

## Chapter 3:

# Philosophy and Theories as Prerequisites for Distance Education Research

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## Introduction

Like conventional education, distance education is deeply rooted in philosophy, which provides the basis for fundamental questions on the purpose and nature of distance learning, the role of the teacher and the learner, the nature of the instructional process, and the quality of distance education. Much has been written on distance education practice but with little reference to the way in which distance education practice is grounded in diverse philosophical traditions, such as pragmatism, individualism, (social) reconstructionism, humanism, idealism, realism, Ubuntu, existentialism, Confucianism, and particular education philosophies (Association for Educational Communications and Technology 2001, Higgins 2020). While the application of technologies appears to augment distance education, literature in the field exposes a theoretically fragmented framework, wanting in both theoretical depth and focused research. Despite recommendations that philosophy and theory be included in research on distance education and appeals from Moore (1973) and Holmberg (1987) that researchers should build a theoretical framework which would embrace distance education, this has not yet been achieved (Wolf et al. 2020).

Lacking a strong base in research and theory, distance education has battled for recognition by the traditional academic community. Some scholars (Garrison 1999, cited in Jung 2017; Hayes 1990, cited in Association for Educational Communications and Technology 2001) describe distance education as no more than a potpourri of ideas and practices borrowed from traditional classrooms and imposed on students who are physically separated from a lecturer. As distance education struggles to associate with appropriate theoretical frameworks, implementation issues come to the fore. These issues embrace the learner, the teacher, and the technology or mode of delivery.

The following paragraphs explore the necessity of framing distance education research within a philosophical tradition and concomitant theories.

## Why a philosophy of distance education and theoretical frameworks?

The Philosophy Foundation (2022) defines philosophy as a way of thinking about ethics, knowledge, existence, time, meaning, and value. As such it deals with ultimate reality and focuses on the general causes and principles of things (Higgins 2020). For the purposes of this chapter, broad philosophical traditions can be distinguished, such as idealism, realism, pragmatism, logical positivism, philosophy of mind, and existentialism. However, in a narrow sense, philosophy can also be defined as the study of the general principles of a particular branch of knowledge, experience, or activity such as education, thus denoting a philosophy of education (Higgins 2020). While a philosophy is conceptual and uses critical, logical, and systematic thinking to study deeply held beliefs (Higgins 2020), a philosophy of law or a philosophy of education would study questions related to the subject—that is, education or law. The latter thus represents the study of the theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience such as education (distance education), law, science, and so forth.

42 Various philosophies of education can be distinguished, such as perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, behaviourism, postmodernism, social reconstructionism, and connectivism, amongst others, each grounded in one or more of the philosophical traditions noted above (Perez 2022). As such, perennialism is rooted in the philosophies of idealism and realism, progressivism originates in pragmatism, behaviourism in logical positivism, postmodernism and social reconstructionism are both rooted in pragmatism and existentialism, essentialism is grounded in Plato's idealism, while connectionism is rooted in Thorndike's behaviourism and the philosophy of mind (Hogan and Tienson 2008; Banan et al. 2020).

## Philosophies of education

A philosophy of (distance) education is thus made up of beliefs about distance education and would deepen the understanding of research in this field. A philosophy (of distance education) is also linked to theories, which means that while a philosophy influences the way in which one perceives the distance education environment, theory shapes the way one interacts with that environment. A philosophy impacts the definition of important problems, while theories provide strategies to arrive at solutions to those problems. Hagen (2005, cited in Himes and Schulenberg

2013; Higgins 2020) explains that a theory is a set of assertions, principles, or ideas on the basis of which we make statements about the world, in this case the world of distance education. In other words, a theory is an explanatory construct that helps structure action by distinguishing key relationships that can be used to explain, predict, or alter an occurrence in a distance education context (Jaeger et al. 2013, cited in Himes and Schulenberg 2013). In other words, theories tend to answer the questions that arise within the context of a philosophy. Together, philosophy and theory guide decisions about the approach taken in distance education research (Himes and Schulenberg 2013).

The importance of a theory of distance education rooted in a philosophy of education cannot be underestimated (Shearer 2021), since distance education theories are specific and formulated to serve the particular educational needs in the curriculum, teaching, and learning (Tan 2006; Shearer 2021). According to Aydemira and Özkeskinb (2015), theoretical frameworks generally involve an understanding of theories and concepts related to a specific topic or field, such as distance education. An unambiguous statement of theoretical assumptions allows the researcher to evaluate the theory critically and to pose research questions within a theoretical framework (Zawacki-Richter and Anderson 2014). Jung (2019) asserts that theory and research function in a transactional association where theory determines what questions to ask in the research, what information to collect, and what to do with the data once it has been collected. As in other fields of study, theory is thus an invaluable tool for distance education researchers to identify and solve meaningful research problems and to concurrently contribute to theory building and improvement (Jung 2019).

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Scholars of distance education argue that there are several advantages of applying theoretical frameworks for research in this field:

- The theoretical framework links the distance education researcher to other studies and knowledge in the field. Guided by a relevant theory, the researcher is given a foundation for forming hypotheses and deciding which research methods and research questions to use.
- Enunciating the theoretical assumptions of a research study requires the researcher to address 'why' and 'how' questions.
- Distance education theories remind us to ask the hard questions about what we are trying to achieve for the learner and to what end, and through which design approaches.

## Does Distance Education in the Developing Context Need More Research? Building Practice into Theory

- A theory provides patterns for the analysis of data, allows the researcher to move from simply describing a perceived phenomenon, and identify to what extent generalisations can be made.
- The theory allows the clarification of larger meanings of findings for other researchers, as well as distance education researchers and theorists.
- It assists the distance education researcher to organise, summarise, and explain knowledge and carry out empirical studies needed in the field.
- A theoretical framework indicates which key variables impact on a phenomenon. It permits the researcher to observe how the key variables might differ and under what circumstances.
- It also helps to prescribe optimal approaches and make future projections.
- Theories assist the researcher to keep focused on the learner, learner characteristics, and the personalised nature of distance learning while undertaking design and development work (Shearer 2021; Jung 2019; Garrison and Anderson 2020; Aydemira and Özkeskinb 2015; Garrison 2000; Krieger 2017; Agonacs and Matos 2019; Hartnett 2019).

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Anderson (2016) argues that distance education (DE) theories cannot be equated to learning theories in the sense in which we think about motivation theory, cognitive learning theory, or particular design models. He asserts that distance education theories rather assist the researcher to think beyond learning theories and design models. They help us to focus on how our students might individually approach learning and therefore how it will affect our course designs.

Even though a weak knowledge base in theoretical foundations of distance education has been indicated as a challenge in some literature (Garrison 2000), a number of theories have greatly contributed to the understanding and development of the field (Jung 2019). Jung (2019) refers to foundational, emergent, and borrowed theories. For the sake of this chapter, only a limited number of theories that have been widely documented to ground distance education research will be explored—namely, autonomy and independence, transactional distance, community of inquiry, connectivism, industrialisation, and neoliberalism.

## Theory of autonomy and independence

The foundational theory of autonomy and independence was originally developed by Wedemeyer between the 1960s and 1970s as a theory of correspondence education and revised in the 1980s to include a theory of adult learning. According to this theory, open distance education focused on the independence of the adult student while studying at a distance (Jung 2019). It appears that Wedemeyer's idea of independent study was aimed at self-directed learning and self-regulation (Aydemira and Özkeskinb 2015). According to Jung (2019), Wedemeyer's theory of autonomy and his preference for using the term 'independent study' instead of distance learning, as well as his realisation that the ubiquity of information technology would secure a future where learning would take place at anytime and anywhere, showed great foresight. His theory was the basis upon which subsequent theories of distance education evolved, such as the transactional distance theory of Moore; Holmberg's work on 'guided didactic conversation', which falls into the category of interaction and communication theories; and the theory of 'andragogy' of Malcolm Knowles, which formed the basis of heutagogy theory by Stewart Hase and Chris Kenyon in 2000 (Agonacs and Matos 2019).

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## Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance

In his discussion of the importance of theory in online and open education, Shearer (cited in Hartnett and Field 2020) describes Moore's theory of transactional distance as an example of a good theory. Shearer also draws attention to the rich research base offered by the conceptual frameworks of Moore to newcomers to distance education research. Moore's theory of transactional distance (TD) (1993) was developed over several years of observations of distance education (DE) learning environments as technology evolved. Moore's aim was not to duplicate the classroom learning experience but rather to address the needs of the individual learner. Recent research by Huang et al. (cited in Krieger 2017) supports Moore's theory as a very useful guide for research on distance learning. A core component of transactional distance theory is the interaction between the three variables of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy based on Dewey's pragmatist ideas of the transaction between teacher and student (Krieger 2017). In essence, Shearer (2021) regards the educational transaction as a dialogue between two or more individuals, which is supported and continuously affected by structure and the characteristics of the learner and is as such unique

for each learner. Moore (1980) defines structure as the measure according to which the goals, implementation processes, and evaluation procedures of a distance education programme are prepared to meet specific objectives of individual students (Jung 2019). Since the three variables are viewed as dynamic, when dialogue increases structure and transactional distance decrease. The distance experienced by the learner is, however, affected by his/her autonomous qualities and the teaching style of the instructor. According to Shearer (2021), each of the variables can be seen as being on a continuum. The way in which the variables are implemented in the design of distance education models will impact on the learner's experience of transactional distance.

While the only available dialogic resources in distance education were audio and video conferencing at the time when Moore developed his theory, he anticipated that highly interactive electronic media and computers would allow rigorous, personal, individualised, and dynamic dialogue and that the nature of each communication medium would impact on the scope and quality of the dialogue between teachers and students (Jung 2019).

Moore's transactional distance theory has thus gone through several changes due to the changing technology for distance education (Krieger 2017), but has been widely used to ground research projects in this field of study (Rena 2006; Abuhassna and Yahaya 2018; Doo et al. 2020; Falloon 2011; Quong, Snider and Early 2018). This theory has been described as one of the core theories of distance education in a web-based learning environment and accounts for excellence in this field. In a study to determine trends in theory use in open distance learning research journals by Ukwoma and Ngulube (2021), transactional distance was found to be the most frequently cited theory. It was, however, criticised as not being synchronised with the current field of practice and lacking a social component (Kang and Gyorko 2008, cited in Ukwoma and Ngulube 2021). While Moore's theory provides a useful conceptual 'lens' through which to analyse online learning practices, Falloon (2011) recommends revisiting some of its tenets to align with synchronous communication tools in online distance education.

### **The theoretical framework of community of inquiry**

Another foundational theoretical framework that Shearer (cited in Hartnett and Field 2020) regards as influential in the field of distance education is the theory of community of inquiry (COI). This theory is grounded in John Dewey's progressive understanding of education and was developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). It is viewed as an important theory in the field of distance

education research that was studied by scholars such as Picciano (2002) and Swan (2002) and continuously revised by Garrison and associates (Shearer, 2021). Community of inquiry relates to a two-way interface between teacher and student in an open and online learning environment and investigates the formation of meaningful collaborate-constructivist deep learning through three overlapping presences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. However, researchers saw the need to extend the community of inquiry framework: a fourth dimension, learning presence, has been added to the classic framework of teaching, social, and cognitive presences (ElSayad 2022). Researchers were of the opinion that the COI framework does not sufficiently address the roles of students' learning experience and participation in such learning environments (Shea and Bidjerano 2010, quoted in ElSayad 2022). A research project by ElSayad (2022) examined whether the additional learning presence structurally represents relations with teaching, social, and cognitive presences. It was subsequently established that learning presence has strong correlations with the three original presences, especially cognitive presence (ElSayad 2022). In this context, the socio-cultural construction of knowledge is accentuated (Jung 2019; Shearer 2021). As with the theory of transactional distance, the presences are dynamic.

Social presence is explained as a sense of being a part of a community of learning even when one is not physically present, which means that social presence is about engagement and interactions (Shearer 2021). Garrison et al. (2000) view cognitive presence as the extent to which students are able to construct meaning through continuous communication. In the third edition of *E-Learning in the 21st Century*, Garrison (2000) focuses specifically on the framework of community of inquiry and the way in which it can inform research and practice in e-learning. The third element of the theory, teaching presence, relates to design and facilitation through which the cognitive and social processes are guides for the purpose of attaining significant learning outcomes (Garrison et al. 2000). This means that the teacher creates an ideal environment for cognitive presence when assisting the students to engage in critical thinking. The fourth and newly identified presence, learning, reflects motivational and behavioural traits of self-regulation and co-regulation, proposing that students intend to achieve desired goals, which is not reflected in the classic COI framework (Hayes et al. 2015, quoted in ElSayad 2022).

Each learner or group of learners ultimately selects their levels of social presence or cognitive presence in combination with and through the guidance of the instructor through teaching presence (Shearer 2021). Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009; Roberts 2019) note that when the four elements of social, cognitive, teacher, and learning presence interact, an ideal collaborative, constructive learning experience occurs. The latter assumption makes this theory suitable for the

evaluation of effective online education.

Garrison et al. (1999, cited in Jung 2019) introduced the COI theory to determine how distance education designs and instruction need to develop, in order to include an education learning environment that provides immediate dialogue and social construction of knowledge into distance education programmes. Outcomes of the original theory were published in peer-reviewed journals which, in turn, have resulted in hundreds of research studies applying and extending the original COI theory, method, and instruments (Jung 2019). The groundbreaking paper 'Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education' (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000) has been cited more than 7 000 times (as reported by Google Scholar, July 2021) and provided the basis for important empirical research in learning theory across multiple disciplines and in a variety of educational settings, such as distance education.

### Connectivist theory

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When network technology-based, open distance education became known in the field, new theories to align with different contexts emerged. One of these theories is connectivism. While open and distance learning environments have gained popularity, the quality of the information learnt and the importance of converting the information into knowledge processes has made the connectivist theory important for open distance research (Aydemir, Özkeskin and Akkurt 2014). Jung (2019) notes that connectivist theory assists researchers to develop an understanding of the changing aspects and opportunities of the socio-technical context for technology-enabled learning. Assuming that learning takes place across networks of people with different socio-cultural backgrounds, connectivism emphasises new learning opportunities created by Internet technologies (Jung 2019). While it is a young and new theory, connectivism is based on the epistemology of connective knowledge and provides new opportunities for distance education research. Connective knowledge, as a third type of knowledge in the networked world, adds to traditionally accepted qualitative and quantitative knowledge, is formed by interactions with people linked to networks, and is distributed across a web of individual people (Jung 2019). Knowledge is therefore seen as a collective undertaking in communities of learning.

Although connectivism is one of the most prominent of the network learning theories developed for e-learning environments (Goldie 2016), and researchers regard it as a theoretical framework that can assist them to understand and support networked learning (Jung 2019), some criticism has emerged. Goldie (2016) argues that connectivism is not a 'new' theory and that Vygotsky's social

constructivism had already highlighted the networked and distributed nature of knowledge. Some epistemological and psychological problems have also been identified with connectivism, such as the under-conceptualisation of the role of the other and oversimplification of the meaning of interaction. Future research is also needed on the theoretical framework of connectivism to clarify the key variables of autonomy, diversity, openness, and interactivity (Goldie 2016). However, Goldie (2016) notes that it is possible that connectivism will become one of the theories which can explain certain aspects of networked learning.

## Theory of industrialisation

The theory of distance education as an industrialised form of education was developed by Otto Peters in 1960 who applied concepts from the corporate world to distance education. Peters compared distance education with the industrial production of goods and proposed a new terminology, which strongly emphasises the concepts from industry for the analysis of distance education (Zawacki-Richter 2019). While the theory was developed during the era of correspondence education and might not appear to be relevant now, it seems important to refer to Peters' theory when considering the influence of corporatisation of education and distance education in the current neoliberalist era. The central elements of the theory of Peters were rationalisation based on the division of labour in the instructional design and development of distance education materials, the use of scientific control measures to evaluate the quality of materials, formalisation and standardisation of communication, and assessment (Zawacki-Richter 2019). The rationalised method of providing knowledge to large numbers of distance students justified the development of large distance education institutions as a reflection of contemporary industrial society. However, it consisted of the reproduction of objective teaching activities, and according to Hülsmann (2000, cited in Jung 2019), the effect of mass production that enables economies of scale was obvious. Haughey, Evans, and Murphy (2008, cited in Zawacki-Richter 2019) also criticised the theory of Peters as avoiding the underlying pedagogical assumptions in his model. Peters subsequently denied the validity of these claims and argued that his principal motive was pedagogical, but that his challenge was the extension and improvement of the educational system by including distance education (Peters, cited in Zawacki-Richter 2019). Regardless of the critique among educationists, the large-scale introduction of online learning in a massive process of change and innovation still requires systemic and 'industrial' approaches such as recommended by Peters (Zawacki-Richter, 2019) but

in an adapted form. According to Zawacki-Richter (2019: 27), it thus appears that Peters' theory is still very relevant today:

to build upon the systems approach to distance education that enables a professional implementation and management of (national) digital learning systems and provides flexible learning opportunities for very large numbers of students, especially in developing economies, where the "world education crisis" has not been overcome.

At this juncture it appears necessary to refer to the impact of the philosophy of neoliberalism on education, particularly on distance education, and the way in which it defines all social, economic, and political aspects of society, such as, inter alia, the role of education.

### Neoliberalism and distance education theory

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Associated with globalisation, the discourses of neoliberalism, included in policies for education, and debates about standards and changed funding regimes, have emerged strongly since at least the 1980s. Over the last three decades the neoliberalist philosophy has reshaped the value and practice of society, including (distance) education, transforming universities into powerful consumer-oriented institutions (Lynch 2014). In this context economic imperatives have become the organisational logic in all societal relationships, and the role of higher education globally has been significantly changed through a shift to business-like decision-making. Distance education has therefore not only gained importance because of the rapid growth in technology, but also as a result of economic and social transformation according to which the market has become strategic for the distribution of goods and services such as education to learners at a distance (Cornell 2013, cited in Ugur 2017). Ugur (2017) argues that neoliberalist education policies and the implementation thereof are characterised by the commercialisation of educational institutions and activities, which means integrating them into free-market relations by privatisation policies and the adjustment of the content, methods, and the instruments of education to free-market needs.

Although the industrialisation theory of Peters as discussed in a preceding paragraph thus carries value in terms of managerial and logistical aspects of distance education, the preoccupation of the neoliberal theory with finances, competitiveness, effectiveness, and efficiency of institutions shifted the focus away from pedagogical presuppositions, especially in a developing context

(Fourie 2009). It appears thus that neoliberalism has added new dimensions to the industrialisation of distance education, which do not seem to align with the theory of Peters.

Given the critical impact of neoliberalism on society and education in particular it is important to note that very little research has been done on neoliberalist philosophy and its association with distance education. This identifies a definite gap in distance education research and not only on the impact of neoliberalism on distance education theory but also the appropriateness of a neoliberalist theory of distance education.

## Discussion and conclusion

With the rise of new modes of study for both distance education and blended learning such as flipped learning, massive open online courses (MOOCs), small private online courses (SPOCs), and distributed open collaborative courses (DOCCs) it has become important for researchers to revisit the theories that were developed in the era of correspondence and traditional distance education, and to refine and update the theoretical frameworks to align with the rapidly changing environment (Jung 2019). While only a few of the existing theories of distance education featured in this chapter, primarily due to limited space, the idea was to remind the reader of the way in which some of the 'old' correspondence theories, such as the theory of interdependence and autonomy and the theory of industrialisation paved the way for the development of emerging theories such as transactional distance and connectivism.

This chapter underlined the importance of research on distance education being firmly framed within a theory and noted advantages of theory-based research. While theory is viewed as a critical tool for future research, it also plays a part in the development of distance education in changing teaching and learning contexts. Jung (2019) asserts that distance education theories provide important descriptions and explanations about current knowledge on distance research and practice and provides guidelines for future research and practice in changing open and distance learning environments.

The low frequency of the use of theories to guide distance education has been noted as a deficiency in this field of research. Wolf et al. (2020) found that distance education researchers who use qualitative research methods often describe their work as case studies, exploratory, or descriptive research. While case study work has been critiqued as atheoretical, positive responses to the criticism led to a broad, instead of a focused foundation for distance education research. Moore

(cited in Wolf et al. 2020) reminded distance education researchers that the inherent problem with conducting atheoretical work is that the research question that is supposedly addressed by the data has very little connection with the previous knowledge in the field. According to Wolf et al. (2020) the implication is that although many individual studies are grounded in theory, a cohesive theoretical foundation has not been identified in the area of distance education. The implication is that there is a gap in the field of distance education research that signifies the importance of developing new distance education theories and refining existing theories. It is important that open distance education researchers and practitioners have access to theories that assist them to understand new technological innovations such as artificial intelligence and blockchain, and the trend of moving away from online to mobile (Jung 2019). It is also essential that educational philosophies, distance education traditions, and experiences from unexplored regions such as the East be considered when developing new theories and revisiting current theories.

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