

# Introduction

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What is distance education? We asked ourselves this as we were discussing the themes of the 2008 DEANZ Conference. Our question was not about definitions as such, but rather about one of the beliefs that underpinned a long-time interest in education at a distance. The discussion had been sparked in several ways. First, one of us had been preparing a presentation which included a discussion of the ways in which face-to-face students increasingly are being required to undertake learning activities away from the classroom. Second, in a chapter that we are writing jointly, we suggest that face-to-face students have become underprivileged through the requirement of physical presence at learning sites. Finally, we remembered a conversation with a DEANZ member who noted the conference themes seemed to indicate a return to a broader concern for education at a distance, rather than the narrower focus of how technologies might support such learning.

During our discussion, we remembered the speech given by the first chancellor of the United Kingdom's Open University at its charter ceremony. The chancellor, Lord Crowther, spoke of four aspects of openness that underpinned the creation of the Open University: openness as to people, places, methods, and ideas. The notion of distance is almost incidental. Distance education exists as a practical, and essential, solution to the problem of openness to places. There is a lot at

stake here. Who controls the place of study—the institution or the student? Acceptance of openness to places, and with that to distance education, cedes the right of control over place of study to the student. The “My Place” theme of the DEANZ 2008 conference reflects the sense of control that distance students might have.

Often though, distance education is not a matter of choice between on-campus or distance study on the student's part; the choice is between being able to study or not. The Lingam and Burnett article in this issue highlights just how much of a necessity distance education still is, by discussing the externalisation of a teacher education programme at the University of the South Pacific (USP). Externalisation was a response to the geographical spread and remoteness of many of USP's 12 member nations, and to the costs and difficulties associated with requiring attendance at a USP campus. The necessity for distance education still exists in New Zealand, but often not for the reasons cited by Lingam and Burnett. It is, for example, only by means of distance education that large numbers of people are able to upgrade qualifications and continue to engage in ongoing professional development—activities that would otherwise be constrained or even made impossible by the inflexibility of work hours and the importance of time with family and friends. Central to distance education is the right to choose

to study where one needs, as much as to where one prefers.

Openness as to methods recognises that distance education is always mediated by technology. Technologies used in distance education are chosen for their contribution to, and sympathy with, the objectives of learning. Lord Crowther explained, "Every new form of human communication will be examined to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding" (1969). A major issue is learner access to the technologies of learning and teaching. We recall Dr. Michael Moore saying that his first question regarding distance education projects in South America was always, "How far, on average, do learners have to walk to the nearest telephone?"

In New Zealand, a major emphasis on building national capacity and capability in digital technologies has seen tremendous growth in distance education courses that employ such means to communicate with students and support their learning. The most recent information about Internet access in New Zealand tells us that 80.6 percent of households have access to the Internet and 48.7 percent have broadband of some form. Access rates are higher than average within the 30 to 49 age range for both Internet and broadband access (V. Nicholls, personal communication, June 25, 2008). These broad statistics disguise a more complex picture of access.

Education and income levels are major predictors of Internet and broadband access; the more advanced the education and the higher the income, the greater the likelihood of Internet and broadband access. In the 2006 census, just over one-quarter of New Zealand households

without Internet access (at that time 35 percent of households did not have access) cited cost as the reason for lack of access. However, where household Internet access is not possible, other means of access are used. While it is important to be thoughtful about technology choices and to be careful about Internet-based courses for distance students, there are now greater opportunities to maximise the benefits that e-learning can bring. The DEANZ conference's "My Space" theme aligns itself closely with e-learning through its use of the term *virtual education*.

The third DEANZ conference theme is "My Learning." For a long time, distance education has been concerned with issues of course design and pedagogy and has paid less attention to the learner and strategies for learning at a distance. A renewed focus on learning strategies relevant to distance students would be valuable. Past evidence of the particular value of cognitive and meta-cognitive strategy use in distance study was reviewed in Anderson (2007). A recent study (Puzziferro, 2008) confirms the importance of learning strategies and study skills such as time management, self-regulation of effort, and study environment, which were significant predictors of student success in online courses. In discussing openness as to ideas, Lord Crowther described the human mind as a fire which has to be set alight. Surely the strategies required by students to learn successfully are the oxygen needed for the fire to burn brightly.

We have not mentioned so far the fourth openness, as to people. We wonder whether, in the New Zealand context, openness as to people is something we take for granted. In

contrast to the education situation in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s, New Zealand tertiary education has a very low entry threshold to any sub-sector of the tertiary sector. There is also successful distance education available for preschool children. Openness as to people echoes the ethos of “equality of opportunity” that has pervaded New Zealand education since the time of Fraser and Beeby. The issue of access to Web-based technologies also bears on this aspect of openness. Baggaley (2008, p. 45) suggests that, because of access issues, openness to people is becoming an aspirational ideal rather than an actuality in distance education. His solution, based on openness to methods, prescribes using a mix of technologies (p. 47).

The articles by Higgins and Krieg and by du Plessis, Walker, and Naughton in this issue reflect all four types of openness within the New Zealand context. They describe activities that represent the ongoing exploration of ways to provide students with an education that serves their needs regardless of the constraints of time or space.

This journal issue concludes with two reviews. Given the historical frame of this

editorial, it is worth giving particular mention to one of those reviews. Burge’s book records the lessons and the meta-lessons of an early generation of distance education leaders. It is surprising how many of those lessons are relevant today, in the same way that a concern for distance education can still find relevance in the four aspects of openness laid out by Lord Crowther in 1969.

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