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Commentary on Distance Education and Transactional Distance

Martin W. Sivula, Ph.D.

Well into the 21st century, the nature of higher education is ever-changing and very complex. Distance education is becoming a major disruption of the traditional self-contained classroom . At all levels of education, technology, software, and “apps” have permeated the educational environment. Smartphones are a “must have” for many persons, and information has no lag in the communications channel... users want almost immediate responses to queries. The transaction that we entitle “distance education” occurs in an environment where there is separation between teachers and learners. Learners and teachers need to cross this space and eliminate any misunderstanding. This is both psychological and communication space, which is called *transactional distance* (Moore, 1997). This commentary will review Michael Moore’s (1972; 1997) theories on distance education, then provide a criticism of it, corroborate support for Moore’s theory, and offer some concluding thoughts.

Introduction

The term “distance” education is somewhat misleading in the sense that every bit of education has some distance between it and the student learner. In Moore’s (1972) original research on learner autonomy and independent learning and teaching, I believe much of the criticism of his “theory” of distance education is one of misunderstanding of his original intent. In 1972 the technology available for education was vastly different than it is in the 21st century. Audio and visual materials included filmstrips, 8mm or 16mm films, radio, and television. Yes, there was computer support, but from a large mainframe computer system where “distance” was how far your terminal was from the mainframe computer. As an example, although credit has been given for the invention of the mobile cell phone in the early 1970s era, practical use for the end user did not come about until sometime later. Innovations are sometimes slow to reach a “critical mass” of users. Therefore, “distance” may mean different things to different persons at different times.

In his interview accompanied by Tony Bates and Sir John Daniel, Moore (2016) stated that his original intent was that to bring education to those who could not acquire it in a traditional fashion. Moore spent time in Africa trying to bring educational materials to those that needed it. His predominant technology was radio. Moore also stated that there was little literature or theoretical basis for any type of distance education. He went on to say that his original theory and research was based upon pedagogical principles. Quite interestingly, Bates and Daniel said that much of current distance education is founded in traditional educational theory and practice. Moore (2016) somewhat disagreed with his colleagues as you can see from the above dialogue. “With separation there is a psychological and communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communication’s space that is that transactional distance (Moore 1997).” When you have a psychological and communications space between learners and instructors, there is always present a potential for misunderstanding. I believe that the theory of transactional distance by Moore (1997) clears up any misconceptions of his original theory of distance

education. He also said in his 1997 work, that there is room for more than one theory. Also, he stresses that historically variables of transactional distance: dialogue, structure and learner autonomy are variables for the interaction of teaching and learning, they are not technological or communications variables. (There might be room for criticism here as “communications” is a portion of the space in his theory). *Dialogue* is the interaction between teachers and learners; *Structure* embodies the elements of course design or the ways the teaching program is structured; and *Learner Autonomy* - where students share the responsibility for their own learning process. Also, with his three components of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy, he states they are “clusters” of variables (Moore, 1997, p.1). He also goes on to state that dialogue and structure are more of qualitative variables (not numerical but places data into categories). So, testing formal hypotheses supporting the theory of transactional distance might be somewhat difficult. Quite interestingly, Moore (2016) also stated that his theory was more in tune with pedagogy. He also stated that it was about teaching which he said currently *distance education* programs do not give enough emphasis in their overall structure.

Caspi & Gorsky (2009) are highly critical of Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory claiming that is a mere tautology (a statement that is true by necessity or by virtue of its logical form). They go on to say, that Moore’s theory lacks empirical support. They present their own theory of instructional dialogue where they suggest learning outcomes such as: achievement, satisfaction and attitudes to be used as dependent variables. They also state that their model can be used for any instructional system and its evaluation, whether it be online or on the ground. In Moore’s (1997) paper he states that his variables are teaching and learning and the interaction of teaching - learning which cluster around three areas of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. I believe it was Moore’s intent is for the researcher to name variables which represent each of the three main areas (clusters). To me his theory is a parsimonious explanation of three major areas of learning and teaching.

Discussion

In the scientific sense of the meaning of theory, Moore’s (1972; 1997) theory of distance education may be deficient. However, if you take in other meanings of the word *theory* in Moore’s work, everything seems to fit properly:

- a belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action...her method is based on the *theory* that all children want to learn
- an ideal or hypothetical set of facts, principles, or circumstances —often used in the phrase *in theory*, we have always advocated freedom for all (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2019)

In Moore’s (1997) same paper he gives recommendations for every distance education program. I have included examples from my perspective over each recommendation.

- *Presentation*-Prerecorded audiovisual material works well, even better, the instructor's own personal video recordings (either synchronously or asynchronously).

- *Support of the learner's motivation*-A key aspect as coaching, tutoring, and other stimuli for the learner's desire to learn the content. Positive reinforcement and progressively adding difficulty to tasks (assignment) work effectively in stimulating learner motivation.
- *Stimulate analysis and criticism*-Higher order thinking in line with Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) in Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Discussions and case studies are especially effective. For example: analyze a given case; evaluate and determine possible alternatives; prioritize the alternatives that seem best; and ask new questions.
- *Give advice and counsel*-Personalized study guides of what to do and what not to do, and videoconferencing one to one is especially effective.
- *Arrange practice, application testing, and evaluation*-Frequent self-testing with feedback is especially effective with fully automated testing software. Assessment online of written assignments is valuable and allows for ample commentary for the teacher and learner.
- *Arrange for student creation of knowledge*-With the personal computer students can maintain a course portfolio with learning artifacts for each course.

To me, these six areas can be applied to just about every level of education, but especially in the area of adult and continuing education. Adult learning theory (andragogy) conceived by Knowles (1984) is based on the assumption that there are definite differences between adult and child learners, such as self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning. And one thing adult learners usually bring to the learning environment is experience. So we could summarize andragogy in four ways: the mature person is independent and self-directed (learner autonomy); secondly, many of the evaluation and testing methods for adult learners should be based upon their daily experiences, e.g., as independent work on community projects, simulations, discussions, and case studies (practice applications); thirdly, adults are also concerned with their roles as workers, spouses, parents, citizens, and practical content (structure) based on adult life performance generates a higher interest level (learner motivation, dialogue) than just purely academic material. Lastly, adults also have an immediate need to apply (practice application, dialogue) what they learn, and they are more problem centered rather than subject centered.

Developing Countries and Distance Education

Cavallo's (2000) research with indigenous knowledge (Thailand) showed that one can build upon the knowledge base in rural areas throughout the world. With utilization of digital based learning interventions and "emergent design" (where the choice of design methodology contributes to the success or failure of an educational reform). He states: 'A practice of "applied epistemological anthropology," which consists of probing for skills and knowledge resident in a community and using these as bridges to new content, was developed.' Even with a lack of formal training (cognitive foundations) rural communities possess great learning potential especially in

developing countries. Building upon the experience base of the local community as it emerges through digitally based educational interventions might (over time) build a distance education infrastructure and lead to educational reform. Emergent design is supported through high interaction between the teacher and the learners (who choose their own projects). In such a manner *technology capacity building* might take a root. All of Moore's (1997) principles can be applied to the developing countries entry into distance education. By choosing the proper digitally based interventions, and by building upon the local communities' knowledge and experience base, a sustainable distance education infrastructure might emerge over time.

Conclusions

I believe Moore's work is a valuable piece of research from which one can organize their own distance education program and its delivery. A theory gets us to think about what we can do when we act on what we are thinking about. You must remember Moore's work was about teaching and pedagogical ideas. Much of the current literature on "distance education" focuses on the identification of independent and dependent variables and their action on students and learning. And yes, variables may be derived from a model or theory, but they are limited in scope. Much of the current literature also focuses on outcome variables of learning. There is nothing wrong with that, however, the actual teaching of a subject or topic is really dictated by the software applications available on a learning management system (LMS). As Moore concludes his 1997 theory of transactional distance, he claims that there is a greater potential for individual self-directed implementation and more self-evaluation. He also says that there is a greater potential for instructors to consult the learner group by audio and video and the individual by computer. Cavallo (2000) showed that even with limited technological knowledge in developing countries, building upon local communities' experience and selecting sound digital interventions can contribute to educational reform. Moore (1997) states "Therefore it can be hypothesized that in the hands of progressive teachers, teleconferencing gives the opportunity not only to reduce the distance but also to increase the autonomy of learners. High quality teleconferencing would also reduce misunderstanding and increase understanding and comprehension of the content delivered.

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