

Is Distance Education for Teacher Education Second Best?

Sue Garton and Keith Richards

Introduction

Distance education has become increasingly popular all over the world. According to a US report published in 2003, there were over 3 million students enrolled on distance education courses in higher education (Saba, 2005). However, in many parts of the world, there is still a lingering feeling that distance education is somehow second best, something to fall back on if you cannot afford the time or money to attend an on-campus programme.

The purpose of this article is to argue that not only is distance education not second best, but that as a means of promoting teacher education and development, it has the potential to be far more valuable and beneficial than what we might call 'conventional' forms of teacher education. We will begin by discussing distance education in general, including a definition of the term and its main characteristics. We will then examine the features of teaching and teacher education that make distance education particularly valuable in this area, introducing the concept of situated learning. Finally, we will show how situated learning can be implemented in practice.

This article is to be seen in the light of almost 20 years of investigation, shared experiences and reflection by the team at Aston University working in teacher education and development in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). The individuals have changed over time, as has the organisation of the

programmes, but the educational philosophy which underpins these programmes has remained constant throughout.

Defining Distance Education

Let us start by defining exactly what is meant by ‘distance education’. This is far from straightforward, given that distance education as a distinct area of study has grown out of earlier systems, such as correspondence courses or open learning, some of which still exist alongside it. Moreover, terms may have very specific reference in a particular country because of the system which operates there, while elsewhere they might be much less carefully defined or they might refer to systems which are different in significant respects. This is not a negligible issue: where distance education is conventionally referred to or treated as synonymous with correspondence education (for example, in the Middle East) its status is usually fairly low (Richards, 1994). In this article we use the generally accepted term ‘distance education’ as it covers both distance learning and distance teaching (ibid.).

Nearly 30 years ago, Holmberg (1977: 9) described distance education as covering

“... the various forms of study at all levels which are not under the continuous, immediate supervision of tutors present with their students in lecture rooms or on the same premises, but which, nevertheless, benefit from the planning, guidance and tuition of a tutorial organisation.”

A more detailed definition is that offered by Keegan (1996), who identifies five characteristics of distance education. First of all, the teacher and learner are physically separated for all or almost all of the learning process. This is what distinguishes

distance learning from conventional face-to-face education. Secondly, there is an educational institution responsible for planning the programme, preparing and delivering the materials and providing support for learners. This distinguishes distance learning from private study and teach-yourself programmes. Thirdly, distance learning is characterised by the use of technical media, such as print, audio, video or computer, which connect the teacher and learner and carry the content of the course. The fourth feature identified by Keegan (ibid.) is “the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)”. Finally there is the absence of the learning group as participants in distance learning programmes are generally taught as individuals rather than in groups, although there is often the possibility of meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes (ibid.).

Recent developments in information technology in particular have led to an increasing convergence of distance and other forms of education. Such convergence has called into question the idea of distance education as a distinct field, but it can be argued that the boundaries are moving as a result of changes in the concept of conventional, rather than distance education. In other words, it is the case that IT applications associated with distance education, such as online learning and teaching, are now widely used in other forms of education delivery (Smith 2005:160).

The advantages and drawbacks of distance education

Given the characteristics outlined above, distance learning has certain advantages and drawbacks for those undertaking this form of study, whatever the subject. Among the advantages that have been outlined by, for example, Cowan (1995) are:

1. Learners can study at their own pace, spending more time on things of particular interest, organising their time around work and family commitments.
2. Learners can control the way in which they learn – they can start from the end of the materials instead of the beginning or they can work through the materials quickly and then go back to work on the details. However, it is important to develop efficient learning strategies, something that those returning to education after a number of years may find difficult.
3. Learners can control the content and emphasis of what they study (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the programme) – concentrating on what is most interesting or relevant to them.
4. Learners set their own goals and criteria for success, according to which they make decisions and choices among options.
5. There are the financial advantages of being able to continue working while studying at the same time.

However, there are also drawbacks (Cowan, 1995). These are principally concerned with support and contact and new technologies have only gone some way to solving these issues:

1. Communication – new technology can contribute to reducing this problem but compared to face-to-face communication, distance learners tend to feel that something is always lacking (Motteram and Forrester, 2005). Moreover, the lack of face-to-face communication places constraints on the relationship between tutor and learner as the tutor is unable to keep a casual eye on learners' progress.
2. The possibility of forming groups to study together tends to be remote. Even with the new technologies available to facilitate this, distance learners will not necessarily take up the opportunities offered (ibid.). The reasons for this are complex, but learners

working at their own pace may mean that they all are at different stages and so collaboration is difficult.

3. Distance education requires a high degree of learner independence. This demand will appear less radical to some societies and to some individuals than to others.

4. Connected to the above points is the fact that studying at a distance can be a very isolated experience. The absence of social links means a risk of unawareness that others have the same problems and the risk of a loss of motivation.

5. There may be administrative difficulties. With everyone at a distance, organising books, the paperwork, marking assignments and so on all take time and extra organisation. Delays can cause interruptions to learning and this can be frustrating.

These are just some of the main advantages and drawbacks to distance education in general. However, there are also other considerations that, we will argue, make distance learning particularly suited to teacher education and development.

Distance learning and teacher education and development

Beyond the general observations outlined in the previous section that are true for distance education situations in general, there are some specific and important advantages of distance education as a form of teacher education and development.

Firstly there is the fact that distance education programmes allow teachers to base their studies in the context to which they naturally relate, without the need for separation from that context or the continuing concerns which inform their work there. As we shall see, this has important implications for the contributions such a course might make to the local professional context.

Secondly, there is the professional culture surrounding teaching. Teachers are undervalued in many countries round the world, and despite — perhaps even to some extent because of — this there are many teachers with a concern to establish teaching groups and organisations dedicated to the development of their profession and those within it. Such groups are essentially collaborative rather than competitive in nature, and while all professions involve some element of competition, teaching is not essentially a competitive activity (compare business, for example). Although they may be isolated in their classrooms, teachers are used to working with groups and in groups, tackling everyday problems through informal discussions in a staff room environment as well as through more formal meetings. There exists, therefore, a cultural context in which providing mutual academic support and cooperation, essential in a distance learning context, is not an unfamiliar activity.

Thirdly, as a result of the professional culture outlined above, there is what we might call a suitable ‘infrastructure’ already in existence. In many situations, the basic structure for the establishment of local networks, again an important aspect of distance learning, already exists in the form of professional organisations. In TESOL for example, the network of international, national and local teachers’ organisations and their special interest groups provide a focus for discussion, debate, and professional activity. Such groups provide a natural and often supportive link with study designed for professional development. Many of those who graduate from distance education programmes in TESOL go on to play a leading role in such organisations.

Finally, there are local applications. One of the problems of leaving a teaching situation in order to study at an academic institution is that the work done there is separated from its point of application. New ideas are encountered and there is an urge to experiment

and conduct research in a context which is close to the heart. Usually this has to take place when the course is over, when there may be less time because of teaching commitments, when employers may be less amenable to the idea of experiments and when expert advisers are not on hand to discuss results. Distance education offers a way of immediately investigating interesting ideas and approaches in the context of a supportive local group and with a reliable link to an academic centre.

This last point is an important one in making the case for distance education in teacher education, in that those who are undertaking professional development and choose to separate themselves from their professional context by going to an institution will sooner or later, if their development is to have any meaning, return to that context and move forward within it, a point made very clearly by Widdowson (1990:65).

Thus, in a conventional arrangement the initial learning is not situated in the professional context, and the return to that context represents a new and separate step in the learning process. In other words, in professional terms, there is distance between the context in which development can be realised and the site of formal learning — the organisation. Seen in this light, the term ‘distance education’ seems misleading when used to describe learning and development that is situated in the professional environment. Thus the whole idea of distance has been reversed as we question a fundamental assumption implicit in the term “distance education”. The use of this term draws attention to the distance element, which carries with it – as we have already mentioned - negative connotations. There is a sense in which the distance has to be ‘got over’, so that at times it can seem that some of the most attractive features of such programmes are really no more than part of a worthy attempt to compensate for the

fundamental disadvantage which distance represents. What is needed is an alternative term.

The concept of 'Situated Learning as Distance Education' (SLADE) would seem to be appropriate as it builds on Lave and Wenger's (1991) original concept of 'situated learning' by emphasising Keegan's (1996) characterisation of distance education as the provision of two-way communication with a dialogue between tutor and student, thus underlining the interrelationship between teaching and learning. SLADE shifts the perspective to the context in which the student works with the student-as-local-expert — and the shift is a fundamental one. It is fundamental not least because it draws attention to what is most positive about the teaching-learning situation, rather than allowing this to be obscured by less important matters relating to distance.

Once the idea of SLADE is accepted it will have a number of important implications for any programme which chooses to use this description, the most obvious of which is the fact that the focus must be on the local situation. In pedagogic terms, this means that the programme must be sufficiently open for participants to ensure that the focus of their studies reflects their locally contextualised developmental needs. In the case of professional — and especially teacher — development, this implies adopting an approach which involves investigating one's own practice and developing the reflective and analytic skills necessary to integrate this into a process of informed professional growth.

The implications for the tutor/student relationship are also significant: the level of self-determination and contextual knowledge required for the successful completion of such a programme mean that the role of the tutor is likely to be that of guide rather than

teacher, and that there must be a genuine exchange of knowledge if progress is to be made. For this reason, the term ‘participant’ may be more appropriate than ‘student’ and should be standard terminology within SLADE.

This then is the case for situated learning in teacher education and development. In the remainder of the article, we would like to examine how situated learning can be put into practice.

SLADE in practice

So far we have argued for a move away from thinking in terms of ‘distance education’ and have proposed the alternative concept of ‘situated learning as distance education’.

There are three main reasons for this:

- the focus of work in teacher education and development needs to be on the context in which participants work and not on hypothetical or theoretical representations of that context;
- participants’ development is realised in and through their local context;
- the important learning relationship is within the local context and the main role of tutors is as facilitators of this.

Thus teacher education and development programmes based on situated learning do not provide the ‘theory’, leaving the application to participants. Rather, they create the conditions under which participants make their studies meaningful by guiding and facilitating them in a process of professional and personal development based on the exploration of ‘theory in practice’. Participants are directly involved in the excitement

of ‘becoming theoretical’ in the context of a professional environment with which they are familiar.

Thus a reflective practice model of teacher education must be adopted (Wallace, 1991), drawing on Schön’s (1983) distinction between received knowledge and experiential knowledge. Received knowledge refers to such things as facts, data and theories. This is the sort of knowledge that is transmitted to teachers, certainly in many pre-service courses in TESOL. Experiential knowledge has two components – knowing-in-action and reflection (Schön, 1983). Reflection is in turn broken down into *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* (ibid.).

Knowing-in-action is ‘accumulated practical knowledge’ which is used to respond to simple or routine circumstances. It is spontaneous professional behaviour that is usually tacit and unarticulated.

Reflection-in-action takes place during practice, especially in response to the unexpected, when the routines of knowing-in action are disturbed.

When someone reflects-in-action, he (*sic*) becomes a researcher in the practice context.

“... He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his enquiry.” (Schön, ibid:68).

Reflection-*on*-action takes place when practitioners reflect on what they have done after the event, often with the intention of informing future actions (Tsui, 2003:45). It enables professionals to make explicit their tacit knowledge.

Programmes based on the concept of situated learning aim to facilitate teachers' reflections on their actions in order to enable them to articulate their tacit knowledge and thereby theorise their practice, pushing their development forward in the context in which it is most relevant. One way for teachers reflect on their actions is through action research (Edge, 2001).

SLADE and action research

In simple terms, action research is represented as a continuing cycle of action, observation, reflection and planning, which leads to more action. That is to say, in their professional context, teachers observe what is going on and find aspects of their teaching that they feel are worthy of further investigation. This is often seen in terms of a problem, but it might also be a significant success, or something of interest for some other reason. The teacher undertaking action research then reflects on this issue, finds out more about it and develops a plan of investigative action. On implementing the plan in action, the teacher observes carefully what has changed and evaluates whether things have improved or not, and whether professional understanding has developed as a result.

Altrichter et al (1993: 202) spell out the assumptions on which this vision of professional research and development is based:

- Complex practical problems demand specific solutions.

- These solutions can be developed only inside the context in which the problem arises and in which the practitioner is a crucial and determining element.
- The solutions cannot be successfully applied to other contexts, but they can be made accessible to other practitioners as hypotheses to be tested.

The two major features of action research which make it so suitable as a mode of operation for a teacher education programme based on situated learning are its dual professional and academic aspects. Firstly, it can be individually empowering in professional terms for the teacher or group of teachers concerned. Secondly, it enables situated knowledge and learning, and experience-based interpretation which is not possible with older paradigm research.

By using action research as an approach in teacher education and development programmes, participants are being encouraged to explore the *knowledge-in-action* on which their teaching is based and to engage in *reflection-in-action*, so as to make that knowledge explicit and to go on learning. However, they are also asked to go beyond such exploratory teaching and to engage in *reflection-on-action*, and to communicate that reflection in written forms which meet certain academic criteria. In so doing, they clarify for themselves and articulate for others, their own '*practical theories*' (Altrichter et al. 1993:207).

Conclusion

In this article we have presented the case for distance education programmes, based on the concept of situated learning in teacher education. We have argued that such programmes, by adopting a reflective approach and by asking participants to undertake action research projects can move forward the professional development of teachers in

ways that conventional teacher education cannot. Our own views come not only from the underlying educational philosophy that we have outlined here, but also from personal experiences as participant and as tutor. Particularly impressive is the extent to which participants on such programmes are able to relate their study to their work and explore professionally valuable local applications.

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Sue Garton

School of Languages and Social Sciences

Aston University

Birmingham

B4 7ET

e-mail: s.garton@aston.ac.uk

Phone: +44 121 204 3806

Fax: +44 121 204 3766

Sue Garton is a lecturer on the MSc in TESOL by distance learning at Aston University, Birmingham, UK. She previously worked as an English language teacher and teacher educator in Italy. She has co-authored textbooks in EAP for university students of Economics and Psychology and has published articles on teaching the spoken language. Her current interests are in the use of new technologies in teacher education and development.

Keith Richards

CELTE

Warwick University

Coventry CV47AL

e-mail: K.Richards@warwick.ac.uk

Phone: +44 24 76575729

Fax: +44 024 76524318

Keith Richards is an associate professor at Warwick University where he acts as coordinator of the EdD programme and teaches on the Spoken English and Applied Linguistics courses on the MA programme. He has worked in a number of countries in Europe and the Middle East and has been involved in teacher development around the world. His main research interests lie in the area of professional interaction and his recent publications include *Qualitative Inquiry in TESOL, Applying Conversation Analysis* (edited with Paul Seedhouse), and *Language and Professional Identity*.