

GLOBALIZATION, DISTANCE EDUCATION AND HEGEMONIC FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

Consideration of the place of theory in distance education suggests that existing definitions do not adequately account for economic, cultural and historical factors. The application of the notion of *hegemonic valency* to distance education highlights the ways in which tools, technological systems and online environments operate in predictable ways. Historically, the imperatives of market forces and social justice have displayed a tension that is continued in contemporary contexts including virtual learning environments. A characteristic of this tension can be seen in the forces and interactions associated with globalisation and technology.

These forces, in association with others, have contributed to a *null curriculum* in which some alternatives open to distance education practitioners remain invisible. It is likely that this situation is further compounded by the difficulty of ascertaining what distance education practices are actually operating world-wide at any identifiable time. Available options for distance educators can be understood in terms of instrumental and interpersonal axes that can potentially indicate the relative consideration that can be given to these factors. This approach is suggested as one way to understand available options at a time when there has been an apparent increase in instrumental approaches to distance education at the expense of interpersonal approaches and issues of social justice. While this problem is of concern, it is more appropriate to reflect on the unintended consequences of distance education for society and identify them than it is to uncritically oppose globalisation and its adherents.

Keywords: Distance education; globalisation; instrumentalism; null curriculum hegemony.

HEGEMONIC VALENCE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

As the discipline of Distance Education has continued to develop there has been a concurrent need to consider the theories that underpin its use. As Gunawardena and McIsaac (2004) suggest, one of the critical challenges in the field of Distance Education has been brought about by rapid changes in the development of new communication technologies. This in turn results in the need to;

adapt theories to understand the learning environments created by new technological developments or to develop new theories to explain or make sense of these new and emerging technologies (p. 359)

Similarly, Moore (1991) has reflected on the place of theory in Distance Education, and has observed that theories give us a broad perspective that helps us to “make decisions that are guided by fundamental teaching and learning principles rather than by the pressure of a particular crisis or the dazzle of a fresh opportunity.” (p. 2).

In this respect, the phenomenon of globalisation is of particular interest to practitioners of Distance Education. The changes to the global economy in recent years are inextricably linked to changes in enabling technologies and market forces.

Understandings of the theoretical underpinnings and everyday practices of Distance Education are consequently dependent on not only the characteristics of learners or particular technologies but on the ways that market forces have operated in past and contemporary contexts, in *combination* with the technology and culture prevalent at the time. In particular, it can be observed that market forces have a *hegemonic valency*. The concept of valence is derived from Bush (1983), who argued that tools and technologies possess a valence or bias analogous to that of atoms that have lost or gained electrons through ionization, resulting in a tendency for a given technological system to interact in similar situations in identifiable and predictable ways. It is argued in this paper that globalization, when applied to Distance Education, also operates in a predictable way, in that the objectives of market forces are valorised at the expense of humanistic concerns, issues of social justice and interpersonal relationships. Historically, the predilection for market forces to operate in such a way predates the online era.

MARKET FORCES, DISTANCE EDUCATION AND GLOBALISATION

The twin imperatives of market forces and social justice have been in opposition for a very long time. Polanyi (1957) has observed that the enclosure of open fields in England achieved improvements and economic progress at the price of social dislocation from as early as the Sixteenth Century. During the Industrial Revolution, some of the Luddites who opposed the introduction of new machinery in the weaving industry were condemned by Baron Thompson in 1813 (Burke 1966, p. 1), who defended manufacturers, noting that “It is to the excellence of our Machinery that the existence probably, certainly the excellence and flourishing state of our manufactures are owing,” while the poet Byron (1812/1970) defended them in Parliament, arguing that

The rejected workmen in the blindness of their ignorance, instead of rejoicing at these improvements in arts so beneficial to mankind, conceived themselves to be sacrificed to improvements in the mechanism (p. 967)

Later in the Nineteenth Century, Matthew Arnold (1882) warned in *Culture and Anarchy* of the consequences of contemporary preoccupation with material progress:

[W]e can say with truth that we have many more centres of industry, as they are called, and much more business, population, and manufactures. And if we are sometimes a little troubled by our multitude of poor men, yet we know the increase of manufactures and population to be such a salutary thing in itself...we are quite dazzled and borne away, and more and more

industrial movement is called for, and our social progress seems to become one triumphant and enjoyable course of what is sometimes called, vulgarly, outrunning the constable.

In the Twentieth Century, J. B. Bury (1932) commented in the era of factory assembly lines on the expansion of industry, commerce and branches of knowledge, and observed that progress had to be offset against the exploitation and suffering of workers. These historical antecedents suggest that the contestation between market forces (often involving a form of technology) and resulting social problems predates the online era. In particular, they imply that some of the problems that might be associated with implementations of Distance Education in an era of globalization can be seen as a continuation of underlying problems that have persisted over time

THE NATURE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

As Distance Education has continued to grow, there have been concurrent changes in the enabling technologies and in our understandings of the nature of it. Keegan's (1996) discussion of previous definitions and understandings of Distance Education concluded with a proposal which outlined the characteristics of Distance Education.

These characteristics include the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learning, the influence of an educational organization, the use of technical media, the provision of two-way communication, and the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group. What is not explicit in many discussions related to Distance Education is the recognition of the *extent* to which the nature and purpose of Distance Education is shaped by economic, technical and cultural factors. In particular, the links between market forces and education are continuing to strengthen. Increasingly, educational policy is being colonized by economic policy imperatives (Pavlova 2005) and education is being inducted into the market episteme (Ball 1998). As Kenway (1996) suggests,

[M]arkets and information technology and the relationship between them are the primary forces driving economic, social and cultural change today (p. 220).

Much of the use of online technology in Distance Education is influenced by globalization. For Castells, (1993) globalization represents a revolutionary transformation in the world economy based on information technologies and extensive changes in education, while for Torres (2002), there have been changes in the kinds of goods and services that are available to people. For practitioners of Distance Education, understandings of the nature and purposes of Distance Education are related to the needs of those organisations that have encouraged its use, previous implementations of Distance Education, and theoretical discussions which reflect on past and present trends.

The needs of organisations such as universities and other corporate groups includes the assumption that distance education can be matched to economic imperatives and that social and humanistic considerations can be considered as secondary. Kellner (2000) has argued that some of the important consequences of new technologies include the further colonization of education by business at the expense of politics and culture, and the undermining of democracy through the

hegemonic influence of capital at the expense of other domains of life. Yang (2003) maintains that the market forces that characterise globalisation have a detrimental effect:

With market mechanism at its core, globalisation undermines certain basic human needs...it does not necessarily cater to non-economic needs. The need to provide for ourselves, to give, create and invent, to do things for ourselves and one another...all this is subverted by the market (Yang, 2003, p. 272)

Hence, if we consider a hypothetical example of a university that offers a Distance Education course to students, the pedagogy employed will be influenced by models that have been previously considered appropriate by corporate interests. The university will want to run the course at a profit, and, as in business, the most efficient means that will enable students to complete the course will be preferred. This suggests, for example, that where two competing pedagogies can be considered as viable solutions for students to understand a given concept or topic, that the cheaper (or more profitable) of the two alternatives will be preferred. The use of video-conferencing might be as useful for this purpose as asynchronous bulletin boards and web pages, but the technical limitations of video conferencing means that it is not usually considered suitable for larger groups who are geographically dispersed. If the choice of video-conferencing meant the employment of an additional tutor, or the creation of smaller groups requiring more tutor sessions, a cheaper solution would often be given higher priority. In such an example, the use of video-conferencing would conceivably enable the recognition of facial cues and body language, and it might reasonably be expected to lead to better interpersonal relationships than a competing asynchronous pedagogy. In this manner, it would also play a small part in improving society. Milojević's (2005) interpretation of hegemonic futures is that they eliminate alternatives by not contesting them or making them illegal or unpopular, but by making them invisible.

It is likely that this phenomenon is similar to the problem of Non-Events described in early reflections on the question of the hidden curriculum (e.g. Gordon 1982,) in more recent accounts of the null curriculum in Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), by Weiss (2006), and by suggestions that there are unexamined assumptions regarding technology and the dominant ideologies of technology (Mayers and Swafford 1998).

This interpretation suggests that although one pedagogy or implementation of distance education is emphasised at the expense of another, the alternative is freely available, although it may not be widely recognised. This understanding resonates with lines from Robert Frost's (2007) poem, *The Road Not Taken*

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

This interpretation relates the choices associated with globalisation to implementations of Distance Education in which more socially relevant alternatives become the "Road Not Taken". The consequence of this approach is an emphasis on solutions that are derived from market-driven approaches. Stromquist (2002) maintains that the increased levels of production and trade are associated with an emphasis on the dynamics of the market and the technological revolution, and

these in turn are related to the emergence of new values in which personal material success is valued more than the promotion of sensitivity to the needs of others.

In a related argument, Apple (1988) has argued that computer technology embodies a form of thinking that orients a person to approach the world in a particular way. The technical logic involved in this approach can contribute to reduced critical, political and ethical understanding. Hence, the choice of video-conferencing, in the preceding example, would be unlikely to be made, not only because it may be seen as more expensive, but because it does not fit comfortably with globalised models of Distance Education and the modes of technological use that are characteristic of it.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The earlier suggestion in this paper that understandings of the characteristics of Distance Education could be derived, in part, from existing examples, needs to be explored with caution. The overarching problem in using induction to formulate such general characteristics is that the researcher is unable to gain direct access to more than a tiny proportion of relevant examples. The requirement for student confidentiality, and, presumably, issues of commercial confidence, has led to a proliferation of online Distance Education approaches on the World Wide Web that are restricted by passwords. The examples that are available for study are therefore likely to be restricted to those courses that are not password-protected, together with specific courses or case studies in Distance Education that the researcher may have access to. Such examples cannot be validly generalised to all (or even most) Distance Education courses throughout the world. As St Clair (2005) argues, the process of induction is problematic in educational research.

Similarly, accounts by theorists in the field remain, at best, as speculative interpretations of what may be happening in the field of Distance Education. These interpretations invariably pass through conscious and unconscious social and cultural filters. When these understandings are combined with the changing nature of Distance Education over time, as reflected in the appropriate literature, the result is likely to include such a diverse range of practices that it would be difficult to say anything useful about it. To illustrate these problems, consider the following metaphor. Imagine that an enormous bin contains fruit from many different parts of the world. Trucks regularly arrive and empty their loads of fruit into this bin.

We would be unable to reliably say much about the overall characteristics of the fruit in terms of nutritional value, acidity and sweetness, because of the depth of the fruit, the difficulty in making valid conclusions drawn from such disparate elements, and because additional loads of fruit are constantly added, rendering previous research dated. And, while some researchers might argue that a study of the trucks and their contents would be helpful, overall understanding would be always less than optimal.

Similarly, when there is a vacuum of understanding, it is easier for hegemonic principles to apply in Distance Education. When universities and corporate groups provide tools and preferred pedagogic solutions for Distance Education it is within a context where, as Evans and Nation (2000) suggest, the notion of the university

as a 'critical community of scholars' has changed into one of the university as an educational corporation. The nature of these tools and pedagogies, in turn, influences our understanding of what constitutes Distance Education. Denning (1998) has observed that while "technology does not drive human beings to adopt new practices, it shapes the space of possibilities in which they can act" (p. 20). Hence the potential, constraints and directions of virtual learning environments can be subtly biased in ways that are not immediately obvious.

Streibel's (1988) observation that the technical nature of a delivery system has the capacity to shift educational interactions away from interpersonal interactions towards procedural skills and information functions resonates with Hylnka and Belland's (1991) assertion that enquiries related to educational technology are often related to outcomes of technologically-based learning systems. As Stewart and Williams (1998) point out, social choices are inherent in the ways in which technologies are selected and implemented, and these in turn shape further change. Hence Distance Educators' choice of tools and pedagogies are consistent with globalisation and market forces because of their hegemonic valency; while their choices are rarely hidden, there is a predilection for some alternatives rather than others. The nature of Distance Education does not result from a free choice made by practitioners, but from the practices arising from globalisation and related political, economic and social factors. To extend the metaphor of the information superhighway, it is as if familiarity with a particular road or the expectations of others helps to determine what roads will be traveled.

In Distance Education, expectations regarding the nature of Distance Education are shaped by precedents and previous examples. Others look at these precedents and they come to define what is the norm for Distance Education. As Kuhn (1970) has suggested, paradigms can be considered as examples of practice that provide models from which coherent traditions may be derived. And, as Von Dietze maintains, it is consistent with the conformity of paradigms that the community involved seeks to suppress competing views. Hence we see an emerging paradigm in which a view of Distance Education influenced by market forces and globalization comes to be seen as normal, and any departure from this paradigm is seen as odd.

GLOBALISATION AND THE HEGEMONIC INFLUENCE OF CORPORATE CAPITALISM

Historically, Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) have observed in the pre-Internet era that under the Reagan/Bush administration in the U.S.A, the notion of schooling as a vehicle for social justice and public responsibility was "trashed for the glitter of the marketplace and the logic of the spirited entrepreneur" (p. 8). This same approach has been a strong influence on the operation of universities in the early 21st Century. As with schools, issues of vocational training and profit have become imperatives as government funding has been reduced.

Earlier liberal concepts of the university have not always disappeared, but they have been subsumed by the need to make a profit. Distance Education has increasingly been seen as one way of providing an income stream in tertiary education, and the nature of its development, particularly in the digital era, has been influenced by these expectations. As Lankshear (1997) argues,

...capitalism is unfolding in the context of a powerful, intrusive, highly regulatory 'techno-rationalist world view' which...has impacted powerfully

on language processes and practices. This world view is an assemblage of values, purposes, beliefs and ways of doing things that originated in the world of business. It has now been embraced by many governments as the appropriate modus operandi for public sector institutions, including those of compulsory and post-compulsory education and training (p. 313).

Arguments that explain the links between education and business in an online globalized world help to clarify some of the recent directions that have been taken in the area of Distance Education. The objectives of Distance Education can be conceptualized in terms of *instrumental* and *interpersonal* axes (Figure: 1). The instrumental axis describes a graduated scale of means and ends. This axis is usually explicit, and although related objectives can be either cognitive or affective in nature, little attention is paid to how a particular implementation of Distance Education may be related to the long-term development of individuals and society. In contrast, the interpersonal axis represents the "road less travelled". This axis enables the Distance Educator to consider notions such as social justice, public responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. These concepts are, collectively, subsumed in what has been labelled here as the interpersonal axis

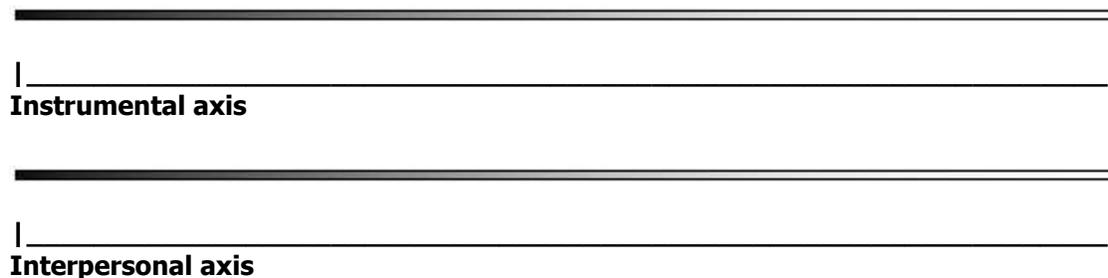


Figure: 1
Instrumental and Interpersonal axes

Examples of the pedagogies associated with Distance Education in the Instrumental and Interpersonal axes are provided in Figure:2 Typically, a market-driven instrumental pedagogy will result in a Virtual Learning Environment in which identifiable means and ends predominate. An interpersonal pedagogy, in contrast, allows for the achievement of instrumental goals but simultaneously considers long-term issues such as the skills or attitudes that may be of benefit to the community.

Instrumental pedagogy	Interpersonal pedagogy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A concentration on means and ends • Relationships between students or instructor seen as secondary unless it helps to achieve defined objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasises interpersonal relationships • Consideration given to issues such as community and social justice

Figure: 2
Pedagogies associated with Instrumental and Interpersonal understandings of Distance Education.

In this sense, pedagogical approaches arising out of an interpersonal pedagogy are seen as complementary in nature, and not as polar opposites. The Distance Educator is not forced to choose between two competing alternatives

Although the interpretation of Distance Education suggested in figures 1 and 2 suggests that there are choices available, it is likely that market forces will continue to operate in such a way that instrumental pedagogies will be chosen in preference to their interpersonal counterparts.

Kellner's (2002) observations are also appropriate to Distance Education. He asked whether education:

will be restructured to promote democracy and human needs, or whether education will be transferred primarily to serve the needs of business and the global economy. It is therefore a burning question what sort of restructuring will take place, in whose interests, and for what ends. Indeed, more than ever we need philosophical reflection on the ends and purposes of education, on what we are doing and trying to achieve in our educational practices and institutions." (pp. 90-91).

UNDERSTANDING FUTURE CHOICES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

It is not immediately apparent that the hegemonic valence of distance education described in this paper can be resolved in favour of a more equitable focus on interpersonal issues. This is not because areas such as social justice, public responsibility and interpersonal relationships are less deserving of attention than their instrumental counterparts. The problem is more that the imperative of global competition is seen as a justification for the privileging of instrumental knowledge at the expense of knowledge which arises from understanding of the self and others (Hartley 1997). In countering this imperative, the solution is not to see the problem as between "them" and "us", or as a simplistic confrontation between the agents of globalisation and those dedicated to a more equitable society. As Talbott (1994) has argued, there is only one group of people – ourselves:

"...we have tended to invest certain institutions with a life of their own...[but] ultimately, even these institutionalized and mechanized projections of our nature must ultimately be traced back to ourselves. It is we who watch the shows, we who populate the massive government bureaucracies, and we who, day by day, transact the nation's corporate business...the citizens who determine the characters of the marketplace are the same citizens who will make the Net whatever it becomes." (p. 82).

It is, however, reasonable to argue that a harmonious society and globalisation are compatible, if uneasily so. It is not therefore inconsistent to maintain that implementations of distance education should represent both instrumental concerns and those of a wider society. This approach changes the focus from the identification of a group that should be opposed to identifying the unintended consequences of distance education and actively promoting pedagogies and tools that will have beneficial effects. Technologies have unintended consequences (Tenner 1997), and they are often associated with manifold latent social effects that are independent of their nominally intended purpose (Sclove 2006). In this

respect, the theories underpinning the use of distance education that were highlighted at the beginning of this paper are useful in identifying elements of distance education that might make a positive contribution to society.

CONCLUSION

The tendency for online tools and pedagogies to operate in predictable ways has profound implications for distance education practitioners, and, ultimately, for the society in which we live. Reflection on the notion of hegemonic valency suggests that the imperatives of globalisation, technology and market forces will continue to influence these tendencies.

Without a conscious effort to select from the less visible options available, distance education will increasingly meet the instrumental needs of interest groups and organizations rather than the long-term needs of society

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