information? Or do they feel bound to defend what was so publicly posted? Students gain from not being so easily typecast by their body shape, skin colour, gender (this is likely to be known but it is not "up-front" when a comment is being read), and accent; but they may lose from not having visual and tonal clues associated with traditional classroom communication (although in future computer conferences verbal and visual presentations may become popular). This may have other repercussions for example the kind of fierce debate which can go on in a classroom, the kind which is not personal once the right rapport has been established, may be difficult to reproduce on-line.

The Impact of the Virtual Classroom

Regardless of how all of these issues around the relative merits of electronic classrooms are resolved, the virtual classroom has changed DE.[5] It has also made DE a possible method for delivering a fuller range of adult education programs, and doing so across an even wider terrain than previously.

Given the state of current research into computer-networked delivery the questions still to be resolved are those outlined in the introduction. Dialogue is different when it is developed electronically, as is the group's social learning.[6] Experience to present, supports the view that distance delivery alone is less capable than face-to-face methods of providing for social education, but that is not a reason to dismiss DE's virtual classrooms and hallways.

The virtual classroom is a substantial advance on, indeed qualitatively different from, the isolated individualized learning of traditional distance education. Further, when it is combined with existing community it can support social objectives and do so across a wider terrain than is possible via traditional adult education means. But there is also a danger that the virtual classroom and the Internet will be fetishized. It can be used to support narrow aims and may not be critically examined by its advocates. It could be argued that these technologies -- which are also being used in traditional educational institutions as a supplement to other means of delivery -- were developed to help achieve economic goals of training and re-education of adults rather than social adult education.[7] However, given the shifts in funding and emphasis in educational provision for adults away from non-formal community-based provision, it is important for adult educators to consider the potential contradictions within the newly developed forms of DE and try to exploit these to achieve broader purposes. They do present opportunities for cooperative learning (McConnell, 1994) and, once the equipment is in place, can be more cost-effective than other alternatives.

Social Education On-line

We should not overlook the fact that there is differential access to computer-networking: indeed some commentators have suggested that computer ownership will become a defining characteristic of the "haves" and "have-nots" in the new information age. However, this is not an

argument for ignoring new technology but rather an argument for making it communally and universally accessible. If we vacate the field it will only ensure that it is completely taken over by the privileged.

When students are linked in a community or environmental group, on-line education (in common with other education for adults), can become social education. Trying to recreate community in the electronic classroom becomes easier if the students themselves are committed to a real community or shared social purpose. They can then use their "individualized" studies and their remote classroom as a basis for their community-based social action.

There are other examples of the use of DE technology as "social education" in community and economic development (Koul and Jenkins, 1990). Or as a component in an educational mix promoting community development (Spronk, 1994), which build on existing community links. In many instances in Canada and elsewhere it is colleges or local educational consortium who are taking the lead in establishing computer facilities in remote areas and using features like audio-graphics to link students to each other and the instructor.[8] We should also acknowledge that the educational purpose can be determined by the student alone: they can replace the institution's vocational credential purpose with a social goal. For example, students signing on for a traditional individualized DE three credit English language course may only be doing so because they have taken over as secretary of a community group and they wish to improve their communication skills.

Conclusion

DE can no longer be defined as "an education without a classroom". Distance educators can now become adult educators: "computer-mediated communications may allow distance ... educators to retrieve this important element (interaction) of adult education" (Taylor, 1996:284).

The new possibilities for an "electronic classroom" offered by dedicated networking systems such as Lotus Notes or by conferencing systems such as First Class, and by the Internet, Bitnet and World Wide Web need to be critically evaluated according to established adult education criteria. A proper evaluation means that critique must replace the "gushing enthusiasm" of the technology advocates.

Computer-mediated learning is affecting all education. Adults, reachable via computer and video DE techniques, are viewed as a new market opportunity by traditional educational institutions which now see their chance to be distance and adult educators. Adult educators need to critically influence this form of education. The inclusion of the electronic classroom and the opportunity for interaction within DE calls for recognition by adult educators of the possibilities for dialogical, social learning now offered by new technologies.

While the shift to social education may be aided by these technological advances it will depend, more importantly, on adult educators' ability to learn from the historical purposes of adult education and accept Collins' challenge to treat "adult education as vocation" (1991). If adult educators consciously engage with the external social conditions of students and link up with

other educational and community projects they will achieve open, accessible, democratic, on-line adult education.

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Endnotes

1. See Evans and Nation (1989) for a critical assessment of traditional DE.
2. This is similar to a point made by Harasim (1996:205) who also argues the difference between knowledge transmission (the Information Super Highway) and knowledge creation via computer conferencing.

3. I taught the same graduate course -- the "Foundations of Adult Education" -- in the classroom (for the University of Alberta) and on-line with only a virtual classroom (for Athabasca University). Annand (1996) is researching the experiences of instructors in computer conferencing.
4. These issues need more research, they may reflect the "experiential" aspects of some kinds of knowledge as well as the limits of the current technology. They may also be partially resolved by improved instructional design and instructional practice.
5. As a colleague (Marco Adria) commented when asked by the author: "I do not know if the dialogue is authentic or not, but I do know that the possibility for such dialogue now exists". Marco has been involved with developing a U's Virtual Teaching and Learning (ViTAL) community.
6. Sometimes the technology fails and students are discouraged from engagin in extended debate. I have experienced the full range from students withdrawing from courses because of technical problems, to "servers" failing for a week, to phone lines being flooded out for a day.
7. I am referring here to the broad mix of DE methods and DE institutions, such as the British Open University. Computer-networking was primarily developed to serve the US military.
8. As illustrated by a presentation made at AU, 7th February 1996 by Alberta Vocational College, Lesser Slave Lake. The presentation discussed synchronous linkages between 5 sites (primarily in different Cree communities) each with 3/4 students, combining a tele-conference with a computer link.