

Book Review

Distance Education and the Mainstream: Convergence in Education.

Peter Smith and Mavis Kelly (eds) (1987). London: Croom Helm. ISBN 0-7099-4499-3.

What will education be like in the year 2000 and beyond? The contributors to this book share a vision that it will differ from the present system in radical ways in terms of access, methods used and the range of resources available for teaching and learning. In particular, the book focuses on trends which are blurring the boundaries between distance education and mainstream, campus-based education - hence the sub-title reference to convergence in education.

The authors assume that distance education and mainstream education are located at the extremes of a continuum, students in the former receiving less face-to-face teacher support than in the latter. Another continuum distinguishes open (student-directed) education from closed (teacher-directed) education. Open learning systems are characterised by open access, freedom from time constraints choice of resources for learning, choice of learning strategies and student control over assessment.

The authors believe that distance education and mainstream education can be perceived to be converging and moving towards becoming open learning systems. Convergence at another level can be observed as distance and campus based systems begin to share more of each others' instructional methods. (For instance, modern communications technology is enabling distance education to share in the most obvious advantage of campus based learning: interactivity). Finally, the traditional clienteles served by each mode are changing and intermixing and therefore beginning to converge.

In the ten papers which comprise this thought provoking collection, the theme of convergence is thoroughly explored from various perspectives. Regrettably, in a review of this length not all of them can be given the attention that is their due but I will mention those which I personally found to be of particular interest. In the opening chapter Fred Jevons convincingly argues against the traditional prejudices held against distance education and shows that this mode of learning can offer benefits justifying its claim for parity of esteem. James Hall draws attention to what he terms "the pedagogy-technology gap" - a reference to the often overlooked fact that the availability of sophisticated technology does not automatically ensure effective learning: "It is not enough to convey facts and to develop students' communication skills. Rather, analysis, synthesis, application and, finally, evaluation or judgement are the hallmarks of the educated person... Emerging interactive telecommunications hold high promise to accommodate teaching and learning pedagogies which nurture and elicit such advanced skills and abilities from students. But those who create these educational pedagogies will need to be guided by well-defined concepts of what higher learning is really about and how it can be stimulated... Can we capture those concepts, those techniques for advanced learning, and realise them in distance education? This is the technology-pedagogy gap which must be overcome if the use of telecommunications in serving distance education is to be effective."

The remaining papers form a useful overview of the field of Distance Education. The complete list includes: Distance education and campus-based education: Parity of esteem (Jevons); Distance education and educational change (Smith); Bridging the technology-pedagogy gap (Hall); Distance education in Kenya: A third world view (Matiru); Towards open learning (Foks); Collaboration between the industrial and educational sectors (Ledwidge and Miller); Convergence in practice at Griffith University (Ross); Staff development needs for universities: Mainstream and distance education (Paul); Staff development needs in distance education and campus-based education: Are they different? (Sewart); Barriers to convergence in Australian higher education (Kelly).

Kenneth Singh
University of New South Wales

Please cite as: Singh, K. (1988). Review of *Distance Education and the Mainstream: Convergence in Education*. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 4(1), 70-71. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet4/singh.html>