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Distance Education in Transition: New trends and challenges

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Book Review

Distance Education in Transition: New trends and challenges

Author: Otto Peters (2002). *Distance Education in Transition: New trends and challenges.* Oldenburg: Bibliotheks- und Informationssytem der Universität Oldenburg. 300 pages, softcover. (Studien und Berichte der Arbeitsstelle Fernstudienforschung der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg, Band 5). ISBN: 3 8142 0813 7

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I was delighted to be offered the chance to review this book because, although Professor Peters published *Learning and Teaching in Distance Education: Pedagogical analyses and interpretations in an international perspective,* in 1998, I hoped that this new volume would provide a new and different perspective on the most recent developments in distance education and in the role which Professor Peters has played in them. The subtitle of the new book, "New Trends and Challenges" seemed to justify my sense of anticipation. And to some extent the book does live up to expectations; it draws upon first-hand experience of the author as an online tutor who is clearly excited by the potential benefits of new technology for the teacher and, most importantly the learner.

A quick glance at the contents page reveals, however, that the book cannot entirely live up to the promise of its subtitle. This is not a newly written volume, but a collection of addresses and papers that have all been previously delivered or published. Disappointingly, the first chapter, "Growing Importance of Distance Education in the World," which charts the history of distance education from its beginnings up to the advent of new communications technologies and the Web, is based on a keynote speech from 1997. Some additional new facts and figures have been introduced, but the changes are not sufficient to give the air of freshness and authoritativeness which the introductory chapter deserves and which Professor Peters is uniquely well qualified to deliver. The enthusiasm and broadness of vision however, which are demonstrated in many other chapters of the book, go a long way towards compensating for this initial deficiency.

When I first met Otto Peters in the late '70s, he was the founding Rector of the FernUniversität in Western Germany and was already well known for his writings and reflections on distance education. In 1978, he became a member of the Steering Committee for an International Institute for Distance Learning, which was set up by the late Lord Perry. Although the concept of such a training institute was widely acclaimed, it proved impossible to obtain the major funding necessary to start it up. The fifteen or so members of the Steering Committee, all heads of

existing distance teaching institutions, agreed to use the relatively small sums which each institution had contributed to the Committee to fund an information service to be provided by the small documentation centre, which I had recently set up as part of the Open University Centre for Cooperation and Services in the UK.

Professor Peters was a strong supporter of the service that eventually became the International Centre for Distance Learning, but which at the time of writing has sadly fallen into sharp decline. At the end of his term as Rector, Professor Peters returned to the mainstream of distance education in the FernUniversität, and has become heavily involved in the application of new technologies. The book strongly reflects the breadth and depth of this experience, together with his enthusiasm for the potential of information and computer technologies.

I do not intend to attempt an exposition of Professor Peters' social theory. This has already been ably done by Greville Rumble in his review of the book and of Börje Holmberg's 2001 volume *"Distance Education in Essence: An Overview of Theory and Practice in the Early Twenty-First Century*. The importance which Professor Peters attaches to online learning dominates the book, as is apparent from the titles of Chapters 4 to 9 respectively; "Online Learning: Visions, Hopes, Expectations," "Digitised Learning Environments: New Possibilities and Opportunities," "New Learning Spaces," "A Pedagogical Model FOR Using Virtual Learning Spaces," "Moderating a Virtual Seminar – Reflections on First Practical Experiences, "and "The Pedagogical Flexibility of the Virtual University."

The emergence of what Professor Peters sees as "new learning spaces" made possible by means of new technology, is perceived by him as of major significance to teaching at a distance and to autonomous learning. In his final chapter, "The Transformation of the University into an Institution of Independent Learning," he applies his perceptions to the university of the future. What the book does not do, and does not pretend to do, is address some of the problems associated with the new technologies, most notably the question of access by developing countries. This is a pity, since it is clear even from the account on the back cover of the book that Professor Peters can draw upon experience of working in South America and Asia as well as within Europe. There are also one or two minor quibbles about the book; the editors, for example, have failed to pick up misspellings of the names of three of the distance teaching universities mentioned on pages 17 – 18. This does not detract from the fact that this is a most useful contribution to the literature, and a valuable addition to a new developing series.

References

Holmberg, B. (2001). Distance Education in Essence: An overview of theory and practice in the early twenty-first century. *Open Learning, 17*(3), 2002, 259 – 271.

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