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Educación a Distancia: de la teoría a la práctica

Author: Aretio, Lorenzo García (2000). *Educación a Distancia: de la teoría a la práctica.* 329 pages. Barcelona: Ariel. 329 ISBN: 84 344 2637 4

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Professor Lorenzo García Aretio's book is a pleasure to read in Spanish. Lorenzo is, among other things, the UNESCO Chair for Distance Education and a superb conversationalist. The joy of hearing his voice is certainly evident when reading this book. His merry, bubbly chat is converted to formal and precise writing, in which paragraphs containing highly condensed theoretical reasoning, or a distillation from years of practice, remains eminently readable.

Lorenzo's book also shows another valuable trace from his conversations. Lorenzo's is permanently engaged in many simultaneous dialogues with distance educators in Spain and Latin America, as well as elsewhere. These conversations accelerate his train of thought, provide him with multiple layers of experience, and are processed into an evolving framework which encompasses the evolution of Spain's *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia* (UNED) and many of its sister institutions, as well as emerging paradigms such as isolated rural schools or established face-to-face institutions entering the field of distance education.

Arguably the strongest point of the book is found on page 113. After guiding the reader through the conceptual foundations of the field – namely its history, potentials, and theory – Lorenzo concentrates on the mediated dialogue, and provides a detailed list of elements from previously established theories (proposed by Peters, Wedemeyer, Moore, Holmberg, Garrison, Henri, Slavin, and Simonson) from which he builds his own theoretical framework that subsequently serves as pragmatic and usable framework for practice. From Peters' theory of industrialization, Lorenzo points to the need for careful planning in distance education. From Wedemeyer's theory of independence, he explains the value of self-guided student action (not excluding collaborative learning, computer mediated communication [CMC], and institutional control). From Moore's transactional distance theory, he elucidates the importance of dialogue, central to Lorenzo's theoretical proposal and his view of the structure of learning materials. Then he applies Holmberg's views of guided didactic conversation, to discuss synchronous and asynchronous communications. From Garrison he takes the concept of control to illuminate a need for evaluation, assessment, and control itself. From Henri and Slavin and others, he focuses on the value of collaborative learning through CMC. From Simonson he draws on the concept of equivalence of results between distance and other forms of education. Lorenzo then describes the forms of simulated asynchronous dialogue, and real synchronous and asynchronous dialogue, to consider the role of advanced technologies in distance education.

For this reviewer, Lorenzo downplays somewhat the transcendental changes that interactivity and multidirectional dialogues have brought into distance education in the recent years. Since he is personally beyond this transition, it is perhaps not so serious that he does not explicitly recognize an earlier generation of distance educators that have yet to integrate interactivity and peer-to-peer

communications, typical of the Internet and of videoconferencing, into their text and broadcast approaches prevalent in many areas of the field.

Lorenzo's chapter on tutoring merits special mention because it grows from an organic tradition of tutoring in open education then adapts it gracefully to IT-supported environments. Quoting Sherry, he distinguishes several roles of tutors and focuses on the role of the learning guide. He underscores the need for cordiality, acceptance, honesty, and empathy, and then adds capacity for listening and reading. Quoting Spruce, Lorenzo gives a valuable reminder for tutors: In order to allow students to reflect instead of tutors filling the voids in conversation, "listen to silence."

In discussing tutoring in distance education, Lorenzo emphasizes that even in distance-taught courses, face-to-face tutoring has a specific and important role to play. This may be less so in many countries and educational systems, but all important in institutions like Lorenzo's own, Spain's UNED, which has successfully established a large number of centers across the country where students may go for tutoring and examinations.

One might wish for a more extensive treatment of tutoring through email and Web-based forums. Our experiences in Mexico, for instance, have shown how successful this can be (e.g., our course *Estrategia y toma de decisiones en educación a distancia*, taught over the Internet in 2001 within the RIFET project of IOHE/COLAM, coordinated by Jorge Martínez-Peniche), as well as the importance of participating tutors to have explicit guidance.

Also, our experience and that of others in many schools demonstrate the value for tutoring and learning of the proper functioning of virtual communities. Although these are subjects in themselves and their construction in educational projects present many challenges, they still merit treatment in a book on distance education. Lorenzo's own forum, CUED-L , shows both the challenges and merits of a virtual-community approach.

For this reviewer, the chapter on tutors, coupled with the chapter "Internet in distance education," provides a sufficient starting point for many individuals who might be considering the creation or expansion of distance education programs. Still it falls short for those who might be seeking more concrete guidance for progress in their projects.

The strength of this book lies in its chapters on learning materials. Emphasis on quality teaching materials will never be enough and Lorenzo provides strong reminders of the need for quality and relevance, and explains the difficulties of costing and planning the development of materials. He also provides readers with a useful and well-reasoned classification of teaching materials.

Those who look to this book to learn how to build online learning projects, or online support for educational projects, will likely need additional guidance. But they will have been provided with a solid basis of understanding regarding the scope and boundaries of their projects.

Another point this reviewer finds weak is the section on selecting the appropriate media for distance education materials. Perhaps this is due to Lorenzo's personal preference or personal history in distance education projects, but for this reviewer this section on selection of appropriate media fell short of my expectations and perhaps of many readers' needs. Although Lorenzo quotes more than 15 authors in the pages dedicated to this subject, he does *not* quote any of Tony Bates' excellent work on the topic. Thus, the reader is left without contact, in this section, with Bates' ACTIONS model, which in our experience provides extremely useful guidance for putting together distance education projects. We also would have started by emphasizing the "no-silver-bullet" approach – *i.e.*, the thesis that the only appropriate technology or medium for distance education is an appropriate combination of technologies and media tailored for each project according to such variables as educational objectives, target audiences, etc. This shortcoming is less pertinent to teachers or tutors in basic functions of distance education, and more so to

decision makers. However, even the most "rank and file" academics in distance education are often "schools unto themselves," and therefore as project leaders and decision makers they often fulfill whatever execution or operational roles are necessary to write materials, design instructional approaches, program simulations or interfaces, assess learning, etc. Therefore teachers and tutors also need to integrate information and media.

It will be timely now to discuss a few discrepancies, which may be more of approach than of deeper substance. Given our experience in communicating about distance education to non-expert decision makers, whether in government, private enterprise, and even within the educational systems, it is the view of this reviewer that it would have been useful to have a more explicit discussion on the distinctions between open and distance education. "Open" and "distance" are orthogonal coordinates. "Open" is basically a referent for the organization of schools and courses for the contract or compact made between student and school. "Distance" is a referent for the physical relationship of learner and provider (school, teacher, laboratory, library, etc.)

Open courses may have essentially no significant distance component. An example is the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México's Sistema Universitaria Abierta*, the Open University System, which until recently required that students attend libraries, tutoring sessions, examinations, etc. Another common example lies in videoconference-based courses, which retain such traditional characteristics of schools as syllabi, scheduling, prerequisite courses, etc. Lorenzo's book would be more useful in many contexts if it expanded on these distinctions.

Another point of (lesser) disagreement, is his treatment of videoconferencing. In particular, Lorenzo mentions it mostly in the context of the Internet, where lack of effective bandwidth and processor power still limit its growth. Thanks to the availability of standardized H.323 videoconferencing over IP, properly interfaced to H.320, the emergence of high-bandwidth networks are still very much a work-in-progress, especially for courses or activities where the last mile leads to a desktop. On the other hand, in many countries and regions, H.320 videoconferencing using video classrooms and dedicated or ISDN-switched data links, provides a significant amount of actual distance education content. Such technology also enables skeptical traditional teachers to make the transition to distance education thanks to the small and quite natural step it takes to move from lecturing in a classroom and extending that classroom through videoconferencing.

For teachers who seek to conduct online communication with students and provide study materials over the Internet, this step becomes a natural. In this fashion, teachers are faced with the challenges and opportunities of putting together the contents, materials, media, and practices of sound distance education. This perspective is slighted by Lorenzo, and this reviewer gladly admits that he may be right in doing so.

However, to this reviewer it appears that Lorenzo has embraced the "mediated dialogue" thesis a bit too unconditionally. Although the theory chapters are directed to general practitioners of distance education, readers with a theoretical bent may seek a more in-depth discussion of alternatives. From a different perspective, a reader with a technological bent may approach this book wishing for a more thorough following of the thread of digital convergence. Personally, I believe convergence will probably happen sooner than Lorenzo assumes. Even in developing economies there are platforms already supporting lightweight cyber-café oriented Web pages, together with more heavyweight digital video adaptations of TV-oriented video production. Furthermore, faced with growing pressure from younger students seeking to have hi-tech media at their disposal, we are discovering ways to deal with limitations of low-bandwidth, and scarce and expensive connections to the Internet, even in isolated population centers that have poor communication infrastructure.

Some readers may also miss a more thorough discussion of digital libraries, learning objects, and other significant supports for distance education. However, there is clearly a limit of what any single book can contain, particularly in a world where even the nature of documents is being discussed in detail and changed continuously. But little more than a hint provided on these subjects was possible. Watching the evolution of these subjects from the platform provided by Lorenzo's book will doubtless be of interest to many.

All in all this is an excellent book. In my view it delivers on the promise made in its subtitle: "From theory to practice." Lorenzo starts by describing theories of distance teaching and learning, listing and ranking them, choosing the strong points of each, and making them bear on practice in a Catholic way.

His approach is no mish-mash. He sticks to the theory of the guided didactic conversation as a leading thread, and progresses to the practicalities of distance education with strong guidance of theoretical principles. And as a stickler of the idea that there's hardly anything of more practical value than a good theory, or, to take a principle from a wildly different time, place, and field, "Ohne Theorie keine Revolution," this reviewer is particularly satisfied with the well rounded, balanced way in which Lorenzo achieves his purpose.

An additional merit to underline is the depth of thought that permeates Lorenzo's book – the grace of its expression and the way all of this is brought together to be of practical value for readers. An excellent choice of literature, quoted in precise and opportune way, complements the values already mentioned. Hopefully a new edition, or maybe an online support provided by volunteers and vetted by Lorenzo, will provide an index, the lack of which is a painful shortcoming in so many Spanish-language publications.

In sum, this book is a reason for distance educators to learn Spanish soon, or to press their favorite publisher to get it translated it into their language.

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