

A Contribution to the Hellenic Open University: Evaluation of the pedagogical practices and the use of ICT on distance education

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Article abstract

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A Contribution to the Hellenic Open University: Evaluation of the pedagogical practices and the use of ICT on distance education

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Abstract

This study examines a) the methods used to structure the pedagogy necessary to underpin distance education delivery used by the Hellenic Open University (HOU); b) the adoption of pedagogical and epistemological conceptual systems HOU uses for the development of its pedagogical practices; and c) the role of information and communication technology (ICT), and the degree of ICTs incorporation into distance education delivery at HOU. This study shows that: a) in terms of providing rigorous course contents, strong framing exists between HOU's various learning modules; b) in terms of pedagogical practices, there is a strong hierarchical relationship and framing between HOU's academic staff and tutors, while conversely, framing is weaker between its tutors and students; c) in terms of ICT usage HOU, in general, uses technology for administration, while conversely, and depending on the program of study, it currently only has limited use for student learning.

Keywords: Hellenic Open University; pedagogical practices; distance education; ICT

Introduction

Distance education (DE) constitutes an important and integral teaching/ learning methodology, one that many feel will support emerging growth trends in education and training worldwide. Various forms of DE delivery, particularly those based on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) tends to be included in the operational scope of many higher education institutions. Adoption of ICT, however, creates significant pedagogic, economic, and organizational challenges for many educational institutions, oftentimes leading to intensified globalization (UNESCO, 2002). Universities oriented towards the use of open and distance learning were first in-line when it came to adopting new and emerging technologies, actions that heralded an new era of increasing access to further education and training (Goho, MacAskill & McGeachie, 2003; Gray, 2004).

Few critical studies examining the pedagogical practices used by HOU have been conducted to date. As such, this study was designed to critically analyze Hellenic Open University's pedagogical framework and its provision of DE, which for most higher education institutions is achieved through the deployment and subsequent use of ICT. The theoretical approaches

articulated by Basil Bernstein were used as the theoretical framework for this study, specifically his concepts about classification and framing.

The theoretical work of Bernstein opened new avenues in sociological research by analyzing the emergence of educational knowledge and pedagogical practices. In simple terms, Bernstein helps to shed light on, and deeper understanding of, the educational processes that unfold inside educational institutions (Morais, Neves, Davies & Daniels, 2001; Sadovnik, 2001; Singh, 2002). Today, DE is typically viewed as a viable alternative that can open doors to students who need a second chance. Moreover, DE is seen as a panacea to the promotion of lifelong education throughout Greece. What is troubling, however, most studies underway tend to be focused on graduate level studies and attempt to apply distance learning models used by HOU. Moreover, such studies are seeking to inform the production of educational material for DE studies throughout Greece (See Malapanis, 2006; Papaleksiou, 2006; Savelonas, 2006). But these studies are happening without adequate attention paid to the validity and rigor of its source – The Hellenic Open University itself. Our study attempts to fill this logistical void in research by using the Bernsteinian approach, primarily because it has been successfully used in the evaluation of the university level pedagogical processes and procedures used to inform and develop the delivery of DE. Indeed, the Bernsteinian theoretical points have underpinned many studies that aimed to investigate and understand the pedagogical activities at conventional educational institutions, irrespective if they use ICT in their educational processes or not (Apple, 2002; Barrett, 2007; Harris, 2001; Newman & Johnson, 1999; Singh, 2004; Singh, Atweh & Shield, 2005).

Distance Education in Greece through the Hellenic Open University

In Greece, DE at the post-secondary level is provided by the Hellenic Open University (HOU), which was launched in 1995, largely with the assistance of European grants from the Community Frame of Support. By the late 1980s, the European Union (EU) had committed to developing its DE offerings in an attempt to train skilled adults needed for the emerging global marketplace (Eliou, 1993). The establishment of the HOU was introduced by politicians as part of Greece's implementation of EU policies. The origins of HOU can be traced back to 1992, when the Greek Conservative Party of New Democracy was in power. That party introduced a bill proposing HOU in the Greek Parliament, which was voted on in September 1992. This bill referred to the process of “training and further education” of the students attending conventional Greek universities. It also proposed that HOU's administration be carried out by an academic council comprised of the Rectors and the Presidents of administrative committees hailing from all Greece's higher educational institutions (Lykourgiotis, 1998). According to Lionarakis (1996), this bill – which incidentally never came into force – “raises the problem of identity of HOU and does not allow it to introduce those new methods that are essential for an open university in a conservative education system” (p. 56).

The HOU was then resurrected when the socialist government of Panellenic Socialistic Movement party came into power. Subsequently, in October 1995, an official administrative committee was struck and comprised Greek academic specialists who collaborated with specialists from the British Open University, and from other open universities throughout Europe. The committee's objective was to acquire the “know-how” needed to successfully launch and run a Greek open and distance learning institution. The task of this committee was to: a) work out the university's framework, b) develop a detailed bill for the establishment of the HOU, and table this bill with the Greek Ministry of Education Affairs (*n.b.*, this bill was different from the one

outlined in 1992); and c) start offering courses leading to several degrees (Koustourakis, 2006; Lionarakis, 1996; Lykourgiotis, 1998). Thus, from 1995-1997, when the new law concerning the establishment of HOU was voted in, the scientific physiognomy of the university was determined. Moreover, several important decisions were made by this committee – decisions upon which HOU continues to function with to this day. The members of the first administrative committee held their posts until June 2004. But national elections were held, and when the conservative government of New Democracy was again elected in late 2004, a new administrative committee was appointed comprising university academics and emeritus professors hailing from conventional universities (HOU, 2004). In sum, the members of HOU's current committee were not specialists in open distance learning and their idea of higher educational delivery and pedagogy conflicted with HOU academic personnel because they take a traditional and conservative approach towards HOU's operation (Andritsaki, 2005; Leontidou & Tzamarias, 2005). Thus, the model of HOU, which the first administration committee established, was resurrected and altered by a second committee along more traditional and conservative lines that, arguably, are at odds to open and distance education as a unique mode of delivery.

Indeed, HOU's overarching characteristics were defined and formed by the first administrative committee's decisions (time period 1995 to 1997) and was significantly informed by the British Open University model. This historical legacy significantly influenced the formation and operation of the institution (Koustourakis, 2006; Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002). And as such, HOU conformed to a single organizational mode model premised solely on DE (Keegan, 1996). According to Farnes (2000), this model:

. . . provides only distance teaching, usually to part-time students. The curriculum, the media used to teach, student support and accreditation are designed in an integrated way to suit students studying at a distance. The staff are totally committed to distance teaching and have no conflict of loyalties between on-campus and off-campus students. . . There are generally no on-campus student activities, though there may be a regional network of study centres where students and tutors meet. (p.8)

The model of the tutor-counselor, as employed at the British Open University (Sewart, 1980), has also been adopted by the HOU. HOU's planning and organization of its program offerings are based on explicit goals, clear guidelines, and detailed instructions to guide its students and its tutors. According to its instructional publications, HOU adopted Holmberg (1989) ideas on the central role distance learning materials play in students' mastery of distance learning studies. Finally, categorizing the HOU into Farnes' map (1993) which details the different stages of DE development, HOU can be said to be in Farnes' "second generation" of development, in that HOU uses multiple media to realize its DE offerings. This stage corresponds with the Fordist mode of production (Peters, 1994). As may now be evident to many of our readers, higher and lifelong education premised on using fully deployed ICT networks is not a reality in Greece.

HOU also faces internal and administrative challenges, some of which do not support or assist in developing its distance learning methods that can be easily delivered via ICT. The HOU, nonetheless, is welcomed and supported by most Greeks, primarily because it offers them a second choice and, sometimes, a chance at accessing the fruits of education. In the academic year 2006-2007, HOU served 15,026 undergraduate and 8,624 graduate students enrolled in six undergraduate and 24 graduate courses.

Distance Learning, Pedagogical Practices and ICT

Until 2010, the development of a competitive trans-European market of educational and research services, often functioning under auspices of private-economic criteria, will serve as the models of lifelong education available throughout the EU. This is shaping current trends in European higher education and is reflected in a quote by Bernstein (1991), who wrote: “. . . academic systems today join more and more into a campaign about what should be transmitted, the autonomy of transmission, the terms of employment of those transmitting, and the processes of evaluation of the receptors” (p. 146). Moreover, the connection of scientific knowledge to the needs of the EU’s labour market is strengthened by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) agreement of the World Trade Organization. The GATS agreement encourages and facilitates the merchandising of educational institutions and their course offerings outside their traditional geographic boundaries, and underscores the reality that pedagogical practices that are “oriented towards the market” and “arises from the frames of cost efficient education, which is supposed to promote applicable dexterities, perceptions and technology in an era of broad and chronic unemployment of the young” (Bernstein, 1991, p. 146) is now a tangible reality. Thus, in the ever globalizing educational environment, the deployment, use, and incorporation of ICT is thrown into the political spotlight, a fact that influences – as much the “knowledge” itself – how this mode of transmission will be used.

According to Taylor (2001) the use of technologies by open universities for the provision of DE can be divided into five models:

1. Correspondence-based on the use of traditional print technology (i.e., books, learning manuals, study guides, etc.)
2. Multi-media for the transmission of information based on audiovisual and print technologies (i.e., the use of CDs and DVDs, etc., coupled with printed materials such as textbooks)
3. Tele-learning based on applications of telecommunication technologies (i.e., face-to-face videoconferencing and/ or educational television)
4. Flexible learning based on online delivery of learning materials and information via the Internet (i.e., on-demand access to downloadable basic learning materials available online)
5. Intelligent flexible learning based on Internet and the Web delivery (e.g., use of Web 2.0 technologies designed to proactively interact with students)

The knowledge and education provided by various higher educational institutions – regardless if they use ICT or not – can be viewed as “socially built” and “socio-ideologically” dependent (Bernstein, 1991; Castells, 2000; Muller & Taylor, 1995). Moreover, knowledge is connected with the selection of specific pedagogical theories used by various social-scientific teams producing, shaping, and promoting its use, flavors and colors the final course offerings. As such, pedagogical theories used tend to be equivalent to the ideological and theoretical positions held by various teams (Bernstein, 1996, 2000; Lamnias, 2002a, 2002b). In other words, a course designed by a professor of engineering will be qualitatively different than a course designed by a professor of languages.

The concepts of classification and framing drawn from Bernstein thus enable the analysis and the evaluation of the HOU's pedagogical practices. These theoretical concepts are discussed in greater detail below.

Classification

Classification describes the terms according to which the relations of power are converted into specialized discourses – that is rules that inform contents (Bernstein, 1996; Sadovnik, 2001). Classification refers to the determination of relations between the various contents, rather than the determination of characteristics of the contents itself (Bernstein, 1996). When classification is strong, there are powerful boundaries between the contents of knowledge and various agents involved in the formulation and promotion of various study programs (Bernstein, 1996). Thus, in instances of strong classification, the cognitive objects taught are clearly distinguishable.

Framing

Framing, on the other hand, refers to: a) the nature of control concerning the regulation of social behavior in communication, and b) the ability of selection (or not) of the teacher or student in the sequence and organization of knowledge; the pacing and the transmission of knowledge; and the criteria on which evaluation is based. In simple terms, framing reveals the transformation of principles of social control in specific pedagogical relations (Bernstein, 1990; 1991; 1996).

Bernstein (1996) describes framing as the result of two forms of discourses: instructional discourse and regulative discourse, which are connected so that the instructional is determined by, and depends on, the regulative. *Regulative discourses* refer to the relations of power existing in each stage of the pedagogical relationship. When hierarchical relationship (either among teachers in an educational institution, or between teachers-students) are visible, then strong framing is said to have occurred. But when they are not visible, as which may happen in an open institution where the teacher plays multiple roles simultaneously, the framing is weaker. *Instructional discourses* refer to the way of transmission of knowledge and are determined by:

- a) *sequence rules*, that is the organization of sequencing of the educational activities, that is what precedes and what follows;
- b) *pacing*, that is the elaboration time that a subject takes and teaching pace; and
- c) *evaluation criteria*, that is the determination of legitimate or implicit communication and social relations, which, in turn, leads to the formulation of explicit forms of knowledge and established criteria for its evaluation (Bernstein, 1991; 1996).

In situations of strong framing, instructional discourses are determined with precision. This involves sticking to strict timetables and rules, which students are required to observe and apply to successfully complete their studies on time.

The principles of classification and framing adopted and applied by an educational institution determine the type of pedagogical practices developed within that educational institution. In examining the formulation of the pedagogical practices used by HOU, Bernstein's concepts of classification and framing were used, and connected the concepts of power and social control (Bernstein, 1991; 1996; 2000).

In DE settings, the actual educational-teaching materials play a central and arguably a sovereign role. Rowntree (1994), for instance, argued that a successful DE package needs teachers who are both able and willing to help students to learn and master the course contents the minute their ‘DE package’ arrives. The creation of DE packages involves (a) the process of re-contextualization of the primary scientific knowledge, and (b) using distance pedagogy balanced with instructional design strategies to enhance the delivery, whether it is delivered online or whether they are print-based course materials delivered via postal mail. Moreover, the formulation of various educational packages, irrespective of discipline, involves the selection of scientific knowledge deemed by the educational institution offering the course as important and suitable for students to learn.

Certainly, those responsible for the development of various ‘educational packages’ and for the planning of an institutions’ overall educational policy, adopt some of the existing and accepted pedagogical forms used by the larger social-scientific community. These forms are hereafter called “pedagogical epistemological conceptual systems” (PECS).

By PECS, we mean theoretical epistemological forms that are validated and accepted by the larger socio-scientific community, and which inform the theoretical background for the approach, interpretation, and/ or legalization of the examined educational policies and pedagogical practices (Bernstein, 1990; Lamnias, 2002b; Tsatsaroni, Koulaidis, Lamnias & Sakonidis, 1997). The choice of elements – e.g., admissions by one or more PECS – depends on the objectives and the general and/ or specific theoretical and scientific orientations taken by a given DE institution.

It is noteworthy that from each one of the existing pedagogical and epistemological and conceptual systems that are validated and accepted by the larger socio-scientific community (i.e., empirical, interpretative, or critical pedagogy) different theoretical approaches to pedagogy emerge. Moreover, the conceptual system adopted influences the processes of re-contextualization of knowledge that, in turn, informs the pedagogical practices of specific institutions. Finally, in the operation of a given institution indicators of different pedagogical epistemological conceptual elements and systems can be come evident upon closer reflection and inspection. Nowadays, the sovereignty of individual now reigns as supreme – i.e., student-centered pedagogical theories do exist (Lamnias & Tsatsaroni, 1996; Lamnias, 2002b), which is clearly a paradigm shift that illustrates that “educational packages” now reign supreme in distance education contexts. Times have changed, and this fundamental change must be acknowledged in research on distance education.

Methodology

The study reported in this paper focused on pedagogical practices developed by the HOU. These practices are strongly connected with the use and production of DE learning material and, also, with the possible use of ICT deployed for delivery and educational purposes. The sources of this research project are:

- a) The 32 Acts that were articulated during HOU’s administrative committee meetings, and upon which HOU’s constitution (October 30, 1995) became effective, until (February 25, 1997) when HOU was legally deemed an ‘organization’ and operational structure determined. As noted earlier, focus was paid on these Acts because the contribution of the administrative committee in this period was decisive in the creation of the academic infrastructure that underpins HOU, and the formulation of the above mentioned law (Lykourgiotis, 1998).

- b) Institutional texts – i.e., publications, in printed and electronic form, referring to the organization, policy, academic development and the way of provision of studies.
- c) The information provided officially on its website from its foundation until today.

The research questions sought to be answered are:

1. How are the pedagogical practices providing DE built into the HOU? How are they built and shaped by: a) scientific knowledge, b) instructive practices, and c) the practices of evaluation of the training process?
2. Which forms of pedagogical scientific knowledge have been adopted by HOU for the promotion of its own manifest pedagogical practices?
3. Does the HOU adopt policies that promote the use of ICT in all programs of study offered?

Qualitative content analysis is used. The findings are grouped into the following categories:

1. Scientific knowledge and study contents in the HOU.
2. Pedagogical practices used by HOU for the transmission of knowledge and use of ICT.
3. Use of ICT.
4. Training process evaluation.

This paper concludes with findings and results from this study.

Scientific Knowledge – Contents of study

Once HOU's constitution was formally ratified in 1995, planning for the university switched focus towards the general orientation of HOU, and the development of its specific academic programs of study. In meeting No.6/5-1-1996, a three member sub-committee was struck to make proposals for the preparation of a plan for HOU's academic development. The basic proposals of this sub-committee – i.e., the orientation of the studies reflecting the opinions of both the members of the administrative committee and of special scientists invited to its meetings – are summarized as follows:

- a) HOU must address Greece's real and emerging educational and training needs. Specifically, HOU must supply graduate studies to school teachers, and offer undergraduate level courses in areas traditionally not offered by Greece's conventional universities (e.g., European culture studies and Hispanic language and civilisation studies). Emphasis was also placed on the development of graduate level courses in contemporary issues (e.g., Greek economic development; tourism and business administration; healthcare management; management of Greece's national healthcare system services; banking; cultural organizations management; and master in business administration).
- b) Studies in innovative scientific and technological areas were also to be offered by HOU at a distance: i.e., graduate level courses in environmental design of cities and buildings; environmental design of infrastructure works; quality assurance; waste management; construction management; earthquake engineering and seismic-resistant structures.

- c) It was deemed that course modules should meet criteria such as: supporting economic growth throughout Greece through the development and provision of a highly skilled workforce needed to support the Country's new labour markets; deliver courses that underpin Greece's social and cultural development; and supply courses that underscore Greece's international position worldwide.
- d) In the first phase of development, priority was given to the education of teachers, executives of administration of the public or private sector, of small to medium-sized enterprises, and to social welfare and the local authorities. (Act 7/25-1-1996)

From these proposals, which were formally adopted by HOU's Administrative Committee (see Acts 9/7-3-1996, 14/11-9-1996, and 18/11-12-1996) it is concluded that HOU must aim to offer scientific knowledge oriented towards the needs of Greece's new labour market and towards sectors where social demand prevailed, such as in the training of highly skilled teachers at the graduate level.

How HOU can adapt its curricula to address the contemporary needs of Greek citizens is based on the choices its administrative committee places on each teaching module – i.e., as the basic functional unit of each program of study. A given module covers a given scientific area, either at the undergraduate or graduate level, and corresponds to approximately 3-4 semesters of study at a traditional university (Act 9/7-3-1996). When a module is no longer of interest or relevancy and should be sunset, or if a new module needs to be developed based on new and emerging educational needs, the chairman of HOU's administrative committee can invoke action that can keep HOU, fast, flexible and fluid, and wholly up-to-date on what is needed to support Greek students in their learning and, by logic, Greece in the global socio-economic community (Lykourgiotis, 1998).

HOU's administrative committee's first objective was to support the immanent provision of HOU's programs, starting in the school years 1998-1999. As such, foreign universities and their scientists were solicited for the development of suitable DE educational materials to be used by HOU. For example, an exploratory letter was sent to foreign universities experienced in developing and delivering DE learning materials. Several materials were evaluated and subsequently purchased to supply learning materials to HOU's graduate program, English language (Act 10/21-3-1996) from the University of Manchester (Act 18/11-12-1996). HOU's now established practice of purchasing from abroad, and translating and transporting turn-key packages of distance scientific knowledge, continued. Spanish Language and Literature (undergraduate) and The French Language (graduate) constitute typical examples of courses. It is the transference of re-contextualized scientific knowledge based on strict criteria of scientific validity and that regulates the power of borders, which reinforces specific cognitive objects (strong classification). It is the effect of the PECS of the empirical pedagogy about the use of ready-made packages of distance scientific knowledge (Lamnias, 2002b).

Most educational materials used by HOU are original, that is they are created by a team of experts. This team, for example, determined responsibilities and frames within which each team member operated. Members included: *a writer*, who wrote the material following particular specifications demanded by form and content; *an academic* responsible for each program (the academic also contributed to re-contextualization of distance pedagogical scientific knowledge via the re-drawing of plans); *a reader*, who 'fact checked' (along with the academic team member) the study texts for scientific quality; and, finally, *a DE expert* who ensured that all texts complied with the pedagogical principles needed to support effective DE delivery.

Construction of distance pedagogical scientific knowledge, within the creation of original educational material produced by HOU, reflects: a) strong classification of material based on strict specifications and the involvement of special scientists in the scientific area that ensure the scientific validity and reliability of HOU's learning materials, b) strong framing because the relationship and terms of collaboration are pre-determined and everyone works on specific, known, and irrefutable rules. In certain cases where the writers were unable to adapt their work to the specifications required, projects were cancelled.

In most undergraduate programs, and in 23 out of 24 graduate programs, the rules of succession are pre-determined precisely, and specific sequence of modules is obligatory. Consequently, there is a strong classification relating to the sequence of the modules that the student should attend to during their studies.

Pedagogical Practices

Teaching practices developed at HOU have been informed by internal regulation. Students must access relative information on their courses from HOU's main webpage. And to ensure they are in a position to advise, support, and direct HOU's students, teachers are obliged to know the organization and operation of courses and programs on offer by the University.

The pedagogical practices, as formulated in the HOU, with the criteria of the 'power of framing' and 'PECS' are now examined:

1. In the HOU, educational material packages consist of: books, cassettes, videos, CD-Rom, and educational software supported through the use of ICT (Act 1/7-11-1995). The creation of an electronic bank of educational material (i.e., learning objects) is currently under consideration (Act 18/11-12-1996).
2. Modules are accompanied by detailed timetables of study and students deliverables in the form of written work and tests (HOU, 2002). Thus, the following are determined:
 - Lock-step sequencing of DE contents provides students a timeline for learning and knowledge acquisition. Students are also given instructions on the applicability of additional learning materials available to them to help them master the subject material on a deeper level (i.e., additional texts, books, and audiovisual materials that are not part of the course per se, but are nonetheless helpful).
 - HOU students learn in a paced environment. HOU's academic year is divided to 32 weeks, beginning the first week of October. Students are made aware of the time they need to spend to study of each chapter (e.g., one or two weeks) and of deadlines and timelines they must meet in handing in their written work and assignments.
3. By regulating all facets of students' studies, evaluative criteria are determined. That is, the questions concerning the rights and obligations of teachers and students in sub-areas such as 'communication' are defined. For example, teachers must be available for student consultations during specific times; moreover, all comments on all written assignments must be returned to students within 15 days of receipt. In terms of quality assurance, HOU evaluates its teachers via a student questionnaire that asks pointed questions as to whether or not teachers failed, met, or exceeded students' expectations on basic criteria such as timeliness, accessibility, and instructional efficacy.

HOU uses a comprehensive regulatory framework to support its students. As such, strong framing exists concerning ‘relationships’ cultivated inside the institution itself. Indeed, HOU uses clearly defined hierarchical relations of power on two levels:

- a). First, HOU’s administrative committee decides the general policy of the institution. The chairman plays a central role in providing direction and guidance to the administrative committee. For example, A. Lykourgiotis, the first chairman of the administrative committee, when taking into consideration the opinions of committee, formally articulated HOU’s educative and organizational features (Koustourakis, 2006). This shows strong framing in the rule sequencing/ pacing and criteria and in the regulative rules between academic personnel, tutors, and HOU’s administrative committee. In Table 1, the characteristics of the instructive practices related with framing and the adopted PECS.
- b). The second level concerns the operation of HOU’s various programs and modules. In this case, HOU’s program directors and module coordinators coordinate and supervise how established instructional policies will guide HOU’s various programs and study modules. Sub-committee teams comprised of instructional personnel (i.e., teachers and tutors) working on specific modules, participate in this process. At first glance, this appears to show relatively weak framing in terms of communication among the teachers/ tutors. The coordinator of each module, however, is typically a member of the HOU’s academic personnel, and their decision is central in that this person determines and directs daily the work flow of the overall team that must deal with HOU’s day-to-day procedural affairs, such as the formulation and/ or choice of subjects on offer, pedagogical approaches that should be best taken, and the development and administration of final written examinations.

Hierarchical relationships and divisions of power are clearly evident in that the tutors do not participate, and are not represented, on any of HOU’s institutional committees. This means that tutors’ contribution to the formation of policy at the institutional level is virtually non existent. Moreover, the tutors’ job performance is evaluated by module coordinators, who, in turn, are responsible for evaluating their terms of employment and the renewal of their HOU contract.

Table 1. Pedagogical Practices: Framming and PECS

	<i>Framing*</i>	<i>PECS</i>
Instructional Discourse:		
Sequence	F+	Empirical
Pace	F+	Pedagogy
Evaluation criteria	F+	
Regulative Discourse:		
Relations between Academic Personnel, Tutors & Administrative Committee of the HOU	F+	Empirical Pedagogy
Relations between Tutors in the same Module	F-	Interpretative pedagogy
Relations between Tutors and Students	F-	

*F+: Strong Framing, F-: Weak Framing.

From Table 1 on the previous page, we can see that:

- Among tutors belonging to the same module, the framing is weak. According to HOU's internal regulation, tutors, being equivalent, only collaborate on instructional teams, to which they belong and only vicariously co-shaping its decisions.
- Hierarchical relations between teachers-students framing is similarly weak, for two reasons:
 - 1) Tutors, apart from their role as teacher, also advise, encourage, and support students (Vergidis & Panagiotakopoulos, 2002).
 - 2) In 2001-2002, students formally evaluated their tutors' performance; this formal evaluation was weighted at 65 percent of each tutor's final assessment. Given this weighting, the outcome of students' assessment is clearly central in determining whether or not a given tutor will be re-hired by HOU. Tutor's ranking for a particular module also determines the choice of the city in which they reside – or where they must move during the academic year. Indeed, living in the right city enables many tutors to participate in the right teams. Moreover, tutors' performance is evaluated by a three-member student committee, a fact that gives additional prestige and power to students' influences over tutors, and arguably, the attitude and behavior of many tutors towards them. For example, tutors may find it politically prudent to display a friendlier attitude towards students (and perhaps more favorable/ lenient marking and grading outcomes?)
- HOU's pedagogical approach, however, is student centered because:
 - a) The DE study materials used are essentially designed to be self-educating learning material. Students must learn how to learn at a distance and as such, they must be empowered over their learning outcomes.
 - b) Because knowledge acquisition is a student-centered activity at HOU, this principle is also reflected in the planning of various group projects. In group projects, there is no teaching per se. On the contrary, in group projects students employ knowledge already gained from self-study. To facilitate these group sessions, tutors employ various pedagogical techniques and approaches (i.e., work groups, discussions, acting, practice) designed to motivate students into action in such a way so that they can process and comprehend the subjects under discussion.

In sum, HOU's pedagogical practice shows that the principles from the PECS of interpretative pedagogy have been adopted, and thus makes HOU's students the epicenter of the learning process.

The Use of ICT in the Practice of Educational Work

Over the last few years, the increased use of ICT, and especially the Internet and the World Wide Web, have offered a suitable framework for more advanced, effective, and technologically fulfilled environment for distance learning (Horton, 2000; Clark & Mayer, 2002).

HOU policy demands that teachers must use ICT. Moreover, because of their nature, there are programs that compel students to use ICT. Teachers and tutors are required to respond inquiries, such as email, in a timely manner. Teachers must also possess the skills, knowledge, and capacity to use personal computers for instructive purposes (e.g., laboratories and tutorials), which are provided either by the instructor or HOU.

Ideally, students' computer skills should also be solid, so they can engage in all facets of university life at HOU, such as registering for courses, researching and accessing online learning materials, accessing library resources, interacting in online courses and discussion groups, and communicating with HOU's secretariat on various organizational and procedural matters. And while students are not obligated to use the Internet, it is handy and, frankly, tends to be necessary. Hence, HOU website has been designed as a centralized repository housing a wealth of additional online educational materials (e.g., study guides) that support many learning modules offered by HOU. As a consequence, the use of ICT at HOU is becoming more central, and it will likely be essential in the future.

Table 2. Internet usage in Greece 2000, 2006 (Source Internet World Stats, 2006).

Years	Internet Users	Population	Users per Population %
2000	1,000,000	10,964,019	9.1 %
2006	3,800,000	11,338,624	33.5 %

Despite the growing need for HOU students to use the University's Internet-based resources, as shown in Table 2, Internet penetration remains low in Greece, primarily due to high cost of access. According to data from 2006, 36.9 percent of Greeks using the Internet connect through their workplace (Stamati, 2006). This means there is a significant digital divide between Greece and so called "advanced" countries. According to Perrin and Mayhew (2000), at the turn of the new millennium approximately 70 percent of the certified four year colleges in the United States offered courses via Internet, in addition to traditional face-to-face delivery modes. This can be compared to Greece, where low penetration and use of ICT is also reflected in the adoption rates of the ICT by HOU for educational use, which is also comparatively low compared to other DE institutions worldwide (Panagiotakopoulos, Lionarakis & Xenos, 2003).

In terms of educational packages offered by HOU's programs, however, *educational software* used as an alternative mode of delivery – in addition to printed materials – remains nearly non-existent. Nonetheless, HOU has been using ICT for its administrative processes; its Web portal interfaces with tutors, students, and even potential students. HOU's current ICT model used mostly houses audiovisual and print-based materials.

Evaluation of the Learning Process

Table 3 shows the results of the training process evaluation, which are framed and have adopted PECS. At HOU, as is also the case with the British Open University, heavy emphasis is placed on students' written work. Students must demonstrate that they comprehend the materials, and that they can apply what they have learned precisely and creatively. This formative evaluation is influenced by PECS's interpretative pedagogy,

which connects student's self-learning activities to cognitive subjects and ultimately the progressive conquest of the learning materials.

Table 3. Process of evaluation, framing and PECS

Forms of evaluation	Framing*	PECS
Formative evaluation via written work	F+	Interpretative Pedagogy
Final evaluation via the final written examinations	F+	Empirical Pedagogy

**F+: Strong Framing*

Student acquisition of HOU's learning materials and modules is paced (strong framing). This means students must hand in assignments on time. Similarly, tutors must mark all student assignments and submit the grades to the students and HOU's secretariat in a proscribed period of time.

Students must meet a minimum grade point standing in order to qualify for the final exams. As each component of the course module is typically weighted at 30 percent, this ensures students are adequately prepared to meet the rigors of the final examination. Indeed, as is the case in traditional universities, HOU also places strong emphasis on students' mastery of its final exams. Thus PECS is strongly framed, because students' final exams results demonstrate not only mastery of module parts, but of the entire course. This process is not draconian, however. If a student fails, they are welcome to repeat the course in the next academic year. For graduate students, however, non-completion of a particular course within two academic years automatically leads to their expulsion from the graduate degree program. Consequently, the HOU as an "open" institution closes permanently for non performing students studying at the graduate level.

Conclusions

The Hellenic Open University is a higher educational distance learning institution that has been working to incorporate ICT into its administrative and learning processes. To this end, HOU has been proactively developing its ICT capacity. Educational practices, aimed at supporting students and their learning processes, have been developed – and will continue to be developed – using the latest technological advancements.

From the data examining HOU's pedagogical practices, we note:

Content of Knowledge

Prefabricated "learning objects", mostly produced in Greece by the HOU, are made available to students. Imported learning objects, on the other hand, are typically pedagogically re-contextualized to ensure high scientific validity and rigor that remains relevant to the Greek context and language. The learning objects developed, used and deployed by HOU, show strong framing in HOU's various modules (PECS data of empirical pedagogy).

Pedagogical Practices

There exists on the one hand, strict hierarchical relationships (strong framing) between HOU's academic personnel and tutors. This framing is evident by the HOU's evaluation process of its tutors, typically by its academic personnel, who, in turn, act as course module coordinators and/or are responsible for each program of study (PECS data of empirical pedagogy). On the other hand, hierarchical relations are blurred between teacher-student, as the teacher acts in mainly an advisory, encouraging role (student centered learning) with the students (weak framing). In this context, the tutor appears as a teachers to students, as they are the ones who supports and leads students in their own individualised process of learning. The educational materials used demand that students learn on their own, with the support of a tutor. This means that teaching is based on individualized pedagogical principles of DE for adult learners (PECS data of interpretative pedagogy). In this context, ICT does contribute.

Evaluation

Pedagogical emphasis is placed on student-centered learning (PECS data of interpretative pedagogy). Formal student evaluation emphasizes the final exam results (PECS data of empirical pedagogy) that evaluates and formally measures students' knowledge and skills acquisition on all modules of the course.

As noted earlier, HOU was established as a single mode DE university catering to adult learners in 1995. When HOU was established, however, power and social control (i.e., the political landscape) in Greece informed the pedagogical choices that currently underpins and informs the direction of HOU. Such issues of political power and social control are explicit in the fact that HOU is generally not accepted as being "legitimate" in the eyes of the established Greek academic community, even though HOU has been formally legalized by the Greek Government. For example, from 1997 until 2003, the Council of Rectors of the Greek universities refused the participation of the Chairman of the Administrative Committee of the HOU in its work. Perhaps Greece's larger and more entrenched traditional academic community is concerned about competition? Or perhaps even the legitimacy of DE as a sound pedagogy? Such concerns are unwarranted, however. Not only does research show that DE offers certain students a sound pedagogical alternative (Shachar & Neumann, 2004), HOU's tutors and academic community are also members of Greece's traditional university community. Moreover, the course writers hired by HOU to write its course and learning materials also work as course writers at traditional universities. Clearly these working ties to Greece's traditional university system has influenced the formation and the operational framework of HOU, which in turn, has informed its more general institutional and organizational choices. HOU, like traditional universities, ensures that students must pass a rigorous final evaluation. To a large extent, however, HOU's formal and informal ties to traditional epistemological modes and institutions, also limits it "being open". Thus, HOU, as an institution providing distance study, could face controversy concerning the level and quality of its studies – a stage, incidentally, that the open universities operating in other countries also passed in their first stages (Keegan, 1996).

Comparing the educational practices between HOU and conventional Greek universities, however, is like comparing apples to oranges. While traditional universities operate in a teacher-centered "sage on the lecture stage" context, HOU students are placed at the epicenter of HOU's educational process. HOU students must learn how to learn at a distance. Clearly, this demands more flexible practices on the part of HOU in terms of providing student support, from writing student-centered educational materials designed to meet the needs of adult learners learning at a

Unfortunately, HOU currently lags behind many other open and distance education institutions in the world, specifically in terms of incorporating and using ICT to support and aid students in their learning. The lack of suitable online educational (digital) materials, coupled with the reality that computer and Internet usage in Greece – primarily due to high cost of access – remains low, means that HOU faces significant challenges in terms of supporting students using ICT. The good news, however, is that this is slowly changing, as reflected in the high-level use of ICT by the HOU for administrative purposes.

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