Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Desmond Keegan *The Foundations of Distance Education,* Croom Helm Publishing 1986, 277 p.

It is difficult at the best of times to attempt to review another author's work. It is more difficult when that work being reviewed turns out not to be as promised. In the case of Keegan's book, *The Foundations of Distance Education*, the book does not deliver what the cover promises. Rather than being a tome that may some day be referred to as an early work that served as a keystone in the development of distance education, it may be remembered as simply one of many books that describes, by direct reference to practice, some aspects of the delivery of learning opportunities to adults at a distance.

Keegan states that this book has three aims: 1) to provide a guide to the literature, theory and practice of distance education, 2) to provide a guide to good practice in distance education for both distance educators and for those who are studying this sector of education for the first time, and 3) to contribute to the foundations of distance education as a new discipline within education (p. 5). Keegan is successful in varying degrees in fulfilling the first two of these objectives; it will be left up to posterity to decide the degree to which he accomplishes the third objective.

Perhaps his failure to achieve this third objective is to be traced to the assumptions upon which the study that provided the data for this book was based. Keegan has structured his argument around the primary assumption that distance education is "a coherent and distinct field of educational endeavour...a complete system of education (that) has its own laws of didactical structure and its own quasi-industrial administrative procedures" (p. 6). This is a lofty assumption to make about a section of the adult education enterprise that in most institutions, and to most governments that either consciously or unconsciously attempt to manage the learning activities of adult citizens, serves as an adjunct activity to be tolerated as long as it does not draw needed resources from other areas of adult education, and of education per se.

A further difficulty has to do with Keegan's attempt to structure a theoretical framework for the development of his study, and consequently of this book. To this end, he has turned to the concept of industrial production, as have other writers who have attempted to conceptualize the practice of distance education. Keegan, however, provides us with an analytical model based upon control theory, presumably used within industry, although this is not made clear. Control theory is a set of strategies for arriving at prescribed goals by means of feedback. The

difficulty with this presentation is that it appears to have been inserted into the book solely as an afterthought. It does little to provide credence to his claim that distance education should be considered as a distinct discipline out of which theory is developing.

The book is comprised of five major sections. Keegan begins with the presentation of distance education as a concept that is separate from other forms of education; to this end he attempts to define the various types of education found at present, i.e. conventional education, nontraditional education, indirect or mediated education, and open education for the purpose of introducing the reader to commonly used, and misused, terminology.

Following this overview of terms, Keegan then attempts to work towards a definition of distance education. This chapter will be appreciated by those who are interested in the development of thought in terms of conceptualizations of distance education. By reference to notable works in this area, Keegan does begin to fulfill his first two stated aims. It is unfortunate, though, that Keegan's proposed definition turns out to be more a description of the necessary components of a distance education system, than a concise, clear statement of what distance education is. It is not the stuff of which theory is made.

The second section of the book is a presentation of what Keegan terms theories of distance education. Keegan states that the first major theoretical structure, and to date the most comprehensive, categorizes distance education as an industrialization of the education process. He quotes Wedemeyer that distance education has failed "to develop a theory related to the mainstream of educational thought and practice". Keegan then begins a thorough review of writings that may be construed as attempts at developing this theoretical base for distance education. These are grouped by Keegan under the headings of Independence and Autonomy; The Industrialization of Teaching; and Interaction and Communication. This section is a good presentation of writings that represent these conceptual approaches to the practice of distance education.

The third section of the book is Keegan's presentation of a theoretical framework for the study and practice of distance education, and a typology of distance teaching systems. He poses three questions that he attempts to answer in the development of this theoretical framework: 1) Is distance education an educational activity? 2) Is distance education a conventional educational activity? and 3) Is distance education possible? Is it a contradiction in terms? The answers provided should stimulate discussion among those concerned with the study of distance education, for they deal with positions that may never be resolved. What this chapter does provide, in concrete terms, are three researchable hypotheses dealing with dropout, quality of learning, and the status of learning in distance education systems. For researchers interested in the practice of distance education, Keegan's hypotheses are worth further investigation.

The remainder of Keegan's work provides the reader with a more practical approach to the design, development and delivery of distance education. It is this

part of the book that actually deals with the logistical aspects of this process, and provides practitioners with a comparative treatment of this process. Keegan presents a typology of distance teaching systems, and touches upon aspects of practice dealing with students and staffing, the choice of medium, administration, economics, and appraisal of selected systems. For those involved in institutional or governmental provision of distance education, the presentation of these topics will serve as a good introduction to the current status of the field.

Keegan has attempted, in this book, to present an overview of both theory and practice in distance education. In this attempt, though, he may have fallen prey to the too common desire to place within two covers all that is known about one subject. He would have been more successful had he decided at the outset which direction to take, and then had proceeded to take it. By attempting to do too much, he may have presented us with too little.

<div style="text-align: right">

Robert J. Carley and Mark W. Waldron
Conestoga College, University of Guelph

</div>

John D. Dennison and Paul Gallagher, 1986, *Canada's Community Colleges – A Critical Analysis*, Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia Press.

In *Community Colleges in Canada* the authors set out to answer one fundamental question: "How might Canada's new colleges best serve Canadians and help shape the Canadian future? (p. 6)

It is evident that Dennison and Gallagher understand the diversity of provincial approaches to college level education across the country and recognize the complexity of the task they have undertaken. The book follows a straightforward organization that successfully introduces a complex subject to the neophyte and focuses the knowledgeable reader on major policy themes. A historic framework is established by outlining the evolution of vocational, CEGEP, community and transfer colleges during the past quarter century. The authors then address issues which are critical to the future of Canadian community colleges.

The work returns repeatedly to several evolutionary themes. Changing economic conditions, shifting public policy concerns and vacillating federal government priorities have affected all colleges in significant and similar ways. During the early sixties most provinces were concerned about educating the "baby boomers" – particularly providing vocational training leading to employment. In a wave of economic optimism political support for the colleges was strong. Each province adopted different postsecondary, vocational education policies and organizational structures to train a rapidly expanding labour force. But by 1980, federal and provincial policy issues were revolving around deficit reduction, accountability and cost efficiency. The colleges' honeymoon with Canadians was over.