Essay Inspired by H805 TMA-02 (OU MAODE) 2006 Boxed Activity Responses

Robin Taylor

1. Activity 4: Distance Education at the University of the South Pacific (USP)

Originally called 'Distance Education' or 'Extension studies', the section originally concerned with teaching at a distance was housed within the Education department. It was subsequently spun out to join a 'multi-media' nexus (incorporating multi-media production facilities and information technology)[1]. The idea being that it would be a central resource for all the university programmes independent of the Education department. Extension studies was perceived to be a 'necessary evil' that had to be borne by the USP. because of it's 'regional' nature. Lecturers preferred the relatively high infrastructure of the Laucala (Suva, Fiji) campus, compared to say the Extension centre in Nauru or Kiribati. Delivery was mainly through print material and therefore more or less a correspondence course. At times a course lecturer would visit one of the regional countries to hold a tutorial or two there. Large courses could afford to employ a local tutor at the Extension centre. Later on audio satellite services were offered to host audio tutorials. In practice though, the audio was indistinct, required one to speak in spurts punctuated by 'over'. The ability to speak and interact with more than a few centres at any one time was liable to frequent breakages in communication. Lecturers holding the tutorials were given no instructions other than when to press their microphone on and off. No pedagogical structure was given to these tutorials apart from those devised and invented by the lecturers on the spot. More often that not, this would turn into an audio lecture delivered by satellite technology. Perraton (2000), gives an optimistic picture of USP's use of satellite technology (Chapter 5) as if it had achieved some sense of success in allowing students to be accessed that previously could not be. He of course is ignoring the fact that most of the countries exist as archipelagoes[2] of often tens if not hundreds of islands. Even if a student lives in the same city where the satellite studio of USP is situated, this does not mean that they can easily access it. To say nothing of those that live on different islands. This only serves to further compound the problem of poorly structured audio tutorials. Any educational gain must be considered wishful thinking at best. Most of the time, the value of those lucky enough to be near a satellite studio, had more to do with clarifying the administration of the course – when and where was the exam e.t.c..

Precious little has been done to evaluate the educational effectiveness of extension services. I have not known there to be anyone employed at the USP who has distance education as a research speciality. Nor have I understood this to be an institutional wish. This is perhaps where, in retrospect, the movement of Distance Education out of the then Education department has not been for the better. Some of the best critical research is the first citation that comes from the

[1] See http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=distance_learning0 & http://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=ourhistory (accessed 25th March, 2006). Out of interest, the picture in the last URL shows USP's original humble beginnings as a Royal New Zealand Airforce sea plane base with sea planes resting in the water.

[2] Fiji for instance has approximately 300 islands of which about 150-180 (depending on how you define it) are inhabited.

ICDL database search on 'South Pacific' by Roger Landbeck and France Mugler (2000)[3]. The first author was part of an educational support service facility, the second is a linguistics researcher. This was a replication of a similar study done with campus students, both pieces of research showing strong evidence that students engaged in shallow learning strategies, most particularly as the students got closer to their examinations. They presented their findings within USP to minuted academic board meetings, in order to persuade the teaching staff an administration that the heavy weighting on final exams in each course (40% minimum) should be substantially reduced to avoid this learning strategy. It was promptly ignored. Much of USP's pedagogy tends to rely on rote learning techniques. Definitions and explanations are taught instead of any notion of critical evaluation. These broad sweeping statements are not meant to imply that all teaching staff followed this *modus operandi.* Landbeck & Mugler are but a number of excellent lecturers who tried to break boundaries and engage in 'real' learning on the part of the students, but this was their own initiative rather than a product of strong institutional academic leadership.

USPs adoption of multi-media and ICTs had the allure of being able to deliver even 'better' quality teaching resources. However like the African Virtual University as Perraton (2000) so acidly states, this seems to have been a history of methodologies trying to justify their existence. Rather than there being stated or researched pedagogical reasons for using them. This was reflected by fellow classmate Alex Mosely (albeit in Activity 9) who talked about the apparent lack of operational forethought even in the so called 'developed world' at his work place (the University of Leicester) where expensive resources are acquired but with no real market to utilize them effectively. This parallels the same at the USP which has received considerable development funds to construct expensive multi-media laboratories. They have hired expensive staff to produce multi-media projects (CD-ROMs for instance) and yet the practical use of these media rich resources must be seriously questioned by a student living in a rural area of Aitutaki (the second largest island in the Cook Islands) who cannot access them because they have (i) no computer, (ii) no electricity and (iii) and materials often do not arrive on time because the boat only comes once a month - hurricanes and cyclone permitting. There is a place for technology in distance and flexible delivery which is cheap and relatively inexpensive to produce and has shown empirical efficacy, and that is radio (Perraton, 2000, Chapter 2). Sadly though it is not utilized possibly because it is not 'sexy' and modern enough?.

2.

[3] See, http://icdllit.open.ac.uk/logicrouter/servlet/LogicRouter?PAGE=object&OUTPUTXSL=object.xsl&pm_RC=REPOICDLDB&pm_OI=10494&pm_GT=Y&pm_IAC=Y&api_1=GET_OBJECT_XML&num_result=0

3. *Activity* 6: Problems with Move to ICTs and is African Virtual University Going Down this Path?

Perraton (2000) mentions a number of possible problems with the move towards computer based teaching/learning. These problems appear to fall into three main categories: a reduction in access; an increase in costs (or a decrease in quality); and continued ethno-cultural hegemony by the 'North'.

The first point he makes is that it will reduce access to the very people one hoped it would reach, going against the 'Open Learning' philosophy originally envisaged particularly for countries in the 'South'. Specifically:

1. Printing costs are deferred to the student, since the course material is delivered electronically.

2. Access to technology and operating expenses is very expensive in developing worlds such that only the rich in society can afford it. There are three capital costs to be borne: the computer, the internet service provider, and electricity. That is to say nothing of set up fees or ongoing maintenance fees.

Perraton's second point, is that the stated gains in the ease of distribution by computers and the internet, are offset by the huge production costs to make the materials simply more than an electronic version of what is already available in correspondence courses. H805 classmate, Dejan Dincic challenges Perraton's assumption high production costs will eventually come down, as will the price of electronic equipment used to deliver it. This is probably true, however, I still side strongly with Perraton here. At the University of the South Pacific, no thought is routinely put into designing educational material regardless of the media employed or topic content. A 'template' is used both for the design, production and even the layout of print materials. There is a complete 'team' that is supposed to work with the lecturer in designing the course[4], but few have had formal training in distance mode pedagogies. USP continues, for instance, to employ glue to complete their 'perfect bind' for their produced course material. The high humidity content of the Pacific ensures that glue quickly becomes 'unstuck' with the result that the distance educational material falls apart pretty much in weeks – in other words it does not survive the duration of the course as one volume.

There is in effect no instructional production of either audio or video materials. Like the 'Asian Model' (Perraton, 2000, p 40), USP has adopted the technology to replace the physical presence of the lecturer. What is different though from the Asian model is the fact that many students are not native English speakers[5] - some Solomon Islanders are speaking their fourth learnt language when they listen and converse in English. Nor are all the lecturers who are being recorded native and/or clear English speakers. This makes for a not very enlightening combination!

[4] Normally there is a team leader, an instructional designer, a graphic artist and a typesetter assigned to a lecturer. However, the same individuals are probably working on a number of different courses simultaneously.
[5] English is the language of instruction apart from two relatively new courses in Pacific vernacular; Fijian and Hindi language studies.

Classmate Dejan Dincic is right to say that production does not have to rich mean muti-media content, but he is wrong to imply that pedagogical design in the production phase is correspondingly 'easy' since no multi-media is used. If anything, it is harder to design and produce world class quality educational material with print medium (say) as the only avenue of instruction.

Perraton's final point is that computer technology and the penetration by the global Internet, may continue the ethno-cultural educational domination:

1. Many institutions are beginning to recognize that the high costs can be offset somewhat if they buy in their courses from other places. USP in increasingly buying courses from both Australia and New Zealand's universities, often with the latitude to 'tweak' them a bit. However, in reality time constraints and teaching overloads make this task effectively non-existent.

2. The perceived prestige given to universities from the 'North' suggests that students may by pass the local institutions along with their cultural and contextual expertise, in favour of a distance educational course given online by say Sydney, Harvard, or Oxford University. Central Queensland University established a campus in Suva, ostensibly to service Asian students at a cheaper price than would had they come to a campus in Australia. Anecdotal reports of USP graduates completing postgraduate qualifications showed that more than half the enrolled students were actually Fiji citizens.

Can it be said that the African Virtual University (http://www.avu.org), might be treading down the path that Perraton describes? Quite possibly. Most of the H805 students studying the AVU web site expressed their observation that there was a heavy tendency to rely on computers, which may mean that the Perraton's first concern may be realistic. To offset his second concern, there does appear to be a move to purchasing with many partners to provide course content and actual learning practice. As to whether it is actually crossing the boundaries that it's mission statement envisaged, it seems to be that the students that would get the most of out the courses would still be close to the Nairobi where the administration is centered

Following on from Dejan's earlier remark in activity 6, it is possible in smaller ways that technology is becoming affordable. In discussing the possibility of using mobile telephones and personal digital assisstents (PDA) Tore Kjaergard points out that particularly the younger generation in Africa appear to have good access to mobile phones. My experience in Fiji, Samoa and Vanuatu concurs in that many people (including older generations) have at least one mobile phone in the family. In part this is because there has not been an alternative, rural areas being starve of any land line telephones. Having telephone access is perceived to be a willing price to pay even if it is correspondingly higher than from countries in the 'North'. Today, for instance one can buy a decent solid prepaid telephone in Fiji for $US40 which includes $US10 of prepaid telephone calls. Using mobile telephones to help in the delivery of flexible teaching modes, may not be such an unrealistic proposition.

4. Activity 8: Is Flexible Learning, Open Learning by Another Name?

Firstly both within the activities of H805 (2006) and in the readings within Jakupec's & Garrick's edited book (2000) & that of Perraton (2000), there cannot any sensible contrast couched in 'absolutes' as to either their similarity or their differences. There have been different meanings with *Open Learning* but this fuzziness increases especially with the term *Flexible Learning*. However, what does strike me is that *Open Learning* is more about a socialist philosophical approach to learning stating that learning should be really for 'all' regardless of background and/or upbringing. This diversity means that the educational institution must be 'open' to provide effectively for it. *Flexible Learning* on the other hand seems a philosophy that is derived from market driven responses to the fast pace of modern life. *Flexible Learning* (Garrick & Jakupec, 2000), like *Open Learning,* promotes lifelong learning but only because people have to train, retrain and then retrain again throughout their careers to remain vocationally competitive. In contrast, I very much like the Lea's notes in the Block 1, H805 study guide (p25) that state that open learners "…study a topic just because they want to and, seemingly, need no assessment."

However, of course there is overlap perhaps in the methods that they use. Both 'may' adopt distance learning along with the use of technology to deliver. Both approaches may be 'open' and 'flexible' in the way the course content is constructed, administered & evaluated. But there again they may not! Open and Flexible learning inevitably must suffer from the same problem in that the 'ideals' of being 'totally open' and 'totally flexible' cannot be met absolutely. Otherwise one sinks into an extreme post modern *reductio ad absurdum* argument - everyone's individual learning and assessment is valid and hence everyone should get an A+.

H805 classmate Tore Kjaergard's point that *Flexible Learning* is *Distance Education* in disguise is, I believe, wrong. Flexible learning 'could' mean that a multitude of delivery channels is made available, one of which could be face to face; whilst another could be 'distance education'. However, if a student chose to utilize only face to face mode, then she/he hasn't really engaged in *Distance Education* per se.

5. Activity 9: What Does Nunan mean that ICTs are already considered Flexible Learning Paradigms?

Nunan (2000), means that the use of ICTs in education is varied. He outlines three schemes (based on Yetton et al, 1997), from the IT models that are cutting edge in educational delivery (i), to the IT that is used to help provide semi-autonomy in departments and faculties (ii) to institutions that employ IT as their teaching and educational backbone (iii). Bottomley (2000) cites the same source and goes onto show three examples of this scheme. Nunan's point then is that this variety of uses of ICTs in education, is a self defining act of encompassing 'flexibility' – as in flexibility of usage of ICTs to achieve different educational goals. Nunan supports his argument by showing how the consequences of adopting model (iii) as his paradigm has

implications in the delivery and content of courses from his University (University of South Australia)

6. Activity 12: How Do Thorpe and Evans Differ in their Discussions on Flexible Learning?

Thorpe's chapter (Thorpe, 2000) appears to use literature that delves into psychology and epistemology. She does however, offer a critique to evaluate whether learning has in fact occurred (or not) under the different 'flexible learning' arrangements. One gets the sense that she is trying to grapple with the notion of true flexibility being like the crock of gold at the end of the rainbow. Whilst we may desire flexibility in theory, can the 'products' of such educational pedagogies justify 'total' flexibility. In other words we need to be critical of flexible approaches as to whether they truly succeed in their educational goals. Her review of evaluations of these learning methods (student centered and experiential) shows there to be little in the way of strong empirical support.

Evans (2000) chapter focuses more on the institutional and qualitative aspect of promoting 'flexible learners'. He is more intent on evaluating the notion that one cannot expect 'flexible learning' to succeed unless training is given to the learners in how to be 'flexible'. H805 classmate, Alastair McCabe suggests that Evans concentrates on the flexible learner in a consumer orientated manner, driven primarily by market economies, when he says that Evans "…grounds his assertions more in economic policy". In contrast, I believe that Evans is actually very much more on the side of what it means to be a student under this new paradigm, and has instead succeeded in showing that this is an underdeveloped and non-evaluated but vitally important point.

Both these readings have strong lessons to be learnt by the current USP buzz phrase of 'Distance and Flexible Learning'. In response to political crises in both Fiji and the Solomon islands in 2000, the then Deputy Vice Chancellor passed an edict that all courses should be placed into 'distance' mode. Given that it normally took 18 months to put a course into 'Extension' mode, it's not surprising that most departments baulked at this. The face saving change of name to 'Distance & Flexible' mode was an internal acknowledgement that this could not be achieved, but there remained strong administrative pressures to push course content into 'distance' mode. In effect this meant provide existing print resources to campus students, placing lecture notes on-line and (if possible) providing videos or video feeds to Extension centres. The vast majority of courses remain heavily didactic and 'top-down' with emphasis on repetition to demonstrate knowledge. Hence flexibility for USP, is more about flexible modes of delivery rather than any notion of flexibility of learning and/or evaluation and/or course content, which are all the areas that both Thorpe and Evans's chapters deal with.

Summary

Superficially, there is a temptation to think of anything other than face to face 'conventional' teaching as something that has evolved overtime and that essentially they refer to the same 'alternative' mode of instruction. From *Correspondence Course* to *Distance Education*, to *Open Learning* and finally to *Flexible Learning*. But the structured discussions in Block 1 of H805 (2006) have shown this to be a false premise. To be certain there is overlap between many of these different pedagogies but they owe their character to the sociological conditions of the relevant time period from which they stem or currently exist. The writings of both Perraton & Thorpe reviewed here, explicate critical stances on both the value of abandoning the 'best practices' of the historical non face to face modes (Perraton), and on fully accepting the value of the latest trend, simply because it is the latest (Perraton & Thorpe).

References

Bottomley, J. (2000) Exploring Reconfiguring institutional strategies for flexible learning and delivery. In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.87-106.

Evans, T. (2000) Flexible delivery and flexible learning: Developing flexible learners? In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.211-224.

Garrick, J, & Jakupec, V. (2000) Flexible learning, work and human resource development. In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.1-8.

Landbeck, R., Mugler, F., (2000) Distance learners of the South Pacific: study strategies, learning conditions, and consequences for course design. *Journal of Distance Education*, **15**, pp.63-80.

Nunan, T. (2000) Exploring the concept of flexibility. In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.47-66.

Perraton, H.D. (2000) *Open and distance learning in the developing world*. Routledge, London ; New York.

Thorpe, M. (2000) Pedagogical implications of flexible learning. In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.175-192.

Yetton, P, and Associates (1997) *Managing the introduction of technology in the delivery and administration of higher education, evaluations and investigations program*. Higher Education Division, Government Printing Services, Canberra, Australia. Cited in, Nunan, T. (2000) Exploring the concept of flexibility. In *Flexible learning, human resource, and organisational development : putting theory to work*, (Eds, Jakupec, V. & Garrick, J.) Routledge, London, pp.47-66.