

Book Review – Distance Education and Languages, Evolution and Change

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Book Review – Distance Education and Languages, Evolution and Change

Editors: Börje Holmberg, Monica Shelley and Cynthia White (2005). *Distance Education and Languages, Evolution and Change*. 342 pages, soft cover. Multilingual Matters: ISBN: 1 8535 9776 7

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Distance Education and Languages, Evolution and Change edited by Börje Holmberg, Monica Shelley, and Cynthia White, comprises 18 robust chapters grouped into six parts: 1) Learner's Autonomy; 2) Learner's Perspectives and Support; 3) Development of Intercultural Competence; 4) Methodology and Course Design; 5) Learning Environments; and lastly 6) Language and Teacher Development. This book also has a very useful preface, which mirrors its purpose and focus.

Before launching into descriptions of each chapter, I found that Holmberg and his colleagues offer an excellent account of the practice of distance education, with particular emphasis paid to language (which, in some cultures, remains a dark horse). My only concern lay in its applicability to developing countries and the spirit of ODL. Power outages are common here in my country, Nigeria, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa and other developing nations throughout the world. Perhaps the auspicious day will come that developing countries will be able to take full advantage of technologies described in this book? In any event, I found this book very useful and I was honored to have been given the opportunity to review such excellent work.

The first chapter, *Autonomy and the Distance Language Learner*, by Stella Hurd, launches us into an examination of autonomy and the distance language learner. Hurd's chapter (which I personally feel likens to a distance education encyclopedia) uses the Open University United Kingdom (OUHK) as platform. Starting with a conceptual analysis of autonomy, reflections on definitions, and overview of noted academics Hurd asserts that students do not learn in isolation, but instead through interactions with others – a process which students move through concrete experience, reflection, abstract conceptualization, and action. Hurd then poses some relevant questions: Is autonomy a pre-condition for successful language learning? Or is it a product or goal that emerges from learner's exposure to certain contextual influences in language? She examines these questions using the concept of autonomy, as pioneered by Holmberg (1983) and how it currently guides the practice of distance education in the OU from the perspectives of course development, student recruitment, material preparation, and learner's support. She also highlights the role of technology in promoting learner autonomy, particularly using Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). In conclusion, Hurd asserts that if distance language learners are to attain autonomy, they must be capable of learning how to learn, because autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, capacity for reflection, the necessity of self-management, and ability to interact with others.

Linda Murphy's, *Critical Reflection and Autonomy*, explores a study of distance learners of French, German and Spanish via a pilot study done at the south region of UK Open University. The findings from this pilot revealed that language learners exercise a considerable degree of functional control in their learning. Murphy also offers us constructive advice: learners must be encouraged to enhance their capacities for reflection and self-direction; they should have an explicit framework available to guide their progress; and they must be given a clear rationale, encouragement, support, along with the opportunity to practice within the course materials.

Alex Ding's *Theoretical and Practical Issues in the Promotion of Collaborative Learner Autonomy in a Virtual Self-Access Centre* describes the integration of ICT to language courses. Building upon earlier scholars' work on facilitating language learning via the Internet, Ding touches upon the theory of collaborative autonomy based on inter-subjectivity (which provided the bases for the creation of Virtual Self-Access Centres). Ding defines the term 'inter-subjectivity collaborative autonomy,' as a version of autonomy that not only stresses the virtues of collaboration as a means of facilitating such autonomy, but that by necessity entails complex relationships of inter-dependence.

In the chapter, *Towards a Learner-based Theory of Distance Language Learning: The concept of the learner-context interface*, Cynthia White explores the evolution of distance education. First, she provides a theoretical background, including Holmberg's conversational theory (1986) Moore's transactional theory (1970), Peters' industrial theory (1967), and Garrison's collaborative control theory (1987). Though I personally found it difficult to understand White's rationale for omitting the Wedemeyer's theory of learner autonomy (1977), she did inform the construction of a learning environment in accordance with the needs, preferences and abilities of the learner, and in response to the affordance of the learning context. Ultimately, White concludes that because the teacher is physically far from the learner, students themselves also need to be responsible for the process.

Cristina Rosi-Sole's and Mike Truman's, *Feed Back in Distance Language Learning: Current practices and new directions* offers great advice for those of us involved teaching language at a distance. Here they explore the ramifications of integrating feedback to achieve learner autonomy. I personally believe this issue is very relevant, as many distance learning institutions – and most particularly in developing economies – often do not place high priority on 'assignment' as an effective means of making distance learners into continuing learners.

A Framework for Supporting Students Studying English via a Mixed-mode Delivery System, by Carisma Dreyer, Nwabisa Bangeni, and Charl Nel, echoes the centrality of student support services in any distance education provision. These authors lucidly corroborate the findings of their empirical study with a framework of student support services.

Monica Shelley's and Uwe Baumann's *Assessing Intercultural Competence Gain in a German Distance Learning Course for Adults*, use 'auftack,' an Open University German language course, to demonstrate how communication competence, cultural awareness, and inter-cultural competence are connected to successful foreign language teaching outcomes. Establishing relationship between these terms, the authors link each of these key terms to foreign language teaching, thus bringing out cultural elements that bring us beyond that of merely exchanging information.

Richard Fay's and Leah Davcheva's *Developing Professional Intercultural Communicative Competence: Reflections on distance learning programmes for language educators and translators/ interpreters in Bulgaria* share their experience of a British Council supported project conducted in collaboration with local curriculum teams in Bulgaria and distance learning

professionals at University of Manchester, UK. Presented is a rich array of concepts ranging from language in Bulgaria, to inter-cultural communication, to language education and trans-national issues. Readers should pay particular attention to figures in Fay's and Davcheva's chapter, for they are very helpful in understanding the authors' concepts.

In *Teaching Foreign Language Skills by Distance Education Methods: Some basic considerations*, Börje Holmberg shares his with us his rich background as an educational researcher deeply rooted in theory. Holmberg provides us with a rich conceptual analysis of issues that, I concur based on my own experiences teaching basic literacy and foreign languages, are central to our understanding of open and distance learning as related to fundamental language acquisition skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Holmberg succinctly treats us to nuances of sentence formation, pronunciation, and the relevance and appropriateness of inclusion of students' mother tongue at particular phases of foreign language acquisition.

Cecilia Garrido's *Course Design for the Distance Learner of Spanish: More challenges than meet the eye* examines ethical considerations of course development in distance education settings. She highlights non-formal learners' attributes that must be considered when developing courses, including integration of culture in language curriculum and the role ICT can have in developing students' linguistic and inter-cultural competence. The author roots her presentation in an underlying open university philosophy. And although emphasis is primarily paid on student needs assessment, issues of cultural diversity, and the use of ICT and its management do receive adequate attention. Interestingly, this author is not comfortable with term 'pedagogical' because it does not lend itself well to the principles of adult and non-formal education (to which distance learning is most suitable). Instead, she embraces the term 'andragogy' because it focuses on student experience, interest, needs, and readiness to learn – all attributes which are paramount to any successful distance education programme.

In *Learner Autonomy and Course Management Software*, Donald Weasenfistle, Christine F. Meloni and Sigrun Biesenbach-Lucas revisit the concept of learner autonomy, but with a new twist. The new twist being the integration of Course Management Software (CMS) as a teaching process that allows instructors to organise and manage course materials and student records, whilst at the same time providing students the opportunity for communication and collaboration. Based on practical experiences gained at a local Internet café, the authors outline three major elements used to develop autonomy in distance language learners: 1) discussion; 2) titles; and 3) testing. These three features were then used in engaging students (in four different settings) as a means of exercising choice, and to use these processes to benefit from other's feedback, all without direct supervision. In short, the key issues raised in this chapter is the relevance of our having a solid understanding of ICT and CMS applications, and how such technology can be used to optimize teaching and learning processes. The authors also detail combinations of ICT with other learner support services, all within the overall aim of fostering of learner autonomy.

Vincenza Tudini's *Chatlines for Beginners: Negotiating conversation at a distance* shows us how users browse, communicate, and exchange of ideas using chatlines. Tudini applied chatline technology to distance learning settings, using it as a tool for students to negotiate language acquisition skills. Indeed, it is well understood that students taught foreign languages in classroom-based settings, particularly during language laboratories, allow them the opportunity to practice speaking. On the other hand, learning 'how to speak' is clearly a major hurdle that nearly all distance foreign language learners face. Tudini describes a study conducted by the University of South Australia, which used chatlines to engage students in oral language development. I personally opine that researchers and teachers in developing countries can learn from reading this Australian experience. It is excellent!

In *Making Online Students Connect: Ethnographic strategies for developing online learning experiences*, Andreas Schramm explores differences between on campus and Web-based courses. Using an ethnographic strategy, Schramm details what is needed to transform a traditional on campus ESC teacher education to a Web-based course. The challenge explored is how, exactly, do interactive classroom-centred learners transfer their experiences to Web-based courses? Highlighted are the various modes of interaction. Schramm concludes that the use of ethnographic analysis of the communicative components can facilitate the transfer of traditional classroom interaction to an interactive online format.

John Milton in *Parrots to Puppet Masters: Fostering creative and authentic language use with online tools* questions findings from an earlier study that concluded that graduates from South East Asian classrooms tend to have little faculty of spoken English. Working with a team of students and targeting oral fluency as an outcome, Milton focused his efforts on the use of online language learning tools, with particular focus paid to the provision of feedback and student writing. Milton shows us that advances in Internet technology can be exploited to deliver principled and practical language instruction to foreign language students.

In *The Challenges of Implementing Online Tuition in Distance Language Courses: Task design and tutor role* Mirjam Hauck and Regine Hampel examine the Collaborative Virtual Learning Environment (CVLE) Lyceum. These authors report on a pilot study conducted at the Open University UK using Lyceum, which ultimately resulted in a successful online German language course. Both learners and tutors reported that the CVLE yielded very rewarding learning outcomes, wherein tutors are not only instructors but also facilitators and participants in the learning process, and students not only interact with tutors but with fellow students. The chapter ends on a note of sage advice that echo early Greek philosophers who built the original Lyceum in ancient Athens: we must all strive to create opportunities for students to engage in oral interaction, and the use of this modern-day Lyceum is one such viable forum.

In *Closing the Distance: Compensatory strategies in distance language education*, Heidi Hansson and Elizabeth Wenno, present a study that was designed to analyze methods of bridging the gap between learners and tutors, and between learners and learners. Hausson and Wenno echo earlier findings of Wedemeyer (1981) that distance learners are just as capable of learning as their traditional on-campus counterparts when communication media are fully integrated. They caution, however, that this will only happen if online learning environments are conducive, and learners and tutors are prepared to participate. In a nutshell, Hausson and Wenno outline what is needed to conduct successful distance language courses. Above all, they remind us that factors responsible for student success, are those that compensate for deficiencies typical of a distance course.

In *PLEASE*, which stands for Primary Language Teacher Education Autonomy and Self-Evaluation, Franca Poppi, Lesley Low, and Marina Bondi examine a three-year project designed to address the training needs of primary level, foreign language teachers. The purpose of PLEASE was to empower teachers with skills for autonomous learning and reflective thinking. The authors elaborate, step-by-step, on the PLEASE website project, starting with its rationale, features of autonomous learning environments, website design, interactive sections, and forms of support for computer mediated conferencing (CMC). In sum, the authors have developed an online device that they feel will meet the needs of teachers who are operating in numerous and varied contexts.

Do Coyle in *Exploring Zones of Interactivity in Foreign Language and Bilingual Teacher Education*, reports on a pilot, Teaching and Learning Observatory (TLO) at the University of Nottingham. As an initiative of the National Ministry of Education, the TLO was developed to

enhance a pre-and in-service professional development opportunities aimed to enhance the skills of foreign language and bilingual teachers. Coyle details TLO project's vision, along with the outcomes of a survey conducted to measure its effect. She touches upon the TLO activities, and costs and constraints of the TLO centers, and explores scenarios wherein ICTs are used for true enquiry rather than as a mere substitute for 'teacher talk.'

In conclusion, I feel that Holmberg and colleagues have written a fine compendium of distance education in relation to language teaching. This book's authors truly stand upon the shoulders of pioneers, such as Charles Toussaint and Gaster Langehscheidt (Titmus, 1981) who began what is generally recognised as the first formally organised foreign language correspondence school. While the Toussaint-Langensheidt School officially closed in 1936, Holmberg and colleagues have admirably continued the pioneering spirit of Toussaint's and Langehscheidt's work. Their book builds upon our insights and add context to the technological and theoretical advances being made in the field of open and distance learning. These authors show us that we can take foreign language studies to new heights using ICT and related technologies.

My only reservation, however, remains grounded within my context as a DE scholar working in sub-Saharan Africa. In the developing world, most students often do not enjoy ready access to fundamentals such as power supplies and bandwidth, let alone ready access to personal computers and affordable computing facilities. Clearly, with full integration of ICT on the horizon, distance educators in the developed world are now in the enviable position of helping students to help themselves. Holmberg and colleagues have proved beyond reasonable doubt that when and where ICT is functionally engaged (clearly, without any power interruptions typical of developing countries), CMC can and does bridge the gap between students and tutors. But can such technologies bridge the digital divide? Or will such technology only serve to widen it?

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