UNIT 1 THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF CORRESPONDENCE INSTRUCTION

Otto Peters (1971)*

Editors' note: The paper reprinted here is now about thirty years old but it remains important. Otto Peters was one of the first people to examine seriously the nature of correspondence education; his ideas are equally applicable to distance education, which was barely recognised at the time he wrote.

Peters' idea of distance education as an industrialised form of teaching and learning has been widely quoted, and was mentioned in our third extract. Here in this classic article we see it in context. Peters saw that in schools there was normally 'unity of person, time and place'. Distance education is entirely different -- indeed Peters claims that comparisons may not be useful -- and that it is above all a form of mass education. He believes that if we can use an analysis of these parallels to work out rules for good distance education, we may find that education becomes internationalised and democratised. It is interesting that only today we are beginning to see real internationalisation in distance education, and that is occurring in recognition of differences rather than similarities between national contexts. We may like to ask ourselves how far Peters' analysis has contributed to this outcome.

It will remain a strange phenomenon in the history of education that educational scientists have neglected correspondence instruction almost entirely. It is true that there is relatively extensive literature about correspondence instruction in many countries, but most of it was written by people who are practitioners and whose intention it was to describe what they have achieved or what their difficulties had been. According to Professor Shatkin, a member of the Soviet Academy of Educational Sciences, even in the Soviet Union, with her millions of correspondence students, no educational scientist has so far examined the theoretical foundations of correspondence instruction. I think correspondence instruction is interesting enough and important enough to attract the attention and curiosity of those experts of education who specialized in such fields as teaching methods or teaching media. If they are able to write scholarly books about, say, methods of secondary education often without having taught in a secondary school, why should they not be able to think about the fundamental principles of correspondence instruction without having given it?

The lack of any systematic research in correspondence instruction was deplored by Roy B Minnis of the US Office of Education at the ICCE conference in Stockholm in 1965. He said: 'Systematic research, writing and formulations of principles, philosophy and procedures are necessary; adding that systematic study is and will continue to be difficult until the theories, applications, and criteria are developed in a universal form'.

Now, analyzing the literature on correspondence study, some cautious yet promising steps in this direction have been made. Some books on the didactics

of correspondence teaching have been published in recent years in
Czechoslovakia and Poland. Seemingly, the Polish educational scientists are very
ingenious and progressive in their studies of correspondence study. Jan
Starosciak, a professor at the Centre of Instructional Research in Warsaw, wrote
that in Poland all traditional theoretical concepts of correspondence study are
now outdated, and that new theoretical approaches are being tried out. At a
number of universities in the German Democratic Republic, departments were
established to study the methods of teaching at institutes of higher learning,
including correspondence study. Dr Mohle reported, in his paper delivered at the
Stockholm meeting in 1965, about the activities of the Institute of Adult Education
at the University of Karl-Marx-Stadt. The sociological aspects of
correspondence instruction are being studied by the German Institute of
International Education Research. And the Pedagogic Centre in Berlin has
studied, among other things, the basic principles of correspondence study.

As I am best acquainted with these Berlin studies, let me touch on a few points.
The first thing found out in Berlin was that it simply does not work when you try
to apply traditional categories of accepted instructional theories to
correspondence instruction on the grounds that it is, after all, also instructional.
The reason for this is that these categories were developed by analyzing, and for
the purpose of describing and defining, oral instruction and not written instruction.
To many this difference seems to be trivial and yet it is fundamental, if you
consider its consequences. Ignoring this difference has caused the public, and
even many educational experts, to judge correspondence instruction by the
criteria of oral instruction.

Let me illustrate this with an example. In the United States many comparative
experimental studies were conducted in order to test the efficiency of
correspondence instruction. Usually one group of students was taught by
correspondence and the control group of the same size by a teacher, the result
being that both methods were about equally efficient. Now, if these researchers
had reflected about the structural difference between oral and written instruction,
between classroom and correspondence instruction, they would never have
started on such experiments. They judged and assessed correspondence
instruction in terms of oral instruction and missed the point, although they
had been very accurate, especially in the statistical treatment of data. If these
experiments had been guided by a sound theory, the researchers would have seen
that the real potential of correspondence instruction can never be shown in
experiments of this kind.

The second basic result of the Berlin studies is the concept that correspondence
instruction is the most industrialized form of instruction, and, therefore, an
exceedingly modern form of imparting knowledge and skills. It is a form of
instruction which is closely related to and dependent on our industrialized society
in many ways. Its structure can be analyzed and interpreted by using principles
and categories of industrialization. In the Berlin studies the instructional process of
correspondence instruction was compared with the industrialized production
process and many surprising parallels could be diagnosed: Neither process can

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start without a previous period of careful planning by experts, and without specialization by division of labour, that is, by dividing the many functions of the teacher or the worker and assigning them to a number of specialists or machines. Both processes rely on the use of technical devices, machines, and even computers, both apply the principles of the assembly line and of mass production, both need and use scientific methods of control in order to improve the teaching or production process while in operation.

In the terms of this comparison, correspondence instruction is much more progressive than nearly all classroom instruction in our schools. Whereas our way of life is most radically affected by industry, the realm of instruction has been exempted. Classroom teaching has remained one of the last strongholds of the manual trades. Here, the industrial revolution has scarcely begun. Compared to the teachers in correspondence instruction, or in one of the integrated teaching systems, the teacher in the classroom appears to be an artisan, as his teaching resembles the work of an artisan if you examine its structure. There you still have the unity of person, time, and place: The teacher determines what is to be taught and how it is to be taught, and he himself evaluates what the result of his work has been. If he uses mechanical devices at all they do not basically change the instructional process, that is, they do not alter its basic structure. Thus oral teaching is a preindustrial form of instruction. This is the reason why it does not lend itself easily to the employment of new technical media and why it is even resistant to these new media.

In the light of this theory, you see again how futile it is to draw a comparison between oral classroom instruction and correspondence classroom instruction. You would never compare one shoemaker and a shoe factory in order to find out how efficient they are in producing two pairs of shoes.

Thirdly, as correspondence instruction is the most industrialized form of instruction, and as the usual theoretical criteria for the description of traditional instruction do not help very much in analyzing correspondence instruction, the Pedagogic Centre in Berlin has suggested the introduction of new categories taken from those sciences investigating the industrial production process. It is, in fact, astounding to see how much better these criteria help to understand and describe the instructional process in correspondence instruction.

Some of the suggested criteria are:

1. division of labour (on the side of the teachers)
2. mechanization
3. automation
4. application of organizational principles
5. scientific control
6. objectivity of teaching behaviour
7. mass production
8. concentration and centralization.
In order to demonstrate how these categories work in describing correspondence study, I am going to quote a definition using them: 'Correspondence study is a method of imparting knowledge and skills which is rationalized by the application of division of labour and organizational principles as well as by the increased use of technical media, especially for the purpose of reproducing objectivated teaching behaviour which makes it possible to instruct great numbers of students at the same time wherever they live'.

Let me refer to a fourth finding. One aspect in this definition was that teaching behaviour can be duplicated *ad libitum*. Parallel to mass production, it is a form of mass instruction. This aspect must be emphasized again and again.

Historically, the necessity and the possibility of mass instruction are very recent phenomena. Also, with respect to this, correspondence instruction is a very modern method. For thousands of years the first and only form of verbal instruction was probably the dialogue. Much later came the instruction of groups. With the teaching of classes, a development of the age of reason, came the first rationalizing and economizing in instruction. But so far, we have not yet managed to practice successful instructional techniques in the teaching of classes. Again and again, the old pattern of the dialogue permeates the structure of teaching and spoils it. Today our task is much more difficult. We have to adjust our instructional techniques to cater to extremely large groups. We have to adjust ourselves to the new technical media which make mass instruction possible, but at the same time make drastic demands on our didactic ingenuity.

Marshall McLuhan observed that when man is given a new effective medium he becomes fascinated by his extension of himself, but, as Narcissus in the Greek myth, at the same time it involves him in a state of numbness. Most of our educational scientists, and also most practitioners of correspondence instruction, are still in this state of fascination and numbness. They have to find a new equilibrium. Meanwhile, they transplant the instructional techniques of the dialogue and of classroom teaching into distance teaching. Is it not much more reasonable to borrow the new forms of instruction from other mass media, like, for instance, newspapers, magazines, films, radio, and TV? Could it not be that sound principles of journalism could help us to devise new methods effective for mass instruction?

Problems of this kind will be studied in the years to come and it is hoped that these studies will lead to a theory of correspondence instruction, or distance teaching, which might help us to devise experiments and offer criteria for evaluating their results and for a rational appreciation of these new and unique teaching methods.

Let me conclude with a more general perspective of European correspondence instruction which will integrate the theoretical aspects sketched in this paper with other developing trends of correspondence teaching.

I foresee accredited and efficient correspondence schools cooperating in many ways with universities and colleges, ministries of education and other state institutions, broadcasting corporations, and educational scientists. This cooperation
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will take many organizational forms, but whatever the form, there will be a strict interdependence between the groups mentioned, and all projects will be centralized. Many of them will cross state and even national boundaries. Each project will be considered a new experiment in the application of the technology of education. This means that the planning, organising, controlling, evaluating, and improving of these teaching systems is carried out by professionals in accordance with the latest developments in their respective scientific disciplines. Their work will be guided by progressive theories of distance teaching and mass instruction. By a growing integration of refined and tested methods of correspondence instruction, of new efforts in academic correspondence study, of multi-media teaching techniques, and of a consistent research on new theoretical foundations of correspondence instruction, much can be attained. By joining the experiences, the inventiveness, the ingenuity, and the talents of those experts who so far have worked in these four rather isolated fields of educational activity, an unprecedented intensity of instruction can be achieved.

Furthermore, by integrating these developments of distance teaching it will become possible to equalize educational opportunity to a degree never attained before. In very much the same way as it has become possible to democratize high quality entertainment by utilizing technical media -- everybody can see the best entertainers now -- it will become possible to democratize high quality teaching. Thus, high quality teaching will be accessible on many levels for everybody wherever he lives and will no longer be limited to certain places and to certain persons. Again you have a parallel to the industrial production process which changed the distribution of industrial products thoroughly so that it is possible nowadays to buy high quality products wherever you live.

The unlimited accessibility to high quality education is the general perspective of distance teaching. It will enable highly industrialized societies to react in a very flexible and efficient way to many of the new demands on their educational systems. But it will also change these systems as well as most of our teaching methods. Let's be prepared!

Literature referred to in this paper

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