The Peters-Moore-Holmberg theory debate - Barcelona October 2006

1 *The theory concept*

Scholarly theories imply a systematic ordering of ideas about the phenomena of our field of inquiry and are usually of two kinds. One is concerned with understanding, the other with explanation and prediction. Basically Moore's and Peters's theories are of the former kind, mine of the second.

Peters regards distance education as an industrialised type of teaching and learning. He has shown that it is characterised by rationalizing, division of work between several cooperating people, mechanising, planning, organisation, production-line work, mass production etc. This is his description and understanding of the didactic structure of distance education.

Moore regards transactional distance as the generally descriptive feature of distance education, on the basis of which distance education functions. 'Transactional Distance is the gap of understanding and communication between the teachers and learners caused by geographic distance that must be bridged through distinctive procedures in instructional design and the facilitation of ineraction' (Moore & Kearsley 2005 p. 223). Here again we have a theory attemping to describe and understand the concept of distance education.

My theory is of a different kind. It implies that the application of a methodological approach -   empathy-creating conversational style – leads to increased motivation to learn and better results than conventional presentation of learning matter. This is a predictive theory that generates intersubjectively testable hypotheses which can be – and have been - empirically tested (Holmberg, B., Schuemer, R. & Obermeier 1982, and Holmberg, B. 2003)

This is not to say that Moore's and Peters's approaches are devoid of predictive elements or that mine does not contribute to the understanding of distance education. Nevertheless it places our theoretical approaches in their basic categories. These categories were, as far as I know, first identified by Droysen in 1858 and later described by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Cf. Bollnow 1967.

2   *My theory of the empathetic teaching-learning conversation*

At a very early stage – I mentioned the idea in a book of mine of 1960 – it struck me on the one hand that many distance-education courses were little more than school books with self-checking exercises and recurring tasks for submission to the distance-teaching organisation, on the other hand that the atmosphere and style of helpful face-to-face teaching could easily replace this handbook style. It is generally accepted that friendly atmosphere, helpful suggestions and encouragement support study motivation and facilitate success. This led me to the very natural conclusion that if we cater for this empathetic approach in distance education the outcomes of the study will improve. The medium used to bring about empathy is normally friendly conversation. This is the very simple background of my theory of teaching-learning conversations in distance education.

Basically the theory implies that what applies to the creation of empathy in face-to-face teaching also applies to distance education – provided special measures are taken to make

sure that students are engaged in decision making, that the style of presentation is lucid, problem-oriented and conversation-like, that friendly non-contiguous interaction between students and tutors is brought about and that liberal organisational-administrative structures and processes are created.

This appears rather self-evident – so why point it out? A study of pre-produced distance-education courses and of the 'correcting'of assignments submitted shows clearly that there is every reason to point out the advantages of empathetic conversation-like presentations and student-tutor interaction. The regrettable fact is that still very many, probably most, distance courses have little of this conversational character. Too often they are merely handbook texts and the interaction with tutors consists mainly of correction and little teaching or explanation.

Naturally at academic and similar levels students have to read difficult and complicated scholarly presentations. There is no reason, however, why these should be distance-education texts. Such presentations are available on the market in book form. By distance education we can provide empathy-supporting, conversational guides to the study of these difficult scholarly tests and thus help students to study them. That is a parallel of what is done in traditional teaching. Full explanations, relevant examples, useful comparisons etc. given in a helpful and friendly way should, I think, alleviate and guide the study. This is what is done by a good lecturer in traditional teaching. Why should we deprive distance students of this kind of learning support? It can be provided in print, online or by speech in recorded form.

At elementary levels the whole of a course can be – and in my view should be – developed as a conversation, preferably of a Socratic type, to help students reach their goals. Here we have a good correpondence course as our model.

The friendly atmosphere is essential also in the interaction between students and tutors. Helping (teaching) students is the main purpose of this interaction. This naturally means teraching, explaining and providing examples etc. Awarding marks (grades) is only a possible secondary part of the tutor's work.

My modest theory simply means that a procedure that has proved helpful in traditional education is applicable also to distance education. Empathy between those who teach and those who learn is universally a good basis for learning. Easily understandable, conversation-like presentations and friendly interaction help students to learn. Empirical investigations support these assumptions.

This theory of mine has been much discussed, as far as I know not rejected, but received with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Among those who are little enthusiastic I count my two respected fellow presenters in this debate.

 3   *Implications for further research*

My thinking and that of many other scholars are based on assumptions about how students learn. These assumptions may be well grounded, but real, uncontestable knowledge would undoubtedly be preferable. A group of Australian researchers have indicated a possible procedure. What I have in mind are the studies carried out by Marland and his group, who have made qualitative interview studies of the mental processes which mediate, thus come between, the teaching and the learning outcomes. They have paid attention to such mediating

processes as strategy planning, hypothesising , elaborating and generating. The studies carried out have included very small groups of students only. I ask myself if it would not be possible to widen studies of this kind in a way to give us more substantial knowledge.

Suppose a battery of interview questions were developed, detailed instructions on how interviews with students should be carried out created by a group of international scholars, a group of interviewers engaged and duly instructed, principles for the evaluation of students' replies specified in cooperation with a group of international experts and competent evaluators engaged. This would give us a chance to interview students all over the world on their learning strategies and practices, to bring this information together and draw constructive conclusions from it.

This would be a vast undertaking. It would require standardising procedures, several parallel examiners interpreting and scrutinising the interviews and a also central body for coordinating the work, but it would produce substantial knowledge of how most people learn and about possible regional or national differences. Where do we find a research institute prepared to start the work, find interviewers and interview examiners, initiate and carry out as well as coordinate work of this kind? I briefly mentioned this plan already at the first EDEN research workshop in Prague in 2000. Were I still active and had I my former research institute, *das Zentrale Inarirurw für Fernstudienforschung (ZIFF)* at the FernUniversität, I should be strongly tempted to attempt this extremely interesting but very difficult project.

What I have indicated is one of several possibilities for rewarding research, which would also give us a firm basis for further theory building and practical conclusions.

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