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A Comparison of the Written Word Within the Evolution of DE

April, 22nd, 2007

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This essay will focus on comparing how various technologies have been used to develop and convey the written word within the context of distance education (DE). Further, each development will be discussed in terms of how it contributed to the *industrialization* of DE.

First, we will discuss the development of the model of a tutor corresponding individually with students, as it provides a point of reference for future comparisons. Second, we will discuss how and why industrialization came into play long before Otto Peters formalized his theories. Third, we will explore how personalization has been combined with efficient industrial methodology to produce the best of both worlds. By comparing static points along a dynamic timeline, with the printed word as a central theme, the comparison itself becomes dynamic.

Throughout history academics have gauged human development by man's ability to make and use tools. Thus we have the Stone Age, the Iron Age, the Bronze Age, etc. For our purposes it might be more useful for us to view the development of man by assessing his ability to manipulate text.

Personalized Text in DE

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Face to face education, with verbal dialog, goes back at least as far as Socrates if not much further. One might think in terms of this development representing the first major development in education with the growing ability to manipulate the written word being the second. The net result has been both the ability to reach infinitely more people, but to pass knowledge to succeeding generations. With each successive improvement or invention the potential range increased to the point where today every part of the globe is accessible to some form of the written word.

Text, as a pedagogical tool of DE, was first used when Caleb Phillips sent Short Hand lessons to students by post in 1728 (Holmberg, 2005). Information and assignments were sent to students who returned their lessons for individual comments by the instructor, resulting in highly personalized education. The instructor provided one-on-one instruction and feedback to the student, albeit at a great deal of transactional distance. This was due to a combination of literal distance, communication and course structure issues. The programs themselves were rather highly structured and offered little two way dialog and with it little student autonomy. While the result was effective, the Transactional Distance effectively isolated the student and fostered the development of separate and less than equal systems in many environments (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

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Peters points out that the earliest experiments in DE were done during a time when religious controversy was taken very seriously. For example, the Apostle Paul “wrote his famous epistles in order to teach Christian communities in Asia Minor how to lead a life as Christians in an adverse environment.” (Peters, 2002/2006) Paul used asynchronous methods such as messengers bearing his epistles to spread his teachings when face to face appearances were impractical.

Industrialization of Text in DE

The first academic school to use the written word for higher education was Chautauqua Correspondence College founded in 1881. In 1883, it was renamed the Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts and was awarded the authority by the state of New York to award diplomas and degrees by correspondence. During this time, several other countries were experimenting with distance education. (Moore & Kearsley, 2005) states, “The principle motive for the early correspondence educators was the vision of using technology to reach out to those who were otherwise un-provided for.” When Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts started their program model, it was that of a typical nineteenth century correspondence school.

As the numbers of students increased dramatically in the nineteenth century, there was a need to meet new challenges. The for-profit institutions of the period

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naturally looked to the business models around them for guidance. The Industrial Revolution provided many excellent models and techniques. The driving forces were profitability and cost controls, both of which the printed word helped to achieve.

Public and private *academic* institutions naturally have different motivations and goals from the commercial sector, such as the public good and other intangible qualities. It took a century before either of these sectors moved forward from the early industrialized models.

Specialization of Text in DE

With the advent of the internet and teaching platforms (e.g., Webtycho) educators have vastly increase the speed of interaction and the potential for dialog, most of it by written text. As such, the quantity and quality of communication has been improved at all levels. For example, students can now have synchronous or a-synchronous discussions in much less time with the teacher (mediator) and other learners, thus facilitating a deeper understanding of the content (Anderson, 2003). Functionally, these improvements aid in pacing, while providing far greater opportunities for elaboration on the content or instructions. Furthermore it is now possible to confirm what the students are learning and that they are appropriately

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navigating through specific learning objectives, while able to respond swiftly to inquiries.

DE has been criticized from its inception for failing to provide the benefits of face to face teaching as a result of its inherent isolation of teacher, student and their peers.

“Most failed to deliver real value that could earn a sustainable and profitable return from learners.” (Elloumi, 2004) This, in part, is due to a high drop out rate.

Overcoming this negative reputation and maintaining enrolment became possible only after the implementation of various reforms, among them industrialization.

Industrialized methods delegate responsibilities to various people, so that no one person bears all of the burdens and responsibilities.

The development of modern technologies has allowed industrialization to flourish as each area becomes more specialized and thereby assumes greater responsibility for its own portion of the entire process. Planning, development, course design, delivery, curriculum, student support, evaluation of results and the planned implementation of technology are but a few of the specialized areas that all come together to deliver the written word.

While this may mean that more and more people are able to take advantage of education, there is, as always, another side to the story. “Autonomous learning is

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extremely difficult to put into place when the learners are guided in short steps in courses worked out to the smallest detail." (Peters, 2002/2006). Even the father of modern industrial educational theory seems to admit there is a point at which enough is enough. On the other hand Rumble counters that without adequate guidance and support, students end up reinforcing the negative images that certain past iterations of DE so richly deserved (Rumble, 2000).

Conclusion

As the written word was disseminated by ever more sophisticated technologies such as radio, television, the internet and the next as yet undefined invention, one fact remained indisputable. Regardless of the technology, the word remains the smallest common denominator in any form of DE and its manipulation offers the greatest opportunities to reach ever greater audiences.

In the next iteration, will we be teaching with holograms as in the Star Wars movie? If this is to be the case, will one on one teaching again become the norm, as ever more effective artificial intelligence make for more sophisticated teaching software. Might today's multiple choice responses to student input become tomorrow's intelligent engine which powers a cybernetic tutor who "thinks"? Perhaps then the written word might take a back seat to verbal dialog, but as long as people can read far faster than

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they are capable of listening, I doubt it. Such are the prospects that make DE so promising and exciting.

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