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Evolution of Distance Education

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When we think about distance education in North America, the first image that might come to mind is online learning of the kind that is offered by University of Maryland University College. However, current online teaching and learning practice of distance education have a much longer history, in fact, dating back to Apostle Paul preaching the gospel by writing his epistles which were sent out to Asia Minor (Peters, 2004, p. 14).

Peters, Moore, and Holmberg (2006) laid the foundation for discussing distance education so many years later. Otto Peters started out as a pedagogue attempting to analyze educational approaches when he came across “correspondence education” (Bernath, 2006). In the 1960s there were no academics for distance learning, so he intended to write a negative on the status of educational approaches. Since Professor Peters was not involved in correspondence education, he was able to analyze it standing from the outside looking in. Human and educational behavior is such that new forms of pedagogies are not readily accepted until they can be theoretically proven. As such, the experts in the field felt that Peters’ framework applying industrial revolution to “correspondence education” was a de-naturalized form of face-to-face education (Peters, 2010).

However, Peters (2010), sought to prove that distance education had distinct differences from traditional or face-to-face education. He expounded on those differences to lay out 7 Dimensions of Theory in distance education. These academic dimensions included psychological, sociological, historical, economic, pedagogical, philosophical, and anthropological frameworks. Peters wanted to enable people to have a new form of pedagogy. Pioneers are often viewed upon askance as due to a misunderstanding of what he was presenting

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to the field. Some of the concerns were: distance education and industrialization couldn't go together, single-mode institutions were being threatened, why a new form of education, the separation of tutors and students and its origin. Peters descriptive theory has shown that distance education does mirror industrialization, relies on media and technology, has caused an attitudinal change regarding students, relationships between students and teachers, provided new pedagogies and broadened the types of students seeking education (Peters, 2010).

In his "Distance education in Transition," Otto Peters identified three periods in the history of distance education:

The first one was established when there was a need in singular projects, mainly in remote areas where people could not possibly attend schools or any other educational institutions face-to-face. This is when the railroads and roads were heavily used for correspondence (Peters, 2004). Whether it was sent by railroad or any other type of transportation, the 19th-century education was very similar to distance education today. The waiting period was longer, and the education techniques were not as developed, but the students still received the material they needed to learn. They needed to study, do their homework, and send it back to an instructor. The main inconvenience was time. Sometimes it could take weeks for correspondence to arrive. However, everything depended on a person. If they wanted to learn, they were absorbing everything they received in the mail (Peters, 2004).

The second period was mainly commercial, but later it was correspondence education as well. The foundation of radio and television speeded up the process of receiving information. It started to look more like a normal communication rather than a one-way learning process. Again,

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it was very similar to today's distance education but slower and not as efficient as today (Peters, 2004).

The third period was the era of distance education by open universities. The invention of computers changed the world. This is the period when distance education started to look very much like online education today. More developed their interest in distance education: Keegan, Wedemeyer. If in 1965 only a small group attended the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) conference, at the 20th World Conference of ICDE more than 1200 experts from 85 countries attended (Peters, 2004).

Distance Education of 19th century was a long, developmental project in process. However, the principles of preparing the material for the students, sending it out to them, and then receiving it back and providing feedback was very similar to distance education today. Now we have full 'blackboards' and school sites that allow us to receive information almost instantly. Instructors still spend the time to send it out to students, and the students have to provide their time to learn and process that given information – very similar, yet, very different educational methods due to the progress in technology.

Skipping forward to more modern history, correspondence education developed on a mass scale as part of the industrial revolution. A learner in the mid-nineteenth century might receive written materials to study and after a period, have their competencies tested. Correspondence education remained popular into the 20th century with many universities offering extension courses to off-campus learners. For example, it was common for agricultural courses to be provided by correspondence to farmers in rural areas (Peters, 2004).

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Although Otto Peters was used to traditional forms of education who decided to research DE education as a new and unique way of teaching, eventually he realized that there were no theories to this phenomenon. Most professors believed that it was a de-neutralized form of face-to-face teaching. Otto Peters proved the opposite by separating the two entirely different approaches. He put Distance Education into a new category of highly industrialized education that requires its unique approaches and methods distinct from traditional methods of learning. Professor Peters' narrative theory of distance education still promotes discussion in the 21st century. It is interesting how one journey to analyze something different has provided a framework that continues relevance in distance education. Professor Peters became an accidental pioneer when he decided to further explore his original finding in education (Peters, 2010).

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