

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 Loughheed 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

place in the pilot project. It is during these two Chapters that the focus of the book begins to shift. The first four chapters were largely a narrative history; in Chapters Five and six the historical narrative becomes intertwined with what reads like a case study trying to make its presence felt. Statements such as "By October 1975 the staff had grown to thirty" (p. 55) are cheek by jowl with comments such as "The course team has become a permanent structure in distance education universities" (p. 58) and "The first, and perhaps the major, principle underlying an effective self instructional system is reductionism" (p. 62). Whatever the value of such statements, both at best debateable, they do not fit well with the historical material with which they share the page.

Chapters Seven and Eight "develop the thesis that the Athabasca University Campus is a communications network" (p. ix). Where the thesis comes from and why it is developed we are not told. "In Chapter Nine the reader finds descriptions of the experiences of ten students, typical of the variety of Canadians who have benefitted from distance learning services" (p. ix). Chapter Ten argues the case that Athabasca University is a reflection of the values of the information age as opposed to large campus based universities which reflect industrial values.

All in all the book is a disappointingly unstructured hodge-podge of ideas, history, anecdotes and case studies. This is a pity for the book contains some interesting sections and the germ of some interesting ideas. Presented as they are however they are more difficult to find than they should be.

The first four chapters are, in this reviewer's judgement, the best part of the book. They present an informative and at times interesting insight into the development of the Alberta University system in the first half of the nineteen seventies. They are at the same time the most memoir-like part of the book and it is largely from this that they draw their strength. The Author is a man with a tale to tell; and he tells it well. He provides insights into the roles played by successive ministers, university administrators, civil servants and local politicians. Although narrative in style the material has a coherence; a coherence derived from the part played by the Author in the events he describes.

As noted earlier in the review, Chapters Five and Six are concerned with the development and delivery aspects of the pilot project approved by the Alberta government at the end of 1972. It is at this point that the structure of the book becomes problematic. Unlike the previous chapters these chapters are no longer solely narrative memoir but are broadened to include substantial material concerning the nature, purpose, methods of presentation etc. of distance learning materials and programs. Unfortunately, this general material and the historical material are in no way satisfactorily integrated. The experience gained in the pilot study is not used to illustrate general principles nor is it used to generate same; the descriptive and the general are simply presented together. The result is neither illuminating nor satisfying. As a memoir the narrative falls apart because of long, misplaced, sections on such topics as the role of course teams in the development process or on the role of telephone tutorials in fostering a student's sense of belonging. All this general material is presented without reference to literature or

research evidence. The Author is plainly torn between two goals and unfortunately attains neither.

Disconcerting as the material on the pilot project may be it is well integrated into the book compared with that in the next two chapters. In these the Author presents his argument that the campus of Athabasca University is a communications network. The genesis of this hypothesis (assertion?), why it's worth testing, what relationship the hypothesis has to the previously presented material etc., is nowhere stated. As a result, this reader was left wondering why it was included at all.

Chapter Nine, a series of profiles of Athabasca Students, presents the same problem. In and of itself it is an interesting enough series of profiles of typical adult distance education students. They include a mother in her late thirties, a student at a campus university taking courses in the summer to transfer to her home institution, an employed immigrant in his late fifties, a native Indian, an inmate of a penitentiary and a senior citizen among others. Those of us involved in distance education have met them all. Why we meet them in this book is however never very clear. If the intent is to show that the University has attracted the type of students for whom it was established then better evidence can be presented than that of a series of well chosen profiles. A statistical analysis of student profiles would provide a more systematic picture for example. Presented as they are they bear no relationship to the material that precedes them; interesting in their own right though they may be.

The last, and very short chapter, argues that Athabasca University is organized and operates in a manner that is reflective of values, practices and expectations of the emerging information society in which we all live. Campus based, research oriented universities on the other hand are seen as being reflective of the values, practices, and expectations of the industrial age. This is an interesting proposition, one seemingly at odds with the proposition of Peters who in his 1973 work "Die Didaktische Struktur Des Fernunterrichts" argued that distance education was an industrial form of education. To have used the Athabasca experience to illuminate the validity, or lack of same, of these opposing views could have given the book focus and purpose. Placed at the end of the book and presented a series of assertions, the proposition is, as presented, unconvincing. This is a pity for the proposition is clearly one worthy of serious consideration given the worldwide emergence of university distance education and open learning systems in the nineteen seventies and eighties. The relationship of these developments to broader societal changes in a topic in need of serious study from a number of disciplinary perspectives. Dr. Byrne had an opportunity to produce some preliminary charts to what are undoubtedly difficult scholarly waters. Unfortunately he contented himself with taking a few, unsystematic, depth soundings.