Summary

In the rapidly changing and diverse environment in which distance education is practiced, many questions remain unanswered. In this environment, it is difficult to arrive at one definition or to agree on a theory of how to practice and do research in the field of distance education. New technologies, globalization, and new ideas about student learning challenge the traditional approaches to the practice of distance education. This theme of change is evident in the discussions of distance education and its definition, history, status, and theory.

Numerous definitions of distance education have been proposed. Most include the separation of teacher and learner, the influence of an educational organization, the use of media to unite teacher and learner, the opportunity for two-way communication, and the practice of individualized instruction. The traditional definitions describe distance education as taking place at a different time and in a different place, while recent definitions, enabled by new interactive technologies, stress education that takes place at the same time but in a different place. The role of educational organizations in the distance education process has also been challenged. These issues will continue to be debated as distance educators seek definitions that fit a changing world.

Investigating the relatively brief history of distance education reveals both diversity and an ongoing change in its practice. Historically, diverse practices of distance education have been developed according to the resources and philosophies of the organizations providing instruction. The history also shows that advances in technology have promoted key changes in distance education. These changes have been most evident in the rapid development of electronic communications in recent decades. How the future of distance education will be shaped
by the integration of its history and these new technologies is yet to be seen.

Changes in society, politics, economics, and technology are impacting the status of distance education around the world. In some cases, distance education is seen as an answer to inadequate educational opportunities caused by political and/or economic instability. In other situations, established distance education providers are being required by a changing society to convert from mass instruction to a more decentralized approach to meet the diverse needs of their students. In many countries, the need for continuing education or training and access to degree programs is accelerated by the demands of a changing society. Students in rural or isolated parts of the world look to distance education for opportunities to keep up with the outside world. Again, technology advances are a major influence for change in distance education worldwide. The globalization of the world enabled by these new technologies will challenge distance educators to rethink the practice of distance education to take advantage of these new opportunities.

The changing and diverse environment in which distance education is practiced has inhibited the development of a single theory upon which to base practice and research. A variety of theories have been proposed to describe traditional distance education. They include theories that emphasize independence and autonomy of the learner, industrialization of teaching, and interaction and communication. These traditional theories emphasize that distance education is a fundamentally different form of education. Recent emerging theories based on the capabilities of new interactive audio and video systems, state that distance education is not a distinct field of education. Both utilization of existing educational theory and the creation of like experiences for both the distant and local learner are emphasized. Traditional distance education theorists will need to address the changes to distance education facilitated by new technologies. Advocates of the new theories will need to consider their impact on the traditional strengths of distance education. Specifically, the focus of the new theories on face-to-face
instruction eliminates the advantage of time-independent learning that traditional theories of distance education value. The debate on these theoretical issues will only increase in the face of continued change.

One indication of the impact of change in distance education theory is the Fordist/post-Fordist/neo-Fordist debate (Simonson, 2003). Fordist education is administered centrally and involves mass production of curricula for mass consumption. Rapid changes in society have resulted in diverse market needs. The Fordist paradigm is unable to respond quickly to these needs. The post-Fordist paradigm implements a decentralized, democratic administration that focuses on the consumer. In this paradigm, teachers have a high responsibility to respond to individual needs of students. Central to the debate between Fordists and post-Fordists are changing views about how learning occurs. The Fordist approach is based in behaviorism learning theory in which knowledge is delivered to the learner. The constructivist approach to learning in which individuals give meaning to the world through experience underlies the post-Fordist position. The debate on these differences will continue as distance education adapts to meet the needs of a changing society.

An environment in which technology, society, economics, politics, and theories of learning are all in transition suggests that definitions, theories, and the practice of distance education will continue to be contested. This theme of change will both challenge and motivate distance educators and researchers as they strive to understand and develop effective ways to meet the needs of learners around the world.
References


Holmberg, B. (1985). *The feasibility of a theory of teaching for distance education and a proposed theory* (ZIFF Papiere 60). Hagen (West Germany): Fern Universität, Zentrales Insti-


Additional Readings


Watkins & S. J. Wright (Eds.), The foundations of American
distance education (pp. 67–92). Dubuque, IA:
Kendall/Hunt.
can Journal of Distance Education, 3(2), 8–21.
Seels, B. & Richey, R. (1994). Instructional technology: The defi-
nition and domains of the field. Washington, DC: Associa-
tion for Educational Communications and Technology.
Simonson, M. (1995). Distance education revisited: An intro-
duction to the issue. Tech Trends, 40(30), 2.
Simonson, M. (1995). Does anyone really want to learn at a dis-
Education Alliance preliminary evaluation report. Ames: Iowa
State University, Research Institute for Studies in Education.
optics. Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 21(3),
265–275.
U.S. Department of Education (1995). The Star Schools pro-
gram. (Available from Star Schools, U.S. Department of
Education, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC
20208-5644).
Watkins, B. L. (1991). A quite radical idea: The invention and
elaboration of collegiate correspondence study. In B. L.
Watkins & S. J. Wright (Eds.), The Foundations of American
Distance Education (pp. 1–35). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.