DOES "DISTANCE EDUCATION" REALLY SAY IT ALL—OR DOES IT SAY ENOUGH? A Commentary on the Article by Kanuka and Conrad

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> "What's in a name?"
> —Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene II.

If we subscribe to the argument offered by Heather Kanuka and Dianne Conrad in their article, the answer to Shakespeare's venerable poser of "what's in a name" is—everything and nothing.

In their article, Kanuka and Conrad decry what they view as the unnecessary and obfuscating proliferation of terms that essentially represent nothing meaningfully different from what is implied through using the traditional term "distance education." They contend also that this apparently groundless and unbridled creation of new terminology "to label our teaching and learning activities" in distance education "… dishonors past practices and slights distance education's pedagogical heritage."

Kanuka and Conrad deserve to be cheered on as they "… rail against the labeling of distance education based on the concept of flexibility, and by association, perceived elements of 'newness.'" In fact, we might go Kanuka and Conrad one better and say that in many instances there would seem to be less of a perception of "newness" motivating the language than a deliberate attempt to presumptively assert the existence of a particular view without adequate argument. It is fairly commonplace, for example, to be confronted with assertions about e-learning as though the simple fact of declaring something as e-learning would necessarily create a unique reality. It is as though naming something makes it real. We can wonder at what motivates this kind of substitution of propagandizing for argument—and perhaps an understanding of such motivations is necessary to counteract the situation that Kanuka and Conrad describe.

However, I doubt that the alternative offered by them is an adequate answer to the conceptual and terminological morass they describe so well. I would argue that "distance education" as a definitive term (and concept) is not an adequate platform from which to launch critically into this crusade.

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NAMING AS DEFINING

Confucious (in Analects, 13:3) states that his first order of business upon being appointed to the administration of "the ruler of Wei" is to be concerned with the "rectification of names" since, "If names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then things cannot be accomplished." There are a few more of these declinations in his rant, but essentially Confucious is of the view that a world that does not have proper regard for naming things is a world well on the way to hell in a hand basket.

An implication arising from the rectification of names is that the proper naming of something gives it an objective reality. This is the sentiment behind the tack taken by Kanuka and Conrad—although it is selectively applied. They argue that we should not proliferate terminology that offers nothing more than we can represent through the venerable term "distance education." In turn, then, Kanuka and Conrad suggest that the definitions of distance education that they have compiled from various sources collectively reflect the reality that they label "distance education." Is this, in fact, the case?

Several of the definitions presented by Kanuka and Conrad illustrate just how notional the concept of distance education is. For example, Keegan (1996) refers to "the quasi-separation of teacher and learner" and the "quasi-permanent absence of a learning group." Verduin and Clarke (1991) speak of a defining element of distance education being "the separation of teacher and learner during at least the majority of each instructional process." Both of these definitions imply some extent of separation of teacher and learner. But what is that and what is its meaning? How much of the instructional event must have the teacher in one spatial circumstance and the learner in another? Is it half? Three quarters? How could we know what the test of separation is? And besides, what difference could it possibly make? Let's invert that relationship—if we have a course offered on a campus and our students are on site and we decide to put some of that course on the Web, what do these purported definitional features have to say on this that would make one bit of difference to the students or the teacher?

Distance education is a term that has come down to us from the past and takes its flavor from classical correspondence education. We see this reflected in the notion that the learner is spatially isolated from the teacher and other students. We also see this influence reflected in the definition by Peters (1983) cited by Kanuka and Conrad that characterizes distance education "as an industrialized form of teaching and learning." As stated above, spatial isolation is not a defining characteristic when it has to be qualified as something that is "quasi-this and quasi-that." In any event, the deliberate differentiation of kinds of tasks associated with producing print-based courses and supporting them is not the reality for many institutions currently engaging in "distance education." Online courses in particular are essentially the work of the person teaching the course.

Vestiges of the classical view of distance education are inherent in the way in which Kanuka and Conrad describe the enterprise. Much of their commentary reflects a view that "distance education" is essentially about the delivery of content. For example, they state, "Distance education is the organizational apparatus and process of providing educational experiences to learners at a distance" and,

> What is important to realize, however, regardless of which terms are used to describe the amalgam of learning modes, is that these terms describe systems of delivery options that fall *within* the broader lexicon of "distance education" and cannot be accepted as replacement terms for the larger enterprise.

If we interpret such statements to mean that delivery of content by the Web, audio–teleconferencing (or whatever other technology) is still in essence the same sense as is implied by the term "distance education," then in that lim-

ited context, the point they make seems legitimate.

However, is the delivery of content to spatially isolated learners really the heart of the issue—or is there a deeper effect that results when students are removed from easy and ready access to a teacher and/or their fellow students? What is the "it" that is missing?

Kanuka and Conrad hint at the "it" in their comments regarding "dishonoring the pedagogical heritage of distance education." They claim uniqueness for "distance education" because "we maintain that distance education is a pedagogical phenomenon that is independent of the communication medium."

If we buy their view that the role of technology (whatever form it may take) is to deliver content (note, for example, their comment about how "new technologies offer only the choice of computer screens"), then this conclusion may not be far off the mark. However, Kanuka and Conrad also state, "Within the field of distance education itself, decades of research have resulted in theory that guides both current practice and research," which would seem to imply that there is something more to "distance education" than simple content delivery.

This assertion seems to me to be highly arguable. I believe that the pedagogical issue in "distance education" has to do with education in its broadest sense, and "distance," per se, has very little to do with pedagogy (other than the substantial practical matters of bridging temporal and/ or geographical separation).

On the other side of the coin, Kanuka and Conrad ask "Has the introduction of Internet technologies now changed the game?" And their answer is an unequivocal "No." However, the context in which they answer their own question is predicated on the assumption that distance education is all about the technology of delivery of content—and in this limited context, they could be considered correct. But this limited context does not seem to me to get at the deeper implications of their question.

WHAT IS AT ISSUE?

I am in complete accord with Kanuka and Conrad in their valiant effort to get rid of pretentious and presumptive terminology and the resulting misleading perceptions of what is involved in this enterprise that relies on some kind of intermediary technology (in the most literal sense of that term) to facilitate the educative process. However, it does not seem to me that "distance education" says it all, primarily because I do not think that distance education, as represented by Kanuka and Conrad, has anything much to do with pedagogy.

What seems to be missing is some sense of what the educative process is meant to be. Volumes have been written about this by innumerable authorities and this is not the place to try to recapitulate all that. The most concise representation I have to offer for present purposes is the notion that the defining feature of an educational experience is transforming "tacit knowledge" (which is a personal and private understanding often difficult for the individual to fully realize and articulate) into explicit knowledge (knowledge that is made public by communicating and explaining it in a formal systematic language to a community of peers) (see, for example, David Smith, Chapter 13 in *Handbook of Online Learning*, edited by Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). This transformation requires active participation in a learning community and ready communication among its members (I note in passing that being able to provide adequately for this has long been seen as the Achilles' heel of traditional distance education).

So, the line of questioning should more properly be something like, "Do Internet technologies facilitate the educative experience? Are there features of communicating through telecommunications technologies that would have us think that these technologies may also be instruments of change and will force education, in general, to become more of a community of learners taking ownership of their own learning?"

There is good reason to wonder if this is not the case. For example, virtually every chapter in Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read (2002) makes a case for the educational efficacy of online learning based on the grounds that:

- the technology of online learning requires teachers to assume a facilitative/mentoring role more appropriate to supporting the development of critical thinking and personally generated knowledge;
- the technology requires students to have to communicate what knowledge they have acquired in a very explicit and clear way;
- the technology promotes a much more equitable relationship among students based on knowledge and understanding rather than on the kinds of tangential influences that predominate in face to face experiences.

This is not the time or place to try to present a compelling argument to support the claim that computer-based telecommunications technologies can result in a different, more effective pedagogy. However, I would hope that the gist of the argument is enough to stimulate some interest in the proposition that this might be so, rather than dismissing the possibility out of hand.

As food for further thought, I would like to leave you with this quote taken from the *Handbook of Online Learning* (Chapter 17, by Barbara Brown):

> There is a type of intimacy achievable between teachers and students in this medium that is quite extraordinary, reminiscent of what Sproull and Kiesler (1995) refer to as "second-level" social effects of the technology. I believe this intimacy derives from a sense of shared control and responsibility, commitment to collaboration and dialogue, and increased willingness to take risks in communications with others online.…No matter how tentative, people's ideas and mental models are to be shared. As one administrator put it, "In an online environment, words matter …. Words are everything." (p. 384)

A POSTSCRIPT

Let's be very clear that teaching in an online environment—or any environment, for that matter—will not necessarily make a bad teacher a good teacher and will not necessarily render an unsatisfactory educational experience satisfactory. On the other hand, excellent teaching can and does occur without being situated in an online environment. We should also appreciate that there can be significant ancillary features to an online environment that automatically bestow a favored status. I've mentioned the notion that the inherent characteristics of computer-based telecommunications technologies can "nudge" teachers in the direction of a more efficacious pedagogy.

In addition, both students and teachers typically find themselves in a privileged position in an online environment for a number of reasons. For example, there can be a substantial positive effect deriving from the novelty of the experience and a need to over-achieve to ensure success. In addition, there will usually be some constraint placed on the numbers of students per course. This allows instructors to devote more time and attention to the course and to interacting with students—a condition that is increasingly difficult to realize in an on-campus situation and perhaps limits the extent to which the same kinds of pedagogical considerations can be implemented for courses not online.

Finally, the advantages and benefits currently reported for online education environments may be largely attributable to the kind and quality of student attracted to that format. Perhaps the currently reported benefits of online learning are not universally realizable (the *Handbook of Online Learning* that I have referred to, for example, is based entirely on experience with adult students at the graduate level). Barbara Brown, in Chapter 17 of the Handbook, identified this issue and went so far as to list a series of characteristics for "students

most likely to succeed" at online learning (page 386).

A CONCLUSION

Whatever one might think of the particulars of the case I have tried to make here, I hope I've persuaded you to wonder about the explanatory efficacy of the terminology and conceptualization of "distance education." It seems to me that this particular rubric is no longer helpful (if it ever was) and needs to be replaced with a more coherent and all-encompassing view of the educational experience, regardless of the technology used to support it.

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