

A HISTORY OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN MEXICO

Manuel Moreno Castañeda
University of Guadalajara, Mexico

*Our history, the weight of the past
and a platform toward the future.*

INTRODUCTION

I consider it important to begin this article by making an essential observation: research on distance education in Mexico is still in the embryonic stage, in spite of its long history. One indication is that among the lines of research defined by the Mexican Council on Educational Research, the leading organization in the field in Mexico, distance education does not even appear. Only recently, in the last few years, has an effort been made by educational institutions and professionals interested in doing research in this field, to set up working associations, such as the Distance Education Researchers' Network and Technologies for Learning.

Since research on distance education is just beginning, it should come as no surprise that the definition of its field of inquiry and its conceptualization are imprecise as yet. As a result, the theory and methodology of research into its

history are in their infancy, and studies must resort to methodological tools taken from other fields or use information technology and tele-

COUNTRY PROFILE: Mexico

Mexico, south of the United States, is strongly influenced by its neighbors but managed to keep its own culture, influenced by almost two centuries of independence. The country is about the three times the size of Texas, with a population of 105 million.

The literacy rate is a high, 95%, and the life expectancy is 75 years. Oil is an important export product and has brought considerable revenues, but the differences between poor and rich are still considerable.

Distance education in Mexico has a rich but not easy history, linked to the country's many universities. The following article is a nice reflection of Mexico's challenges in the field of distance education.

—Lya Visser

• **Manuel Moreno Castañeda**, Rector, Virtual University System, University of Guadalajara, Mexico. E-mail: manuel_morenoc@yahoo.com

The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 6(3), 2005, pp. 227–232
Copyright © 2005 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1528-3518
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

communications as partial reference points. The limitations of these approaches make it difficult to offer in-depth explanations of the current status of distance education, not to mention justifiable proposals for its further development.

It is the intention of this article to look for criteria that take the historical character of education as a starting point. In its origins, education was open and ongoing, a process that is innate in the human condition. In its process of institutionalization, it took on the form of school systems, with a structure and a legitimizing function that excluded those who could not, or would not, adapt to schools' schedules, spaces, and learning methods. This situation created a need for educational programs that were not bound by such rigid conditions. On the basis of these considerations, I undertake this study with the following premises as my starting point: (a) education is a sociocultural product that had a beginning, has evolved, and will one day disappear; (b) distance education develops just as school-based education does, but with an inversely proportional growth curve, because as schools make their admissions and operating processes more closed and rigid, alternative educational options arise; and (c) research into the history of distance education needs its own theoretical and methodological approach, because it is a field that is still in the process of formation. It is hoped that this article will contribute to the development of the field.

OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

To begin, it is important to take a look at the concepts of open and distance education. Depending on the context, they are sometimes taken as synonyms, and other times their uses can be confused.

Open Education

Unlike in other places, where *open* refers to unrestricted access to educational institutions

with no need to demonstrate previous studies, in Mexico the concept refers to the fact that traditional school processes are made more flexible; for example, class attendance, the school calendar, and examination periods for certifying learning. The documentation of previous studies, however, is still a prerequisite.

Distance Education

Distance education refers more often to the methodological and technological strategies that make it possible to deliver educational contents and provide communication among participants in an educational process even though they do not coincide in space and time. As paradoxical as it may sound, the driving force behind distance education is the desire to do away with distance.

In view of the ambiguities in the use of the term, and not wishing to enter into a debate about its concept or use, I will consider distance education not in its literal meaning, but as the intention to overcome the distances that deny many people access to educational services. In short, and from a social standpoint, we should conceive of distance education as more than a way to overcome distance in space and time, for which a number of methodological and technological resources are available. Our biggest challenge is to overcome the tremendous social, cultural, and economic distances reflected in unequal access to educational services.

CRITERIA FOR A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this article is to establish a perspective for the historical analysis of distance education by proposing categories that coincide with the premises that underlie this mode of education: (a) greater and more equitable coverage; (b) self-reliance and independent learning; and (c) flexibility in adapting to participants' living conditions. From this perspective, there are many approaches for looking at

the changes that have taken place in distance education, such as educational policies and their social orientation, distance education models that have been implemented, and the most typical approach, the technological supports on which they are based.

Among the factors that have had an impact on the origin and development of distance education, there are three that I consider crucial: (a) the development of traditional classroom education, which limited the times, places, and modes available for learning, and thus led inexorably to the creation of new modes for those who could not go to school; (b) the development of different media and modes of communication that allowed for contact among people from different locales who were participating in the same educational process; and (c) the educational policies that were implemented in each stage of the history, and the role played by distance education. These considerations will give structure to my analysis within the historical framework outlined below, which does not so much mark boundaries between periods as indicate educational policy shifts that led to new perspectives for distance education.

ORIGINS AND TRENDS

Itinerant distance education was characterized by the distribution of educational materials designed for independent study and subsequent visits by educators to students' places of residence, as in the cultural missions created in 1923 to provide service to rural professors in their own community. This model was formalized in 1945 with the Federal Teachers' Training Institute, which provided an array of support services, combining long-distance communication like radio and mail service with face-to-face individual and group advisory sessions, as well as different learning situations such as correspondence courses, complementary oral courses, individual study, local study and advisory centers, and group classes. The institute was phased out in 1971,

but its methods have survived in teacher training institutions.

Correspondence courses date back to the nineteenth century, when regular postal service was institutionalized, and continue up to the present day. In fact, educational programs that limit their activities to distributing courses, giving online educational support, and evaluating by Internet, are in essence offering correspondence courses.

The creation of *telesecundarias* in the 1960s ushered in large-scale use of educational television that now reaches over 30,000 locations. The coverage and student-support strategies used in this experience give it a mass-based, standardized quality, which allows it, on the one hand, to reach large numbers of students, while on the other hand running the risk of offering inadequate support to each student in his or her regional and personal circumstances. Face-to-face instructors are an attempt to remedy this situation. Television has also been used for educational purposes in higher education, but not on a systematic, mass-based, and exclusive basis.

The 1960s witnessed the influx of the universities into distance education, a new era marked by the opening of the great European universities that worked within these educational frameworks, such as the Open University in Great Britain and the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) in Spain. Along these same lines, the National Autonomous University of Mexico created the Open University System, aimed mainly at people who for one reason or another could not study within the traditional system. The Open Teaching System of the National Polytechnic Institute, while not distance education per se, did represent a milestone in the creation of nonclassroom formats of higher education. When the National Pedagogical University (UPN, in its initials in Spanish) created the Distance Education System in 1979, it became the first public institution of higher learning in Mexico to offer this type of education on a nationwide basis, by setting up distance education units in every state. The UPN to this day

has continued to give priority to the use of printed materials for independent study, while maintaining the Saturday advisory sessions that require professors and students to meet face-to-face. In this sense, the itinerant model of the last century is still in use.

In the 1990s, the *e-learning rush* began in earnest, owing to the development of the Internet, which made communication access easy and readily available, thereby providing distance education with an excellent platform for educational communication, access to information, and more reliable learning processes. The momentum continues to grow as technological innovations open avenues for new educational possibilities.

We must not lose sight of the uneven development of these processes. Many institutions remain faithful to the structures and practices of the time of their founding, and new proposals are often overlaid on traditional processes. Socioeducational practices tend to encompass processes that are simultaneous and disparate, even recurrent and regressive. It is not at all uncommon to find the most traditional teaching methods presented with the latest technology, or trend-setting pedagogical innovations supported by traditional technologies. We can therefore conclude that the new media are not about to displace the old ones; instead, they serve to diversify the menu of possibilities, in an ongoing search for the best options for distance education.

In general, it can be stated that distance education in Mexico is a mixture of the traditional and the modern, forever caught in a tug-of-war between the inertia of routine on the one hand, and rupture and progress on the other. Some aspects of the educational system become more flexible, such as classroom time, curricular options, and so forth, while other control mechanisms typical of school systems remain firmly entrenched, such as the centralization of teacher-training processes and an overall school-bound vision of educational situations.

ORGANIZATION

The following categorization shows different organizational models for defining the relationship between educational modes and institutions.

Centralized National Institutions

The National Pedagogical University in its beginnings could be considered emblematic of this category, when its Distance Education System controlled more than 70 centers all over the country and concentrated academic, administrative, and educational processes. This model, with its mass production of materials, permits greater coverage and exclusive, specialized personnel, but at a cost: standardization, lack of regional variation, and obsolescence of materials due precisely to their mass production. This model eventually came under the fire of teachers' unions and decentralization policies and gradually lost ground. Now the academic oversight of curricula remains centralized, but the administration has been delegated to the state governments, and the professors themselves are in charge of evaluating the students' learning processes.

Units Within Existing Institutions Sharing Curricula, Resources, and Personnel

An illustrative case is the National Autonomous University of Mexico, which organizes its Open University System on the basis of its existing structure, by simply adding to each department a division that takes care of open education, with a separate faculty, but the same programs, curricula, and calendars as the classroom-based system. It has the advantage of making use of resources that are already in place, and offers the possibility of introducing flexibility into the classroom-based system, but runs the risk of imposing school-bound structures on distance education.

Units Within Existing Institutions Having Their Own Organization and Curriculum

With this model, nonclassroom education can have its own curriculum, with specially developed spaces, materials, and personnel. This obviously implies an extra investment, but allows for an organizational model that is designed expressly for this kind of education. An example is the National Polytechnic Institute, which in 1974 started up its own program of nonconventional education—the Open Teaching System—with its own curriculum, personnel, study materials, and administration. More recently, in 2005, the Virtual University System of the University of Guadalajara was created, with its own administration and its own academic offerings.

Consortia and Networks

With these models, the members negotiate their academic, administrative and technological responsibilities. This format also allows for optimal use of resources, manageable production scales, and regional and institutional adaptations. Problems can arise, however, if collaboration and cooperation policies are not renewed and the results of joint work are not distributed evenly. Of the examples of this type of collaboration in Mexico, the EDUSAT Network deserves special mention. It provides a technological platform that covers a significant portion of the population of Latin America, and serves educational institutions using all modes of learning, at all levels.

Outside Influences

Outside influences are undeniable in our educational culture in general, and in distance education in particular. This influence is evident in a number of aspects, including: (a) the way institutions from countries with preponderant economic power have gained easy entry into our educational systems by taking advantage of their technological advances, their

excess academic production, and the need for flexible versions of higher education to meet the demand of Latin American institutions; (b) the tendency to imitate foreign models, either conventional universities that incorporate distance education in different ways, or universities that engage exclusively in distance education; or c) alliances among institutions from different countries, alliances that are not always balanced or beneficial to our needs and purposes.

Perspectives from History

The history of distance education in Mexico is highly complex, and reflects the multiple causes to which it owes its origin, as well as the outside influences that have shaped the programs and institutions that work in this educational mode. The origin and subsequent trends are characterized by the following features:

There is a certain amount of confusion and ambiguity in the definitions given to the concepts of open and distance education, and even more in the uses to which these concepts are put, which makes it difficult to delineate the field and object of study with any kind of precision.

Distance education systems tend to preserve their original format; they are unwilling to abandon the strategies, methods, type of material, and media they used when they first started up. It is thus common for programs to include a hodgepodge of learning and teaching strategies, resources, and media from all the stages of distance education.

Distance education has been used primarily for compensatory purposes, intended for people who do not have access to traditional education, rather than as a strategy for diversifying and strengthening learning processes.

Depending on the role that we wish to assume in the global knowledge society, we can aim at a whole range of goals: from being knowledge generators, to being knowledge disseminators, or merely consumers. Here is where key decisions must be made that will

allow us to move up from our status as technology and information consumers, which relegates us to a position of dependence, and aspire to full participation in the globalization process by means of our own home-grown proposals, rooted in our particular identities and social projects.

In terms of organization, the trend seems to point to institutions that engage exclusively in distance education, or that combine it with face-to-face education, which is the tendency that is gaining momentum and moving toward proposals involving formats without borders.

Depending on the coverage strategies, we have, on the one hand, large-scale, standardized systems for the majority population groups that demand education and, on the other hand, personalized systems with greater academic and technological support for the privileged few. An alternative proposal for dis-

tance education should offer quality education for all. If distance education is to continue promising a ticket to better living conditions in Mexico, it needs to open up more and overcome distances in time and space, but above all, social, economic, and cultural distances.

The problems affecting distance education are serious, numerous, and hard to overcome: dependence on imported projects, standardization, a bureaucracy that leads back to traditional school-bound formats, traditionalism, a lack of adequate policies, and isolation. However, we must not overlook its strengths, such as the existing infrastructure, the wide range of valuable proposals that have already been made and, above all, the spirit of collaboration that characterizes us, and that only needs greater organizational efforts to become a consolidated force.