



Interview

The philosophy of distance education: An interview with James D. Marshall

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James D. Marshall is Emeritus Professor at the University of Auckland. He has published extensively on a wide range of issues associated with education. His contribution to the philosophy of education is highly regarded nationally and internationally. A comprehensive celebration of James D. Marshall's contribution to education scholarship is published in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Volume 37, Number 3, 2005.

AG: Professor Marshall, can you please comment on your earliest experiences of distance learning?

JM: My first experience of distance education was at secondary school at Timaru, because I left home to go to boarding school. What I mean by this is that before the development of distance education programmes and their use of various media (radio, print, and the internet), students experienced distance education as a leaving home, to attend a high school or a university, as these educational opportunities were only available at distance. Hence the student required the means to access this education and in New Zealand very few young adults chose to move away from home. There were national scholarships available but these were limited in number.

In New Zealand, however, there has been, at least up until the educational reforms of the late 80s, a strong culture of staying in one's region and this has governed educational decisions. Where possible students went to their local university except for medicine, dentistry and engineering. More than this, a generally negative or at least ambiguous perception of university reflected that many people questioned, what did you need to go to university for? Many young adults stayed close to home, and many chose not to go to university at all. The largely negative perception of university education in New Zealand reflected the belief that university was considered a barrier to family unity, in a sense it created a distance in family relationships. There was also the worry about what would happen to the child. Parents perceived that their children could become snobs.

There was also the matter of practicalities. The distances travelled to attend university, for many New Zealand students, created the physical reality of education at a distance from one's family and community. In a country with poor communication systems, it really was a disruption between family and school. However in the United Kingdom, the reverse was assumed, you go away, it's a rite of passage.



AG: When you were in Great Britain you worked with the Open University, how was the Open University distance education programme delivered?

JM: I worked for two years with the Open University from its inception in 1971. My role there was to facilitate tutor groups in the southwest of England, while I was based at Bristol University and St Mary's College, Cheltenham. The Open University employed approximately 100 full time academic staff and supplemented its academic staff with part time tutors who worked with a full time staff member in the various regional centres, supplemented by a once-a-term visit from a support team from the university's institutional home in Milton Keynes.

AG: What did you teach while at the Open University?

I taught on Arts foundation courses – Year I and II. The programme included various disciplines, and these offered students a range of subjects including music, history, education, and philosophy, which I had tutored. It was a radical new programme and included summer schools. At the summer schools the students would study a drama presentation (for example, Hamlet), around a theme (for example, 'Was Hamlet Free?') which covered themes of the whole programme. This was a distance programme with study guides, and these study guides were considered revolutionary at the time, however the education still involved a lot of face-to-face contact. This was especially the case during the summer school. This provided a chance for students to interact with the academic staff, it was a very constructive and collaborative learning environment.

AG: In what ways did this experience shape your views on distance education?

JM: It was the first time in my life that I liked Shakespeare [laughs]. The programme was inspired by a Dean of Arts who was an enthusiastic advocate for providing an accessible and integrated programme.

AG: Much of the contemporary literature reflects the importance of key motivated and influential individuals for the development of successful distance and online learning programmes.

JM: I would agree, during the 90s the then [University of] Waikato Vice Chancellor was very enthusiastic, he was a great educator, he wanted to take education to people in isolated communities in the central North Island..

AG: How was this programme developed?

JM: The Waikato programme was run in a partnership between the University and with regional polytechnics. I was on the Board of Studies for that programme and also involved in a similar programme run by the University of Auckland. Both programmes attracted supportive and positive academics, however there were fairly low participation rates and both programmes were eventually shut down, as other arrangements took their place (for example, the expansion of polytechnics and approvals for degree work). This was quite different from my experience at the Open University, where initially there was a limited amount of options for prospective students, yet numbers swelled. This was an important aspect for me. The Open University provided new



opportunities for university study, there was a breaking down of historical restrictions to those who could benefit from a university education. The people involved in the programmes, both in the UK and here in New Zealand were committed to this, they perceived distance education as a means to open educational opportunities and borders.

AG: How did the Open University compete with a very traditional and hierarchical University system in the United Kingdom?

I think we have to look at the history of the university system in Great Britain. The public exam systems in the schools meant that most students were doomed, and would have no chance of getting into a university. Even after the Robins report [in the 60s] an expanded university system in Britain was still restrictive in terms of eligibility and opportunity. Grants were means tested hence middle class students were restricted by finances, while working class students were restricted by academic standards.

By contrast, in France during this period academic and financial access was relatively open. Despite this, of course, once you were in the university system, you were rigorously tested – in France staying at university was harder than getting there.

The Open University made a difference for students who had been prevented entry to the traditionally privileged university scene. For them, going to university was an opportunity to test themselves intellectually. I would also say that the opportunity to participate in a university programme in some way helped to offset a resentment towards society. For students who had failed the 'matriculation' exams, the Open University got them back into a positive relationship with learning and towards society.

There were also students who had had an opportunity to attend university after secondary school, but had not taken this up. For them the Open University provided better and easier access at later stages in life, which would suit their needs and gave them a chance to challenge themselves.

AG: A key emphasis here seems to me to be the way in which distance education has challenged certain privileged relations to higher education. Distance education has and continues to alter the power and knowledge relationships which manifest around and through tertiary education. How did the British universities respond to this challenge during the 60s?

JM: The Open University was popular, but it had ongoing problems proving its credentials. In particular, the quality of courses was brought into question. There were a lot of criticisms of the use of a study guide in the curriculum. At Bristol [University] we would introduce a philosophical text, for instance Kant, and then we would discuss around it, asking the students key questions to promote further dialogue. However with the Open University the text was taken apart and discussed in the study guide.

There was some criticism of this process in terms of how it would benefit the student, and whether it limited the possible directions of learning. Of course at Bristol, where I was also an undergraduate, the lecturers generally geared discussions to end up at predetermined conclusions. So perhaps the distinctions



between the classroom discussions and the use of the study guide were not as great as assumed. I wonder whether much of the criticism of the study guide was more generally a reflection of negative perspectives of distance learning in general, and of the idea that students participating in the course were inferior to students of the traditional university system in Britain. There was a definite sense that distance students were regarded as of lower or poorer quality.

AG: In your view how did the programme impact upon students and teachers?

JM: For me the experience of tutoring on the Open University programmes was eye-opening and inspiring. I had been working in a top middle class College of Education at Cheltenham, with a very different type of student with different attitudes towards education. Working with students who were discovering or rediscovering a passion for education was an invigorating experience for me. Work with the Open University students brought the curriculum alive for both the students and the teachers, particularly through the face to face components, especially the early use of drama, to engage deeply and extend upon the study guide reading.

The students themselves, coming from such different backgrounds, contributed to the value of the distance programme. There was a real sense of opportunity and discovery made possible by the commitment, at the Open University, of opening up university and challenging the privileged contexts of education.

AG: The challenge for distance programmes is often to keep in favour with academic leaders and their expectations for the development of leading tertiary institutions in a sector characterised by growth and competition. How have you perceived the success of distance learning in establishing itself as a viable alternative for students?

JM: Internal politics has often constrained the ability of distance programmes to flourish, particularly in my experiences in New Zealand. I think there were some very frustrating experiences for distance students, especially when lecturers and tutors were unhappy about their conditions – particularly when travelling long distances.

AG: Maintaining a committed teaching team who are 'on board' with distance education is a priority for programme leaders. As noted above, it is often the passion of individuals that contribute to the formation and delivery of new distance programmes, but how do they keep the programme going?

JM: That problem is part of a wider issue for me. We have a responsibility to protect education programmes, whether distance or not, from over institutionalisation. Administrative and academic requirements can become so specific that there is no room for intelligent decision making. A programme becomes constrained, and this is what Weber refers to by the idea of the iron cage. The rationalisation of education leads to a simplification of best practices, it over emphasises calculations such as student numbers, and puts added pressure on research directions. This all concerns me in that I find this form of institutionalisation restrictive in terms of the opportunities for innovative educational experiences.

AG: How would you conceive the role of the educator in this context?



JM: I acknowledge that there remains, despite this iron cage, the power to interpret guidelines and legislation. This was very much what Foucault was referring to as micro-practices. Administrators, designers, leaders and teachers in distance programmes have a responsibility to carefully interpret the guidelines given, and to deploy the resources available to ensure, distance learning as a challenging and inspiring experience for students who might otherwise not benefit from participation in a 'main campus' university programme.

The commitment for distance educators, and for online educators, is to continue to develop distance programmes guided by this philosophy. And with increasing use of new technologies to support online distance education, one of the key responsibilities here is to critically consider the role technology might have in keeping education open.

AG: Views on the impact of web-based learning for the teacher and learner are often very polarised, what for you are the key issues when considering the role of the internet in distance learning?

JM: One major concern I have is the potential for homogenisation of learning styles, both in the sense of learning styles that can benefit from online education, and in terms of the way in which online learning might produce or restrict the learning and writing styles of students. I am also very interested in the development of meaningful bonds between the teacher and the student, and the opportunities for interaction between students. How will educators ensure that online discussion can preserve and transmit aspects of language that are not transferable to print? And in what way will the technologies affect the possible interpretations and phrasings of content? Finally there is the constitution of the student's own identity in meaningful relations with more advanced scholars.

AG: What sort of challenges do you feel teachers may face in online learning?

JM: I am worried about the cost of working on an online course for educators, is anyone asking about the cost of constant contact, a cost for those that make themselves the most available? Online teaching can't be costed the same way as face to face teaching, it will need to be rationalised differently, it will require better funding.

I'm thinking here also about not just economic costs but also the costs to the educator in view of the growing concern with uses of technology that will leave the educator constantly inundated by spam and other unwanted media, educators will be open to constant media traffic jams and, perhaps, constant questions from anxious isolated students.

AG: In what way are these concerns, for both the learner and the teacher, consistent with concerns regarding the design and delivery of face to face class-based courses?

JM: I acknowledge that the same concerns can be levelled to a face-to-face learning environment. And I think that despite these concerns we need to ensure that we don't dismiss the benefit of online learning, this is an educational phenomena that should be preserved as an educational technology for distance



students. With the development of online learning I have become very interested in McLuhan's issues about the message and the medium. I wasn't interested in him then, but now I think he was right. We have to take into account Marshall McLuhan's concerns regarding the cost of any reduction of language and humanity through the use of the Internet. The richness of oral language discourse and dialogue needs to be cared for.

AG: Considering the ongoing, and arguably inevitable growth of online programmes, what for you is a central concern that might guide our thinking about the design, delivery and evaluation of online learning?

JM: I am interested in how technology rationalises human experience, critique of distance programmes should therefore consist of questions regarding the ordering of people and practices drawing upon Weber and Heidegger. A central question then is 'how does the development of distance programmes and online learning reflect changing views about the nature and purpose of university education specifically, and tertiary education in general?' Is it to be the mere transfer of information, *mediated* by academics, or *education* ?