



***Teaching
and Learning
at a Distance***

Foundations of Distance Education
Second Edition

Michael Simonson, Sharon Smaldino,
Michael Albright, Susan Zvacek

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Teaching and Learning at a Distance

Foundations of Distance Education

SECOND EDITION

Michael Simonson

Nova Southeastern University

Sharon Smalchko

University of North Carolina

Michael A. Smith

California State University, Stanislaus

Susan Zvacek

University of Kansas

Merrill
Prentice Hall

Upper Saddle River, New Jersey
Columbus, Ohio

- Distance education is based on deep learning as an individual activity. Learning is guided and supported by noncontiguous means. Teaching and learning rely on mediated communication, usually based on preproduced courses.
- Distance education is open to behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist, and other modes of learning. It has an element of industrialization with division of labor, use of mechanical devices, electronic data processing, and mass communication, usually based on preproduced courses.
- Personal relations, study pleasure, and empathy between students and those supporting them (tutors, counselors, etc.) are central to learning in distance education. Feelings of empathy and belonging promote students' motivation to learn and influence the learning favorably. Such feelings are conveyed by students being engaged in decision making; by lucid, problem-oriented conversation-like presentations of learning matter that may be anchored in existing knowledge; by friendly, noncontiguous interaction between students and tutors, counselors, and others supporting them; and by liberal organizational-administrative structures and processes.
- While it is an effective mode of training, distance education runs the risk of leading to mere fact learning and reproduction of accepted "truths." However, it can be organized and carried out in such a way that students are encouraged to search, criticize, and identify positions of their own. It thus serves conceptual learning, problem learning, and genuinely academic ends.
- In sum, the above represents, on the one hand, a description of distance education and, on the other hand, a theory from which hypotheses are generated and which has explanatory power in that it identifies a general approach favorable to learning and to the teaching efforts conducive to learning.

Andragogy—Malcolm Knowles

Most do now consider Knowles's work to be a theory of distance education; it is relevant because most often adults are involved in distance education, and andragogy deals with frameworks for programs designed for the adult learner. At its core is the idea that "the attainment of adulthood is concomitant on adults' coming to perceive themselves as self-directing individuals" (Brookfield, 1986).

Knowles spent a career formulating a theory of adult learning based on research and experience related to the characteristics of the adult learner (Knowles, 1990). The andragogical process consists of seven elements:

- The establishment of a climate conducive to adult learning, that includes a physical environment which is conducive to the physical well being of the adult learner, and a psychological environment that provides for a feeling of mutual respect, collaborativeness, trust, openness, and authenticity.
- The creation of an organizational structure for participatory learning that includes planning groups where learners provide input about what is to be learned, and options regarding learning activities.

- The diagnosis of needs for learning that includes differentiating between felt needs and ascribed needs.
- The formulation of directions for learning that includes objectives with terminal behaviors to be achieved and directions for improvement of abilities.
- The development of a design for activities that clarifies resources and strategies to accomplish objectives.
- The development of a plan that provides evidence when objectives are accomplished.
- The use of quantitative and qualitative evaluation that provides a rediagnosis of needs for learning.

Knowles's andragogy suggests a number of characteristics needed in distance education systems designed for adults. For example:

- The physical environment of a television classroom used by adults should be able to see what is occurring, not just hear it.
- The physiological environment should be one that promotes respect and dignity for the adult learner.
- Adult learners must feel supported, and when criticism is a part of discussions or presentations made by adults, it is important that clear ground rules be established so comments are not directed toward a person, but concentrate on content and ideas.
- A starting point for a course, or module of a course, should be the needs and interest of the adult learner.
- Course plans should include clear course descriptions, learning objectives, resources, and timelines for events.
- General to specific patterns of content presentation work best for adult learners.
- Active participation should be encouraged, such as by the use of work groups, or study teams.

A Synthesis of Existing Theories—Hilary Perraton

Perraton's theory of distance education is composed of elements from existing theories of communication and diffusion, as well as philosophies of education. It is expressed in the form of 14 statements, or hypotheses. The first 5 of these statements listed below concern the way distance teaching can be used to maximize education:

- You can use any medium to teach anything.
- Distance teaching can break the integuments of fixed staffing ratios that limited the expansion of education when teacher and student had to be in the same place at the same time.
- There are circumstances under which distance teaching can be cheaper than orthodox education, whether measured in terms of audience reached or of learning.
- The economies achievable by distance education are functions of the level of education, size of audience, choice of media, and sophistication of production.

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Supporting Adult Learners

Adult Learners must feel supported:

- **When criticism is a part of**
 - **discussions or**
 - **presentations made by adults,**

- **It is important that**
 - **clear ground rules be established so**
 - **comments**
 - **are not directed toward a person,**
 - **but concentrate on**
 - **content and**
 - **ideas.**