"E-Learning in the USA: The Storm after the Storm"

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<u>Introduction</u>

During the past five years college level e-learning has become an established feature on the US higher education landscape. By one estimate (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 1998) over 31% of all US colleges and universities already offer some courses in this mode, with projections that the percentage will rise to over 90% by the year 2007.

Initially, this latest wave of educational technology characterized by networked computers and asynchronous instruction was greeted with skepticism, especially among educators. They had seen, in the past decades, overblown claims for distance education using television, newspapers, and lastly computers, with disappointing results. E-learning appeared to be more of the same- a fringe phenomenon for second rate students attending mediocre institutions; definitely not in the mainstream. The rapid and widespread acceptance of computer mediated distance learning came as a shock. Simply put, the revolution was over almost as quickly as it began, and the advocates of e-learning carried the day.

What we are now facing is the serious integration of distance and e-learning with face-to-face learning in American higher education. Faculty reaction has changed from rejection to grudging acceptance. In a recent report, (<u>Academy Today</u>, January 18, 2001) the American Federation of Teachers, the largest teachers union in the USA, announced that students enrolled in distance education undergraduate degree programs "should" take some of their credits on campus in

traditional courses. Distance education should also be a component of official faculty workload to be determined in collective bargaining agreements. A new report issued by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Eaton, 2001) provides evaluation criteria for online courses and demonstrates how these converge with more traditional offerings.

At least one major US university is requiring that students minimally take one online course as part of their undergraduate instruction while others are still debating the issue. Establishing the appropriate place for e-learning within a college or university is the task confronting many US educators, not just those in continuing education. In this presentation I will address the articulation of curricula of online and traditional instructional models, educational environments conducive to e-learning, what administrators and faculty must do to ensure success, conflict and cooperation across academic units, and the future of continuing education, with attention to equality of access and other social concerns.

The Spread of Electronic Distance Learning

Between 1994 and 1997 online courses tallied an overall growth of 116% among all institutions, and 204% in public four-year schools. According to this NCES trendline, by 2009-10 online courses are projected to account for 31% of all course enrollments at the post-secondary level. This would be approximately four million students in the USA. Online student demographics, provided by New York State's SUNY Learning Network (SLN) indicate equal popularity among both full and part-time students, and among both younger and older (below and above 25 years of age). E-learning is proving itself to be, using Christensen's term, a "disruptive technology" in US higher education, reshaping all of higher learning, including how we think about education.

Yet, American post-secondary institutions vary greatly in their enthusiasm and commitment to distance learning. The private sector, in particular, shows a much

lower rate of participation, approximately half that of the public sector. This can be related to issues of resources, mission and image. Some of the elite schools, in particular have limited their involvement in e-learning to the marketing of their brand names for income-producing non-credit offerings, while restricting their high-status degree programs to conventional delivery formats. This strategy is both described and recommended in Lloyd Armstrong's article in <u>Change Magazine</u> (2000). A further example of limited engagement is the example of Cardean University which represents a collaboration of the business schools of Columbia University, University of Chicago, Stanford University, Carnegie Mellon and the London School of Economics for online undergraduate instruction. Students attending Cardean, while they may have some of the same outstanding faculty as students attending these other schools, will be ultimately earning Cardean degrees (<u>The Economist</u>, February 17, 2001, p.70).

On the other hand, there are cases of equally illustrious private schools offering their "big ticket" programs at a distance. Duke University and Purdue University's renowned Krannert School, for example, are offering their highly regarded Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree programs via the internet.

It is safe to generalize, however, that public higher education, especially "state universities" in the USA have a long experience with correspondence education and this has served as a fertile seed-bed for their experimentation and involvement in electronic modes. Ironically, some of the largest correspondence courses are virtually unknown, outside of the responsible continuing education unit, on their home campuses. What is different now however is that online e-learning courses have benefited from all the attention recently paid to e-commerce, both positive and negative, and thus enjoy a much higher profile in academia today among faculty who have never previously directly encountered any form of distance learning. Accordingly these online courses have served as a lightning rod for faculty opposition to non-traditional courses and students in ways that correspondence has not. The virtually complete marginalization of

correspondence education- separate administrative staffs, budgets, faculty, and students- has ironically shielded it from vocal opposition, unlike the high visibility online courses which enjoy frequent, if not weekly, mention in the academic press, especially the weekly <u>Chronicle of Higher Education</u> which runs a regular column on electronic distance education.

The resultant controversy about online learning is therefore inextricably linked to another discussion on the place of part-time/off-campus/extended learning within the edifice of higher education. This has been further enmeshed within debates on faculty productivity, workload, roles, and the perpetual tug-of-war between academics and administrators. Part of my self-imposed charge this morning, then, is to try to untangle as many of these issues as I can, while shedding light on the direction and purpose of adult learning- a major concern all of us here today share.

The Example of Education through Correspondence

To anyone familiar with the history of adult education, the current infatuation in the US with online education is reminiscent of that of correspondence education several generations earlier. This first distance format appeared in the late 19th century and quickly became a major phenomenon, particularly in adult education. It enabled students to study and earn academic credit by mail. Because of correspondent study's accessibility to people of all classes and income levels, and the aggressive advertising campaigns of some of its practitioners, especially in the proprietary for-profit, non-credit sector it enrolled people in huge numbers. In 1924, according to Noffsinger (1926) four times as many people were enrolled in proprietary correspondence schools than in all other resident colleges, universities, and professional schools combined.

In Wisconsin, a legislative agency investigated the numerous commercial schools-usually located in other states- in which thousands of citizens were

enrolling. They found many of the schools suspect, ineffective, or even fraudulent. In response, the University of Wisconsin's Board of Regents, the university's official governing body, made a commitment to provide an honest, high quality alternative to its proprietary schools. Wisconsin accordingly developed a large volume of vocationally oriented correspondence courses, in addition to the college level credit courses it already offered through this distance mode. In some respects the University represented its program as a consumer protection measure (Rosentreter, 1957).

Both credit and non-credit correspondence education coincided with the proliferation of advancing job opportunities in a variety of occupations, especially in technical and professional areas and in state licensing, which were most often based on test performance. These developments favored the acquisition of occupationally specific knowledge that also lent itself to the granting of certificates, diplomas and other visible manifestations of learning attainment. Like the correspondence study medium, many e-learning programs today are also credential and certificate driven as well as being intertwined with opportunities in e-commerce and in virtually all fields of employment. By way of illustration, a recent study issued by the US Department of Education's National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries and Lifelong Learning reported that in the field of Information Technology (IT) over 300 discrete certifications have been created since 1989. Moreover, approximately 1.65 million individuals have earned about 2.5 million IT certificates by mid-2000 (ACHE, January/February 2001).

Suspicions about the proprietary sector's involvement in distance education, both correspondence and electronic, and especially the competition for adult students, have goaded the traditional sector to respond, if only in self-defense, not necessarily out of fondness for flexibility in learning. The University of Phoenix, the US's largest private university, is also a highly visible example of an aggressively expanding, degree granting proprietary school. For the past few

years it has served as the proverbial "wake-up call" for traditional universities concerned about losing their shares of the adult part-time market to this brashly entrepreneurial higher education upstart.

<p style="text-align:center">Backlash</p>

Correspondence education, despite its notable achievements in democratizing higher education lent itself to extensive abuses. In fact, the entry of traditional institutions into this venue was, as I recounted earlier, partly a result of consumer protection against the egregious claims and actions of unregulated mail order colleges.

Because of this less than ideal history, allegations of "soft pedagogy" have persistently dogged adult education. John Dyer's landmark book, Ivory Towers in the Marketplace, published in 1956, is only one of many extensive rebuttals to this alleged inferiority of part-time education. But more damaging than sniggers of academic one-upmanship are reports of fraud, "diploma mills," bogus degrees, and the like. Reports of worthless degrees and certificate from colleges that existed only on paper, or from spurious unaccredited virtual colleges whose only reality was their web sites continue to emerge. It is easy to see how rampant speculations about academic quality can easily take root and spread against this backdrop of abuse. When dubious institutions can easily escape regulation, or can misrepresent themselves to unsuspecting (or opportunistic) consumers (The Chronicle, March 23,2001, online edition) reputable adult education programs must continuously struggle to free themselves from charges of "guilt by association" with less savory practitioners, both past and present.

Much as the halo effect surrounding e-commerce helped propel and fuel an early interest in anything online, recent reverses in the "dot.coms" have also cast still another cloud of suspicion over enterprises connected with the internet. While less than a year ago we could write confidently about the "allure of e-commerce,"

now the operative term is most likely to be "skepticism." It remains to be seen if the failures of the dot.coms will have a major negative impact upon e-learning. As I was writing this paper (March 22, 2001) I read another headline in the Chronicle of Higher Education's electronic edition, "A 2nd Distance-Learning Company Announces Layoffs as Technology Firms Tighten Belts." In the article it was reported that the distance learning company eCollege would be laying off approximately 35 of its 330 person workforce. Earlier this month, UNext, another e-learning company eliminated 52 jobs from a total of 390.

Suffice it to say that a more critical eye will be paid to online programs possibly resulting in a more stringent regulatory environment. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation guidelines I mentioned earlier are just one example. As long as e-learning is not rigidly recast so that it becomes a procrustean clone of traditional instruction, the heightened climate of criticism will be beneficial and corrective. Because of the real benefits of e-learning to part-time students we are unlikely to see this innovation dissipate or weaken. It will be interesting to track the contours of the continuing debate. At the very least opponents of e-learning now have a larger and more receptive audience for their criticisms. On the other hand, the rapid growth in online courses which has occurred over the past 3-5 years requires some consolidation and assessment, so a breathing period of limited duration is neither inappropriate nor unwelcome.

<div align="center">The Larger Issue of E-Learning</div>

Just as the term "electronic distance learning" appears to be interchangeable with the term "distance learning" we tend to also conflate "distance learning" and "e-learning," not always aware that we are talking about different phenomena. For example, distance learning also includes correspondence, video and audio cassette, satellite broadcast, and television. These other modalities are still very active, now often in combination with electronic distance learning. E-learning can

be a feature of traditional classes, not just an attribute of courses that are 100% online and taught at a distance.

At my university, approximately 500 traditional face-to-face courses use the software program Blackboard as part of an online dimension to facilitate faculty/student interchanges. An even greater number of faculty and students, exclusive of these courses, use some form of computer technology, often linked to the web, as a dimension of their teaching and learning. This might be as basic as using web resources for college assignments and papers, providing web links to students seeking further information on a subject, or as the basis of interaction between faculty and fellow researchers at other institutions. As campus libraries allocate additional resources to online journals and books and provide professional support to faculty and students seeking to access information through the web, it has become abundantly clear that e-learning is an established and growing feature of the higher education landscape- not just for online continuing education students and faculty. It is a rare campus library today that does not have an online catalogue and subscriptions to at least a score of online journals and databases.

Even faculty who are critical of courses taught exclusively online would be reluctant to forego the advantages of our modern web-based academic environment. For this reason, the growth of "hybrid courses" combining technology and classroom interaction in complimentary fashion will continue unabated contributing momentum to distance learning.

Correspondence courses never enjoyed this degree of inter-relationship with mainstream instruction. Faculty who already use the internet to some degree for their courses are understandably curious about how far they can go in this direction, perhaps even to the point of actually teaching online. For online instruction to be considered a success it must become more than the province of part-time instructors, teaching on a per-course basis, and migrate closer to the

core of full-time faculty workload. This movement will be appreciated by many students seeking greater flexibility in their learning and earning schedules.

The outcome will be a faculty and student population that flows from one format/medium to another based upon preference, registration realities, and opportunity, especially the affordability and availability of technology. E-learning will become a complement to the traditional ways of learning and not a separate entity unto itself (like correspondence).

Web courses, thus far at least, are relatively small, enrolling up to 35 students, and are heavily discussion based. Economically it can not yet substitute for large lecture-type courses which are the staple of many university undergraduate curricula. When the necessary technological development occurs- the wide scale home delivery of low cost online computer video streaming- enabling instructors to teach "live" to a group on campus and at the same time broadcast out to hundreds of non-campus based students- distance education will take a major stride forward. Within this configuration teaching assistants would run small online discussion groups, much as they do now face-to-face for large lecture classes. I hasten to add that in my opinion this development will neither improve nor weaken educational quality. I view quality as independent of instructional mode and instead dependent on the level of effort of faculty and students.

<center>Locus of Control</center>

The locus of control for most distance education programs including online web-based courses has been heretofore schools and divisions of continuing education. That is where one customarily finds the enthusiasm, commitment, and expertise for these non-traditional programs and students. The early history of continuing education in the US is in fact closely linked with the concept of extending education- as both a metaphor for the college reaching out and as an

actual description of the mechanisms of instruction. This is true in both the US and the UK.

While experience in correspondence education may have initially obtained for the first wave of schools involved in distance education, this is certainly no longer true for the vast majority currently experimenting with e-learning. A prior background in distance education is no longer a necessary pre-cursor for experiments and endeavors in this domain as the experience at my own university demonstrates. Moreover, the large scale application of e-learning technologies at the college level are already expanding beyond the borders of what has conventionally been defined as "continuing education." And this is true even in schools with extensive correspondence and with large online continuing education programs. Chief Information Officer (CIO) positions are common throughout American higher education attesting to the importance of the computer and information technology infrastructure campus-wide. Moreover, the commitment of campus libraries to the development of an electronic academic culture, as mentioned earlier, suggests that when campus leaders get together to talk about e-learning, the audience will be much much broader than simply the continuing education dean and staff. It is also likely to include undergraduate and graduate directors, the registrar, and representatives of the university senate and faculty union.

The advantages of having many different sectors committed to quality electronic education are numerous. Not the least is a broader platform for initiatives and experimentation, a larger pool of intellectual talent, multiple budgetary commitments from various financial pools, and a united front for lobbying on behalf of students learning and faculty teaching via the internet. Continuing education leaders within this configuration benefit from having university colleagues with similar interests. They also benefit from the exposure of many more faculty to the realities of online instruction. Campus investment in the necessary electronic infrastructure is also a rising tide lifting all boats. They do

however give up the very real and significant freedom of operating independently bound only by their imagination and independent resource base. It is certainly conceivable that the online arena will become just as ossified and recalcitrant as other academic aspects of campus life. When this happens, as it must, continuing education pioneers will move on to greener, fresher pastures.

The nature of "non-traditional" education looms forth as a major question mark. When most students are no longer full-time nor campus based, what is a non-traditional student? When courses are offered in a variety of formats, flexible structures, in interdisciplinary subject areas, what constitutes educational innovation? Continuing education has most often defined itself in "opposition," by way of what others are not doing: weekend, distance, evening, adults, women, minorities, the bypassed, the at risk. Is it conceivable that the full brace of these causes will be embraced eventually by others? Where will this leave continuing education as the self-appointed "white knight" of higher education, with its mission of crusading reform?

While considering these remarks I rediscovered in my bookcase Michael Collins' Adult Education as a Vocation (1991). The book, subtitled "A Critical Role for the Adult Educator" stakes out a strong position against the mechanistic, technical-rational approach to continuing education which he maintains is overly concerned with administrative program issues and not their more worthwhile emancipatory dimensions. I am glad that Michael wrote this book which I considered very significant when I first read it a decade ago. It is important for professors to question the values inherent in practice and to raise them for graduate students preparing for more responsible positions within our field. Recently I was involved as co-author with my friend and colleague Joe Donaldson of the University of Missouri on a chapter on "Leadership" for the new Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education (2000) published by the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education. The chapter addressed functional and post-modern approaches to leadership and I was struck throughout our collaboration by the

different worlds we each inhabited. Joe, a professor, and at that time Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, and myself, as a Dean. He was pre-occupied by the themes of sexism, racism, and classism as filters for our perceptions of leadership while I was enmeshed in my daily realities of budgeting, staffing, programming, and leading organizational change within an indifferent, often hostile institutional climate. That we were able to persevere and bring our writing project to fruition is a testament to our abiding friendship and <u>not</u> to a common way of seeing the world of adult education. I submit that the ideological debate of emancipation must be carried on by those in the best position to do so while others, and here I include myself, work on the less lofty, but equally significant terrain of university administration which we inhabit. I think, in this fashion the cause of progress is doubly served, both theoretically and in practice.

<center>The Future of Continuing Education</center>

Along these lines, I submit to you that our field is not defined exclusively by an academic content area of adult learning nor, conversely, is it defined solely by pragmatic behavior. It is a canvas of practice and experimentation combining layers of history and conflict. The values inherent in outreach- egalitarian, democratic, an enlightenment confidence in the beneficial power of knowledge, embrace a utopian program that sees education as a tool of social progress and often personal salvation. Distance education and technology within this construct is just another tool, with advantages but also serious limitations. As Duguid and Brown observe in <u>The Social Life of Information</u> (2000), social equality cannot erased by "just a few strokes of the keyboard." We know that barriers of race, class, sex, economic inequity are powerful inhibitors to learning. The computer revolution benefits those who are already relatively privileged. At the very least, they often have access to computers at work or at home (even though the number of low/no cost public access sites increase). Nevertheless, a recent study reported by the University Continuing Education Association (UCEA)

(UCEA, Infocus, March 2001) points to the "democratization of the internet" with respect to income. Between mid-1999 and mid-2000, the proportion of lower income users (earning less than $25,000) grew by 49.3 percent; more than any other income group. But still, by any economic measure, correspondence as a distance education technique is more affordable, hence its continued global popularity, particularly in the Third World.

It is obvious that e-learning has been beneficial to the structural edifice of continuing education and has created many new jobs within our field. It is the latest pony for us to ride as we gallop through our careers, switching horses as appropriate. When I look back at my own history in continuing education (30 years in 2002), and when in a cynical mood, I see it as a career in "sales" with perhaps too much attention having been paid to issues of marketing. These have included anticipating audiences for various programs, generating enough revenue to keep my superiors pleased with me, hiring more staff so as to expand programs still further, contributing to the education mission of my university by bringing a greater number of adults within its educational sphere, and reaching out to audiences which are most likely to attend. This is not exactly an agenda of social reform, although it is beneficial to humanity along modest incremental lines. Idealism? Enthusiasm? Commitment? A utopian vision? To the extent that these persist at all, it is only within the context of my own school where I have tried to create an enviable educational and learning environment

Reflecting on it now, I believe that I probably subscribe more to institutional goals than I ever did before. I try to find a protective niche for continuing education and its mission within my university, but am less confident that the goals of our field are unique, or any more worthy than others advanced by my fellow deans. If anything, I appreciate the university culture of autonomy and self-indulgence, and the freedom it offers us to make our dreams real. The only justification I can adduce for this rare privilege is helping others improve their lives through education.

I see the convergence of adult education, continuing education and all other forms of education, as the imperatives of lifelong learning compel everyone to continue with their education. The skills of those who currently identify themselves as adult or continuing educators will be in demand as Malcolm Knowles predicted almost twenty years ago. But unlike other professions, and where I differ from Knowles, these skill sets and the knowledge base are easily obtained and not at all arcane. It is hard for me to see them as exclusively linked to specific graduate degree programs in adult education. I think people entering our field will have many more career opportunities throughout higher education if they are willing to accept the larger value system of higher learning which privileges abstract, rational, theoretical approaches to knowing. This is of course easier said than done since our field of continuing education views knowledge as a tool, values many different approaches to knowing, and is generally much more eclectic and flexible in its approach to life and earning a living. Those that stand fast to this constellation of values are assured the privilege of always wondering about life in the mainstream, secure in the knowledge that they will never experience this phenomenon.

Distance learning for us may be simply another area to develop expertise and perhaps even virtuosity. Or for personal experimentation- as a teacher, learner or teacher/learner. We should always be asking "What is next?" and of course be willing to master whatever this may be.

<u>A Post-Script on Non-Credit Continuing Education</u>

I wanted to end on a high, even inspirational, note but I do not think that is possible, especially for those that are in that part of university continuing education that is usually called "non-credit, credit-free" or some similar sobriquet. Within a very short period of time, this world will cease to exist as we know it. In the USA, it is rapidly vanishing. Traditional non-credit courses where they

continue, will occupy a smaller proportion of the adult learning universe.The race is going to more aggressive, nimble, and entrepreneurial providers, especially those with ready cash to invest in the most sought after programs, , now in IT, and in online technology. Student/customers will increasingly require "industry" specific certification and the just-in-time (read electronic) delivery of courses. It will be a learner-driven and learner-centric process. Students will refuse to wait for the next semester, but will insist on starting their coursework immediately, at times and locations most convenient to them, in the same way they conduct electronic banking. This flexibility is available through the internet. Universities, unless they can link up with commercial/for profit providers will find it difficult to compete in this world, unless they have a brand or product which is so much in demand and which cannot be duplicated, a rare combination. And even with these partnerships, universities are just buying time. With greater governmental regulation of the for-profit sector helping to assure quality, and with consolidation and shake-outs within this growth industry of new educational providers, high profile brand names will not need a university seal of approval, and will be able to justify quality on their own terms. They will even be able to qualify for credit through a number of already in-place course credit assessment agencies such as, in the US, the Washington-based American Council on Education (ACE), and the New York State Program on Non-Collegiate Sponsored Instruction (PONSI). Both organizations will evaluate non-credit offerings for college credit.

However, there may be a silver lining to these developments. Without profit-driven, non-credit continuing education to provide additional cash income, universities may decide to make a greater commitment to non-standard for-credit programs. Since for-credit tuition is generally higher than non-credit fees, everyone will make out better within the context of our profit-driven world. This applies to students too, since credit programs and degrees make a more significant, value-added, impact upon adults' lives (Grubb, 1996). Some of the innovations necessary to capture this market are compressed programs, modular scheduling, and a consumer focus.

Of course, another possibility may be a renewed commitment by universities to outreach and socially motivated programs that are not required to pay their own way. I would whole-heartedly applaud this development, although I think it is very unlikely to occur. Except for the voluntary, community-service sector where outreach is a core activity. It may be that our field of continuing education will segment itself along this for-profit/social-service fault line. This would be a significant development and one worthy of abetting. At the very least, the debate would be a healthy one, and perhaps lead to some redirecting of effort by our most talented and motivated colleagues.

In closing, I hope that my remarks will serve as a suitable jumping-off point for this conference. I look forward, with you, to the next few days.

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