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EDITORIAL

Distance education success stories proliferate as practitioners, excited about their programs and wanting to share their experiences with colleagues, disseminate reports in a wide variety of educational and technical publications. However, as Michael Beaudoin points out in this issue of DEOSNEWS, distance educators have seldom taken time to engage in serious reflection on their practice. Beaudoin argues that time and energy spent in such critical reflection will pay large dividends. Grounding practice in the philosophy and theory that results from critical reflection will not only improve individual and collective practice, but may allow distance educators to move from the periphery of educational thinking and practice to positions of educational leadership.

INTEGRATING EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION TO ENHANCE
DISTANCE EDUCATION PRACTICE

Michael F. Beaudoin

Many distance education practitioners have acquired significant experience at this point in their careers, but too often, as evidenced in typical journal articles and conference presentations, this experience translates into sometimes tedious "show and tell" accounts of the history, statistics and accomplishments of the particular program they are currently associated with. What is conspicuously lacking is systematic reflection on practice that can be usefully applied to other settings, that can enhance present practice and can inform future distance education activity.

Practitioners do not necessarily communicate what they learn, do not often test their theories, and typically function without incorporating what they have learned from previous situations. The effective practitioner may not even understand why he or she is effective, and thus not be able to tell others how to function. While we may compare notes about what does work, we seldom are able to adequately diagnose failure (assuming we are willing to acknowledge it), and we are usually unable to isolate those factors within our accumulated practice that lead to insightful understanding about how we might best proceed in the future.

Advancing effective distance education practices demands adaptive policies and procedures to meet changing circumstances and new

needs. This requires persuasive evidence derived from both ongoing research and continuous practice. Professional competence requires development of one's own evolving theory of practice, and that requires the ability and willingness to diagnose problems, test solutions and attempt alternative models of conventional technique. To do this, distance education practitioners must become more skilled at being reflective about what they do, analyzing their ways of behaving, and arriving at new ways of knowing. This reflective activity can yield insightful analyses of both effective and not-so-effective practice modalities that can inform new colleagues entering the profession, can be useful to veteran colleagues who may be prompted to engage in similar inquiry, and can assist institutions contemplating similar programs and services.

A paradigm shift is occurring in distance education. Just as adult education emerged from the shadows over the past two decades to become more central to the mission of higher education, so too is distance education now becoming more institutionalized. Distance education has finally met the criteria that George Keller, the guru of strategic academic planning, identifies as critical to legitimizing new program initiatives--centrality, need and quality (Keller 1983). Despite our noble intentions, we have often labored in the shadows, hovering on the periphery, waiting for acceptance, and feeling somewhat beleaguered. But we've got to stop acting and feeling like outsiders, because distance education professionals have come of age, and we now have a splendid opportunity to lead.

A key challenge for distance educators in the 1990s is to optimize the results of past distance education efforts in ways that will influence future practice. This requires a linkage between the realities of changing practice and continuing learning. This connection also requires that distance educators be learning consultants playing many roles: they must research, design, implement, instruct, administer, and evaluate educational programs. To have real impact in a changing environment, distance educators should have knowledge and skills in the principles and methods of adult education, particularly as they apply to distance education; trends in the field and an awareness of the application of research findings to practice; utilization of collaborative techniques; and ability to teach and lead other professionals.

Distance education professionals also need to learn about the capabilities of other professions, to understand what they do, and to recognize the limitations of their own field. They should not only practice their profession, but also adapt it to changing conditions, and revise it to include new information and resources from diverse arenas. They must realize how programs are conceptualized, designed and delivered in fields other than education. In so doing, distance educators can serve as catalysts for promoting collaboration across professional lines. It is this dynamic, on-going process of professional self-renewal that can be achieved if we are reflective thinkers as well as active practitioners (Brookfield 1986, 62).

Psychologist Richard Keagan's adult development stages are instructive in understanding the continuum of experience professionals progress through in their careers. Presumably, most

enter a profession expecting it to be meaningful, but once in the field, professional growth is not necessarily easy. Many remain in a traditional mold defined by the values, beliefs and ideals of established practice. As young professionals enter practice, they are prone to conformity in hopes of being accepted as members of their professional community. This represents a period in which expectation and internalization are crucial to their sense of meaning. They ACCEPT truths. As they move through systems and accumulate experience, they increasingly value competency and mastery, they find their way through problems, explore new ideologies and theories, and establish greater self-identity and self-confidence. They SEEK truths. Eventually, mature practitioners achieve a certain degree of self-knowledge, adopt new ideas and theories, identify more intimately with their profession, yet are more willing to accept contradictions and question assumptions, recognizing that self-transformation is occurring, and welcoming possibilities for change. They DEFINE truths. (Keagan 1992). As distance educators with accumulated experience, we must increasingly articulate and disseminate more thoughtful approaches to practice; to use Keagan's phrase, we must "DEFINE truths".

Donald Schon advocates that practitioners in the various service professions "reflect in action" as a dynamic means of enhancing their practice. A practitioner who engages in reflective practice can question the value of his/her task, examine the training and the theories he/she brings to it, and access the probable outcomes of performance. In this process, the practitioner reflects on the elements of knowledge and skill he/she brings to bear on practice, and thus may arrive at new insights regarding the techniques, values, and purposes imbedded in his/her initial assumptions about how to function effectively. This process can take on the quality of a struggle between what is known and comfortable, and what is unknown and riskier. But if we can learn from it, it has the potential to be an antidote to the dominant paradigms of educational theory and professional practice that impede needed educational reform (Schon 1983, 56f).

Distance educators should also identify what variables in their personal histories of professional practice are most powerful in determining and defining new perspectives that can guide improved practice in the future. The variables that can lead us to new insights about our programs and new ideologies about our practice are many and diverse. For example, we might attempt to isolate those elements which contribute to successful innovation from those that lead to mediocrity at best or failure at worst. Factors to consider might include: the presence of a program advisory group; the attitude of a dean or vice president; the type of instructional technology utilized; or the effect of congregate meetings on independent learners. These characteristics can be monitored and documented to ascertain their impact on practice outcomes.

This reflection-in-action is an essential process by which professionals can assess the efficacy of their present practice and initiate appropriate interventions. It can lead to better integration of research and practice and to new insights about how to influence and impact the instructional systems of our institutions. In this way, we are able to research our practice and concurrently practice our research, and thus enhance the efficacy of our actions (Beaudoin 1992). Active reflection can take many forms, from

simple and serendipitous activities, to systematic and ongoing assessment. For example, an informal Friday afternoon gathering of staff to compare notes about the week's events and activities can reveal surprisingly useful observations; a quarterly meeting of directors and deans involved in similar programs for the purpose of sharing enrollment trends, new programming initiatives, etc. can be an insightful means of collective reflection. At the other end of the continuum, a formative program evaluation methodology could incorporate decision points where new data could lead to interventions and to appropriate changes in practice modalities.

Most professions display a gap between technical knowledge and professional competence; for example, too many of us, fancying ourselves to be on the edge of innovation, have perhaps been a bit too caught up with the technology of distance education, while less attentive to its pedagogical applications. As distance educators we should be interested in a process that merges the two and encourages an intellectual climate for further inquiry. If distance educators focus only on knowledge and technologies that soon may become obsolete, we will not contribute to expanding competent, professional performance (Queeney 1990, 69ff). And as we acquire new skills and knowledge, we have a responsibility to share it with others through our own writing, conference presentations and other professional activities.

This, then, is the challenge for distance educators--to develop the skills and perspectives and mindset that can contribute to ongoing personal growth and continuing professional development. In this way, we will be better able to define our future roles, and better determine how we might influence future practice for ourselves and others. It is an ambitious goal; one which encourages a dynamic process that helps us define a new vision and move toward it. It facilitates a type of learning which enables individuals to recognize what they don't know and to sense the possibilities for new knowing (which is the true definition of learning).

But none of this can occur unless we, as distance educators, convincingly insinuate our theories and practices into the academic mainstream. If we see ourselves on the periphery of the education and training establishment, if we cannot effectively implement our goals and strategies, if we are preoccupied with the technological rather than pedagogical dimensions of distance learning, then we are not very likely to provide the leadership necessary to create a context for learning that is useful to ourselves and attractive to others.

In short, unless we actively reflect on our role as educators, intervene within our institutions to make them more responsive to the needs of our consumers, and continuously improve upon our own practice in the important work we are doing, then we will ultimately lose our impact in an increasingly complex learning society, and we will become less relevant players in educational settings at the very moment when our contribution is so urgently needed.

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