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Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Evans, Terry and Daryl Nation (eds.) *Critical Reflections on Distance Education* Deakin Studies in Education, Series 2, The Falmer Press, Philadelphia, 1989. 272 pp. $25.90 U.S. Reviewed by Ross H. Paul, Vice-President Academic, Athabasca University

What a rare and welcome event – the publication of a book on distance education that is neither descriptive nor prescriptive, that sets out and effectively demonstrates the merits of a "critical" approach to this burgeoning but still fledgling area of endeavour and one that has much to offer those teaching in more conventional classroom settings!

For once, we have a text that is more than a collection of interesting but only tangentially related articles. The editors, Evans and Nation, who themselves work several hundred miles apart, chose their contributors carefully, asked them to adopt the perspective of 'critical reflection' developed from the work of social theorist, Anthony Giddens, and then to participate in a two-day seminar to critique each other's articles. The result is a provocative and integrated collection that closely relates theory and practice.

Reflecting its subject matter, the book abounds with contradictions and ironies as practitioners are confronted with the realities of trying to overcome the problems of distance.

In one of the strongest contributions, Jackie Cook, seconded to Shanghai for a year but teaching one of her Women's Studies courses by correspondence back to Australia to help overburdened colleagues, is startled by the personal depth of the writing she receives from her distant students which often exceeds the quality produced by those in classroom settings. In an open and engaging manner, she recounts how the experience forced her to challenge her own commitment to student "self-direction" on campus where students are apparently less "liberated" from the authority of the instructor.

Another example, from the other side of the ledger, is that of Fitzclarence and Kemmis, experienced practitioners in distance education, who become increasingly disillusioned with the distance mode of operation in trying to design a course on curriculum theory for distance delivery in Deakin University's Master of Education programme. In confronting growing state control over curricula and an age when students' lives are increasingly characterized by abstracted and 'distanced' social relationships, the authors wonder aloud whether distance education is "an expression of the problem or part of its resolution" (p. 171).

Smyth finds that budget cuts which prevent him from getting a phone also have a positive outcome in that they force him to reduce the number of written assignments, thus freeing his students up for more reflection and control over their own learning than he had previously allowed them.

In their democratic approach to designing street kits for youthworkers, Bonning and Evans are disappointed in the results of their reliance on practitioners to produce the materials, and, even more ironically, find that their open techniques yield rave reviews from the same government department which effectively killed the project by overwhelming it with bureaucratic requirements and inappropriate time pressures.

Another common theme is increasing social isolation and alienation and education's role to empower individuals to combat this. While distance education is usually portrayed as a key vehicle to this end, it can also be itself an isolating mechanism.

In a particularly insightful and damning critique of traditional approaches to libraries, Helen Modra seeks an appropriate balance between prescription and freedom in trying to find appropriate ways to apply the lessons of Paulo Friere to the *conscientization* of library school students. It is perhaps notable that two of the strongest contributions (Modra's and Cook's) emanate from women new to distance education, both of whom find its existing literature "technist" and singularly unhelpful. Cook asks why, when she approached distance education literature, she was confronted "by bureaucratic history and brochures of electronic whizzery?" and why ...

> ... is that most problematic of issues, the teacher/student relationship, addressed in the main by Telecom and discussion of learning bristling with behaviourist categories and reduced to statistics? (pp. 25–26).

Building from the critical perspective and the pedagogy of Friere, practitioners from widely divergent bases and degrees of experience confront their own intellectual problems candidly and critically, following the example of the editors who are quite open in discussing the difficulties they faced in pulling the project together. One of the most revealing articles is Bruce King's account of a course team's attempt to develop a "programme development" component for a graduate diploma in distance education. Admitting that the team embarked on each unit without a clear notion of what they intended to produce, King reveals that they learned two-thirds of the way through the process that their essentially didactic approach, in largely ignoring the insights and experiences that the student practitioners themselves brought to the course, was belying the very principles from which they thought they had been working.

> "A major cause of our difficulties was the sense that for the course to be academically respectable the team had to get it 'right'. Recognition that this degree of staff determination for what counted for knowledge and how it was to be assessed was 'getting it wrong' was liberating both for our students and for the team." (p. 121)

A key target of the authors is what they call the "instructional industrialist" approach to distance education which has characterized its early development. Building on David Harris's work at Britain's Open University, the editors challenge both the OU's "educational technology" model and the conservative, dualmode approach employed at the University of New England.

Chapter after chapter takes the reader in fascinating circles as practitioners grapple with the gaps between intentions and results, between theory and practice. The editors are particularly adept at presenting usually jargon laden sociological concepts in helpful and straight-forward language, and most contributors take seriously the pedagogy of Friere in seeking to go beyond mere consciousness raising to *praxis*.

A major chapter by John Smyth is a product of his reflection on a distance education course for teacher education, but is appropriate reading for anyone concerned about teachers theorizing about their own practice. In decrying what he terms a crisis in western education, that of bureaucratic and dehumanizing centralization, his piece is a clarion call for teachers to challenge the rationality, legitimacy and motivation of what they do, and to resist and overcome the "economic rationalism" of centralized educational bureaucracies to which distance education is particularly vulnerable.

Not all chapters are as strong as those cited. Arger's on interactive radio is more typical of earlier writings in the field in its tendency to be descriptive rather than self-critical. Parenthetically, one doesn't have to look too far to discover why the radio programmes didn't draw more "non-elitist" general listeners. Non-students were invited to call in if they could provide "some intelligent and stimulating talkback" (p. 84), a qualification to dissuade all but the most self-confident listener. This point is reinforced by Grace's examples of the low power positions of external students who tend to blame themselves rather than the institution for the problems they face ("is there something wrong or is it just me?") but these two chapters do not attain the same depth of analysis as the others.

The book deserves a wider audience than its title will probably attract. It not only advocates a strong critical perspective which unites theory and practice, but goes further than most in living up to its own ideals. Future academics seeking support for their grappling with the challenges of distance education for the first time will have one advantage over Cook and Modra – access to this book. It will probably anger those more sympathetic to the traditions of instructional systems design and educational technology who have been instrumental in the earliers development of distance education and frustrate those looking for ready answers, but the book is intellectually honest and challenges practitioners to look much more closely at what they are claiming to achieve.

Along with the writings of David Harris and the critical perspective that characterized the recent OU/ICDE Cambridge conference on Interaction and Independence, this text is clear evidence of the maturing of distance education. It doesn't offer a lot of answers to its own challenging questions, although it abounds with interesting ideas about the uses of journals, diaries and other ways to induce students to become much more involved in their own learning. Most of all, it challenges those of us already engaged in the field to confront our own "taken for granted" notions and hence to avoid being "coopted into supporting ... (our) ... own oppression." (p. 213).

The final irony is that by making interactive learning even more problematic, distance education may be forcing its adherents to challenge fundamental

assumptions about the nature of education and society in ways too seldom confronted in the classroom. Some may find the book too idealistic and utopian, but Nation and Evans have anticipated this concern too, by quoting Friere:

> "... if we are not utopian we will easily become bureaucratic and dehumanizing" (p. 252).

Good on you, mates!

Byrne, T. C., *Athabasca University: The Evolution of Distance Education.* Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1989. 137 pp, $19.95. Reviewed by John Bottomley, Director, Administrative Studies and Social Sciences, Open University, Richmond, British Columbia

This is a difficult book to review for a number of reasons. What does one make of a book addressing the evolution of distance education at Athabasca University which makes no mention of its last two presidents; has only two references to its second president but four to the individual who was project manager for the development of the University's first science course? Much of the difficulty stems from the fact that at no point in the book does the Author make it clear what it is he intends the book to be. We are thus left to decide for ourselves and are, I am afraid, left hanging. Is the book a case study? If so, it neither addresses a preposition nor is grounded in theory. Is it an historical account of the place of Athabasca University in the evolution of the Alberta post-secondary education system? If so it shows no attempt at balance or an attempt to get beyond a simple narrative. Is it a personal memoir? Maybe, but if so the second half of the book does not belong with the rest. The problems of intent will be clearer for the reader if I summarize the book's outline.

Chapter One, entitled "The Manning Years" sets the educational scene in Alberta during the late 1960's and ends with the establishment of the University in June 1970. "On June 25, 1970. Lieutenant Governor Grant MacEwan proclaimed order in Council 1206/70, establishing Alberta's fourth University" (p. 16). Chapter Two "In Search of Reform" and Chapter Three "The Academic Concept", deal with what the Author refers to as "the "first" Athabasca University" (p. viii); not a distance education institution at all but a campus based liberal arts institution to be built on a campus at St. Albert just to the North of Edmonton. Chapter Four "The Lougheed Victory" discusses the consequences for the putative university of the fall of the Manning government and the transformation of the mandate of the University into that of a distance education institution. In December 1972 "the government directed the governing authority to undertake a pilot project for the production, testing and application of learning systems in its undergraduate programs, and to explore the application of newer technologies towards the end of improving educational opportunities for adults generally" (p. 50). The next two chapters discuss in turn course development and course delivery as these took