

OPEN PRACTIS



INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

Volume 1, Issue 2

June 2007

ISSN: 2304-070X

Table of Contents

Distance Education in North America: An Update

Gary E. Miller & Ken Udas

1-14

Open Educational Resources at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

15-18

The Metamorphosis of Distance Education in the Third Millennium

Marta Mena

19-21

Distance Education in North America: An Update

Gary E. Miller, The Pennsylvania State University
Ken Udas, The Pennsylvania State University

Over the past decade, the Web has dramatically changed distance education in North America, greatly increasing the number and diversity of institutions involved in distance education, creating new institutions and models for institutional collaboration, and mainstreaming many facets of distance education into the fabric of traditional institutions. In the process, North American institutions, like their counterparts elsewhere around the globe, have begun to create a new pedagogy that uses the continually evolving new technologies to address the needs of a knowledge society.

Growth

One consequence of the rapid diversification of distance education because of the Web has been the creation of new professional communities. Institutions that had no history of involvement in previous kinds of open and distance education were not drawn to the existing professional institutions. Instead, they tended to create new professional communities. One of those of communities is the Sloan Consortium, which grew out of the Asynchronous Learning Networks initiative of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. For the past decade, the Sloan Foundation has provided more than \$40 million in grants to institutions to stimulate use of Internet-based technologies to create access to education for both adult and traditional students. This work stimulated the creation of the Sloan Consortium. Through the Sloan Consortium (<http://sloan-c.org/>), the Foundation has sponsored annual conferences, a journal, the dissemination of best practices, and an annual survey of the impact of online learning in the United States.

The 2005 report, Growing by Degrees, illustrated the growing impact of online learning. It notes that, in 2004-05, enrollments in online courses grew over the previous year by 18.2% -- more than ten times the rate that the National Center for Educational Statistics projected for growth in the general postsecondary student population. Overall online enrollments increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004.

Not all of this increase reflects new distant students. Some degree—perhaps a significant degree—of the increase in online enrollments reflects rapid acceptance of online learning within the campus-based programs of traditional colleges and universities. The 2005 survey discovered that 63 percent of institutions that offer traditional classroom-based undergraduate courses also offer some online undergraduate courses; at the graduate level, 65 percent of institutions that offer classroom-based courses offer some online graduate courses.

However, the 2005 Sloan survey also suggests that an increasing number of colleges and universities are offering complete programs online, for both traditional and nontraditional students. Forty-four percent of institutions that offer campus-based master's degrees also offer at least one master's degree online. This is even more significant among two-year institutions—community colleges—in which part-time students constitute a large part of the traditional student population. Among these institutions, 72 percent identified online learning as part of their long-term institutional strategy in 2004-05 – an increase from 58 percent in the previous year.

The survey also suggests that online distance education is at the end of its initial start-up period. Asked “Is online education critical to the long-term strategy of my institution,” 58.4% of the institutions surveyed answered, “Yes.” The majority of

institutions also reported that online education has become critical to their long-term strategies. The response was highest among institutions that offer master's and doctoral degrees and institutions that offer associate degrees. The majority of traditional liberal arts colleges have yet to embrace online education.

New Organizational Relationships

While online learning is bringing many new institutions into distance education, it is also fostering new relationships among institutions. Education in the United States is organized at the level of the individual states. Several states have created new relationships among institutions designed around the use of online distance education to ensure that all residents have equitable access to important programs. Examples include Kentucky Virtual University (<http://www.kyvu.org/>), the State University of New York's SUNY Learning Network (<http://sln.suny.edu/>), which provides a common online delivery infrastructure for the 63 SUNY institutions; and UMASS Online (<http://www.umassonline.net/>), which supports statewide and national delivery of degree programs offered by the member institutions of the University of Massachusetts System.

Other kinds of innovation are also appearing. One example is the Great Plains Interactive Distance Learning Alliance (Great Plains IDEA -- <http://www.gpidea.org>), a collaboration among eleven major state universities that are both comprehensive research institutions and public institutions committed to service to their states. The alliance is an academic collaborative focused on "human services" disciplines and designed to allow these institutions to share students by allowing students admitted to one member institution to take courses online from other member institutions. Thus far, the initiative

has resulted in online degree programs in such diverse areas as community and economic development, gerontology, youth development, and family financial planning.

The use of the Internet is encouraging U.S. institutions to collaborate with colleagues internationally. An example is the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN -- <http://www.wun.ac.uk/>), a consortium of research universities that have begun to share resources and programs through online distance education. Originally, WUN included five U.S. institutions (University of California-San Diego, University of Illinois, Pennsylvania State University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and University of Washington) and six institutions in the United Kingdom (Universities of Bristol, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Southampton, and York). Additional universities have since joined from Europe and China. WUN has encouraged institutions to share access to complementary online programs. For instance, Leeds, Penn state, and Southampton all offer online Master's Degrees in Geographic Information Systems. Through WUN, arrangements were made to allow students from one of these institutions to take online classes from the others and to apply them to the student's degree program.

Transformation as a Trend

Over the past few years, it has become clear that online learning is having a transforming effect on American higher education. This can be seen in part by the rapid expansion in the number and type of institution delivering programs to nontraditional students through online distance education. However, even more dramatic is the impact of online learning on traditional campuses, where online learning is becoming a common feature in residential courses. "Hybrid" courses that combine online and face-to-face

elements and “blended” degrees that combine online and campus-based courses are the current front line of innovation.

The result of this diffusion of online learning is that the traditional distinctions between “distance education” and “resident education.” As geographic proximity ceases to be a defining factor in the relationship between an institution and its students, this line will continue to blur.

Two other factors will continue to stimulate this transformation. One is the emergence of a distinctive online education pedagogy that emphasizes active student engagement in researching content, analyzing information, and applying the results to problems, often in collaboration with other students. This pedagogy encourages the creation of new and more diverse learning communities. A second factor is the rapidly changing economy, which has put significant pressure on the need to give current working adults access to educational programs that will help them remain competitive. This latter factor is especially apparent in community colleges and in the growth of online professional master’s degrees and postbaccalaureate certificate programs among comprehensive research universities.

Technological Innovation

Transformation is also being driven by new technology applications that can be used as easily to enhance a campus-based class as they can a distance education class. The use of BLOGS and Wikis allow students and faculty members both settings to create new kinds of learning communities. Podcasts allow faculty members to keep students take advantage of campus visitors, conference discussions, and so forth.

The combination of these changes in organizational structure, institutional sharing, and new technologies is moving an increasing number of U.S. institutions to give serious consideration to what has already emerged internationally: the development and sharing of open educational resources (OER). The remainder of this paper will report on several U.S. institutional initiatives in OER that may signal a new trend.

OER Overview

There is no question that the topic of Open Educational Resources is gaining significant profile in the United States. This is reflected in the growing number of open courseware and OER projects being launched at colleges and universities, foundation-supported projects, journal articles, blog postings, and conferences. This trend follows on the heels of increasing acceptance and use of open-source software in higher education.

While dozens of colleges and universities in the United States are involved with OER projects, a relatively small number are commonly referenced, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (<http://ocw.mit.edu/>), Rice University (<http://cnx.rice.edu/>), Utah State University (<http://ocw.usu.edu/>), Carnegie Mellon University (<http://www.cmu.edu/oli/>), Johns Hopkins (<http://ocw.jhsph.edu/>), Notre Dame (<http://ocw.nd.edu/>), Tufts University (<http://ocw.tufts.edu/>), and a few others. These institutions currently have made available 1,911 full courses, with MIT alone accounting for 81% of these offerings and the top three institutions accounting for 94% of the total. In addition to the 1999 courses posted at Rice University's, Connexions, there are 3786 individually identified modules, which are course components.

Although most of the other open courseware initiatives cited in this paper provide reasonably robust searching capabilities that allows the user to easily identify and

disaggregate content, Connexions is designed to support a community of contributors, allowing users “Editing-In-Place” permission to modify content and making contact information for content authors readily available. In the early stages of development it is clear that there are two distinct philosophies relative to flow of information. Some initiatives are designed for involvement and contribution from a wide community, while most are designed for one way sharing from the university to either faculty designing courses or learners interested in supplemental materials or self-learning. This division affects the nature of the software supporting the project, content licensing decisions, sustainability and funding models.

In a recent report David Wiley (2006)ⁱ looked at different OER program models and sustainability. He used the MIT Open Courseware project, Rice University Connexions, and Utah State University Open Courseware project as archetypes for comparative purposes. This report and many of the other articles published in the Open Education 2006 proceedings, serve as a kind of standard of current thought for early adopters and a bellwether for the next round of adopters in the United States, reflecting a growing maturity and understanding of OER and sustainability relating to topics such as overall program model, the types of resources developed and the media used, nature of how content is reused, and the nature of the intended end users, potential funding models, and impact of national policy.

As with many relatively recent phenomena, common knowledge among institutions and professionals in the United States regarding the OER movement is somewhat limited to a community of interest that is growing in size and sophistication. In addition to college- and university-based OER projects a constellation of support,

consortia, and information-dissemination projects are growing, which also reflects a growing sense of importance and interest in the OER movement. The substantive presence of organizations and resources such as the Open Courseware Consortium (<http://www.ocwconsortium.org/index.html>) , OER Commons (<http://www.oercommons.org/>) , OpenCourse (<http://opencourse.org>) , the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation OER (<http://www.hewlett.org/Programs/Education/OER/>) , and Creative Commons Education (<http://creativecommons.org/education/>) is lowering the risk barrier for U.S. colleges and universities to participate in the OER movement by providing better understanding and support.

Institutional Involvement, Mission, and Licensing

A number of institutions have taken leadership as early contributors to the open educational resources movement. Although institutions such as MIT, Rice, Johns Hopkins, University of California-Irvine, Tufts, Carnegie Mellon, Notre Dame, and Utah State University, cite common themes for why they are involved with open courseware initiatives, they have operationalized their programs differently. Some of the differences that were outlined in David Wyles' (2006) overview of some open courseware projects, included scale of operations and goals, intended audience, and available funding. Some of the commonalities include a conviction that the open dissemination of knowledge and information is inherently good and an important contribution to stakeholders outside of the home institution. This theme was applied to humanity quite broadly and also to specific communities such as scholars in developing economies, health care administrators, life-long learners, and self-learners. In all cases there is an underlying assumption that their open courseware project was predicated on principles of free and

open distribution of content, which will reduce access barriers across organizations, cultures, and geography.

Features such as content quality and relevance, ease of access to the content, project sustainability, and ease of content use will certainly affect the successful implementation of project goals. Although each of these qualities is important and deserves treatment, in this paper we have decided to provide a brief overview of content licensing decisions as this decision will have long-term impact on the usefulness of the content, distribution patterns, and ultimately how successful the project will be in meeting its goals for open and free distribution. The usefulness of content will relate directly to how much freedom is accorded to the user of the content to adapt it and redistribute it given local needs and conditions. Given that most of the projects cited some global intent, local conditions where resources are to be used will vary widely in terms of language, distribution technology, intended outcomes, cultural acceptability, and economic reality. Given the global intellectual property regime currently in place, the nature of the license under which the content is distributed will have impact on the freedoms communicated to content users.

Of the eight projects reviewed, all used a Creative Commons based license. Three types of licenses were adopted across the group of programs. One program adopted the *Attribution* license, which reserves the fewest rights, six projects adopted the *Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike* license, while one project adopted the *Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs* license, which, of the licenses adopted by the group, is the most restrictive. The Tufts OpenCourseWare project modified the base

license and retitled it the *Tufts Open Courseware License 1.0*. An overview of the licenses adopted is provided below in *Table 1. OCW Project and Adopted License*.

Open Courseware Project	Creative Commons License
Rice University, Connexions	Attribution
MIT OpenCourseWare	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
Johns Hopkins, JHSPHOPENCOURSEWARE	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
Tufts University OpenCourseWare	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
Carnegie Mellon, Open Learning Initiative (OLI)	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
Notre Dame OpenCourseWare	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
Utah State OpenCourseWare	Attribution - NonCommercial – ShareAlike
UC Irvine OpenCourseWare	Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives

Table 1. OCW Project and Adopted License

The license adopted by Connexions provides the freedom for the user to share the content, which includes the right to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work and to make derivative works provided that the user attributes the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor and makes clear to others the license terms of this work. The license adopted by a majority of the projects transfers the same rights to sharing and modification, but adds a restriction on commercial use such that the work may not be used for commercial purposes. UC-Irvine OpenCourseWare adopted a license that imposed a further restriction prohibiting derivative works so users may not transform or build upon the content that UC-Irvine has licensed and distributed.

As the open courseware projects mature it will be worthwhile for institutions launching new open courseware projects to gauge the impact that licensing arrangements have on meeting project goals related to free and open use of content. Several communities within The Pennsylvania State University, including the Penn State World

Campus (<http://worldcampus.psu.edu>) are starting a dialog about launching open courseware projects and how the considerable experience in designing and developing online course content and courses can be leveraged systemically to help ensure dependability and usability of the content from a learning design perspective.

Early proposals and proofs of concept have lent toward adopting a license that places few restrictions on the user allowing for the creation and distribution of derivative works and commercial use. The impetus behind these leanings is the belief that a license that prohibits derivative works will unacceptably restrict the usefulness of the content in terms of localization while including a non-commercial restriction will place an unacceptable dampening affect on adoption of content in developing societies where sustainability is predicated on the development of micro enterprises or where distribution and labor costs have to be recuperated.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Motivations

The benefits and opportunities of open educational resources for open, flexible, and distance learning institutions will be in large measure predicated on the mission and core values of the institution and the goals of the OCW project. Many of the examples of US institutions with established or fledgling open educational resources projects are not traditional open education providers cut from the same fabric as institutions like the Open University UK (<http://www.open.ac.uk/>), The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (<http://www.openpolytechnic.ac.nz/>), Indira Gandhi National Open University (<http://www.ignou.ac.in/>), and many others whose primary mission is to reduce access barriers to education including providing open admissions, flexible learning pathways, reduction of constraints based on time and geography, and affordability, while

maintaining high standards of academic quality. In the US context an organization such as the Penn State World Campus has a commitment to flexibility, which it can articulate through the use of information and communication technologies, but may not be in a position to enhance access through open admissions, flexible learning pathways through independent learning options, or low financial burden to prospective learners.

From the institutional perspective, there is some benefit to being an early participant in the open educational resources movement through recognition as being an innovator and displacing the notion that the institution's principal value as a teaching institution is tied-up in its course content, rather than its faculty, interaction, services, library resources, community in general, and reputation as a granter of certifications. As an organization that has a commitment to access and the development of human capacity, contributing courseware and learning materials for open and public use is one means of reaching institutional objectives. In addition, participating in the larger OCW community and making resources available with the appropriate license can potentially increase the quantity and quality of the materials available for your own use, enhancing quality and reducing design, development, and production costs.

Perhaps the most important potential opportunity for institutions is the impetus for developing an open internal dialog about open educational resources. Through this dialog the institutional players can reflectively develop a better understanding of how they view their role in a larger community, their institution's commitment to social wellbeing, their relationship to colleagues at other peer institutions in the US and in developing societies, the nature of competition in higher education, and the fundamental nature and value of information, knowledge, and the academy. To what extent this

dialog occurs is not known, but there is growing evidence that some institutions are engaging and moving forward with OCW projects.

The swelling numbers of online learning programs and courses, cited at the beginning of this paper, point to a large and growing amount of digital content potentially available for distribution under a license that promotes open access. The extent to which content is made freely available will be determined by institutional orientation relative to the freedom of knowledge and perceived business impact. The extent to which open educational content will be distributed and used, once made available, will be largely determined by the usefulness of the resources and the restrictions placed on use by formatting and licensing decisions. The dialog that is just starting at Penn State is at least starting from the premise that the more open the content, the more useful it will be, and the more worthwhile will be our investment.

Conclusion

The increasing diffusion of online distance education into the mainstream of U.S. colleges and universities is having a profound effect on the academic community, redefining access to education and influencing how institutions create learning communities among both students and faculty members, share faculty-created learning resources, and creating new opportunities for inter-institutional collaboration. The institutional community involved in online learning is increasingly rapidly, and the opportunities for collaboration between these institutions and their counterparts in other parts of the world is growing as well.

References

Allen, I.E., and Seaman, J. (2005). *Growing by Degrees: Online Education in the United States, 2005*. Sloan Consortium, Olin and Babson Colleges, Needham, MA.

Wiley, D. (2006). *On the Sustainability of Open Educational Resource Initiatives in Higher Education, Open Education 2006: Community, Culture, and Content*. Center for Open and Sustainable Learning, Utah State University, Logan UT.

Open Educational Resources at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia

Like many things, Open Educational Resources (OER) are not new. Think of the schools broadcasting service available on BBC television in the 1960s and 1970s and, subsequently, the Open University radio and TV programmes broadcast again through the BBC. The leading Spanish distance learning institution, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), founded in 1973 and partly inspired by the British open model, is no exception, with a well-established practice in providing media support for its degrees through course-related programmes broadcast through Radio Televisión Española. In 21st century Britain, Spain and elsewhere, however, the single driving element that *is* new in OER as in almost everything else – and even that is fast losing its novelty – is the internet. Given our web-driven context, it would, in practice, be extremely difficult if not impossible to halt the free availability of information or open resources. Indeed, on what grounds would one oppose such access? Put another way, what is the role of Open Educational Resources, on the one hand, and that of the UNED, on the other, in a country such as Spain?

Recent statistics show that while Spain has a relatively low percentage of internet users (38.4% as of November 2006), 72.6% of those are connected from home and an overwhelming 94.5%¹ prefer the world wide web to other internet-based services (e-mail and online chats come in second and third, respectively). The most efficient way therefore to make open resources available is through the internet. To all intents and purposes, in fact, OER and the internet are inextricably linked.

As a distance education provider and as much a part of the web-driven knowledge society as any other institution, the UNED thus recognizes the need to enhance its OER profile. It faces challenges such as creating a viable business model, quality assurance, incentivizing OER authors and dealing with Intellectual Property Rights and software issues, among others. While OER have been part of the UNED profile for some time, they have emerged more as a result of individual, departmental, or other partial initiatives. For the first time, however, its Strategic Plan (2006-2009) declares a commitment to developing and promoting free access to educational resources, including the creating of an institutional repository of learning materials and taking part in international OER projects. The UNED has created the Centre for Technological Innovation and Development (CINDETEC) to provide digital support for the creation of online material, including open resources. Another example is *e-Spacio*, set up by the UNED Biblioteca Central, which stores, organizes and disseminates research and teaching material created by UNED professors. UNED further is a participating member of the Multilingual Open Resources for Independent Learning (MORIL) project directed by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), a project which has received funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Traditionally, study in Spain has been seen as a way of gaining qualifications, and those qualifications have been seen as a way of finding employment. In other words, learning for learning's sake – a conceptual corner-stone of the OER movement – would, in principle, appear to hold little potential appeal. Additionally, Spain has long held one of the highest levels of unemployment in European Union member countries, reinforcing

¹ Source: Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación. <http://www.aimc.es/aimc.php>

the conviction that study must be linked to job-prospects. Fortunately, unemployment levels are falling (they currently stand at just over 8% compared to an EU average of 7.7%)² and there is forward-looking legislation in the matter of recognising and validating learning acquired in informal situations. The two laws which directly concern the importance of recognising such learning, irrespective of where, when and how it was acquired, are Law 5/2002 of 19 June and Law 2/2006 of 3 May. This legislation, which should ensure that the learning acquired through OER can result in desired qualifications, is already being implemented by the UNED, which has nearly 200,000 students. The UNED's Centro Universitario de Idiomas (CUID), for example, has recently established a new suite of exams mapped against the Common European Framework that will enable students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who have acquired their knowledge of English in informal and/or open contexts to gain a valuable qualification which will improve their job prospects.

The UNED is committed to providing the requisite OER which will help unaffiliated students to reach the level of proficiency required by these examinations. That is, the UNED intends to provide freely available, high quality materials which will enable EFL students at beginner or elementary level to progress from level A1 of the Common European Framework through A2, B1 and B2, to the advanced levels of C1 and C2. The prizes for providing such OER are enormous: the prospect arises of ordinary working people who find it difficult to attend or pay for classes now being able to learn English, to obtain a qualification as proof of that learning, and so improve their prospects. The benefits for the Spanish economy are potentially very important.

The UNED is also uniquely positioned with regard to a vast potential market of Spanish speakers, a market which extends beyond Europe and Latin America to the nearly 30 million³ speakers of Spanish in the United States. The UNED already has a regional presence through local study and support centres in places such as Buenos Aires, Caracas and New York. The positive consequences of the enhancement of human potential in Latin America through openly available UNED-produced OER – which would also drastically reduce costs related to student-mobility – are clear.

Given that there is already a great deal of material available via internet purporting to provide educational resources – the Massachusetts Institution of Technology Open Course Ware initiative, jointly funded by the Hewlett and Mellon Foundations, is just one of the best-known and most influential – it might be thought that acceptable OER already exist. Careful analysis of such materials reveals, however, that while they are abundant in quantity they frequently fail to meet the needs of distance learners at best (MIT materials, for example, are for traditional classroom use), and are seriously deficient in quality at worst. Many of the materials for example require students to read extended pieces of text and would be more naturally offered in book format than on the computer screen. Moreover, many are in reality merely testing students not teaching them. In the classroom such materials, while far from ideal, may be of some use since

² Source: Eurostat.

http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/PGP_PRD_CAT_PREREL/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_AR_2006/PGE_CAT_PREREL_YEAR_2006_MONTH_12/3-01122006-EN-AP.PDF

³ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 gives a figure of 28.1 million speakers of Spanish in the United States. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-29.pdf>

they help the teacher to discover what the student cannot do and what therefore needs to be taught. For students in a distance-learning situation however such materials are often a source of frustration.

The matter of quality assurance and materials pedagogically appropriate to the distance learning environment is crucial. Materials that promise a lot but deliver little may endanger the future of OER by bringing the concept into disrepute. The UNED therefore is committed to participating in the movement only through materials of high quality and a recently created task-force has identified the following criteria:

- a) The materials should focus on content of central not marginal relevance; that is, they must be core material, the study of which is essential for passing important examinations in key areas. The material would be not only subject-related, but skills-related also, with a strong emphasis on distance methodology – something the MIT initiative lacks.
- b) At least in part, the materials should be of a nature which only the new technologies can offer. That is, they should not try to deliver learning experiences which are better delivered through a book or in a conventional classroom, but instead take advantage of the unique interactive possibilities of the new technologies.

An example of such materials will make the UNED's intentions in the field of OER clearer. A team in the Facultad de Filología at the UNED is developing a grammar checking programme, called *e-gramm*, which enables students of English as a foreign language to correct the mistakes they make when they write in English. The computer programme highlights in colour sequences words in which it has detected a mistake and provides on-screen feedback which explains the mistakes, offering examples of correct usage and explaining how they differ from what the student has written. With *e-gramm* correction is not automatic but instead requires students to understand the grammatical and lexical explanations and then write the correct version themselves. *E-gramm* is free, easy to install via internet, and user-friendly. It centres on a core skill, writing, in the key area of EFL. It is also designed to offer valuable learning experiences that neither a textbook nor a classroom can easily offer:

- a) *E-gramm* provides students with feedback on their mistakes whenever they wish, a feedback that is generous, explicit and detailed.
- b) *E-gramm* fosters 'just-in-time' learning in a way that is not possible in the classroom. That is, it provides the student with the required information to determine if a phrase is right or not at the most opportune moment; just when the student is most interested and receptive.
- c) *E-gramm* provides students with highly motivating and useful work because they are working on their own written production. The time invested in correcting their own writing will be time well-spent because while evaluating each phrase of their written work with the help of *e-gramm* they are learning to use correctly words they have chosen to use. By assuming responsibility for correcting their own writing, students become more autonomous.
- d) *E-gramm* not only allows students to work on their own (rather than other people's) mistakes, but also to progress at their own speed. Unlike conventional classrooms, where it is assumed that all students need to learn the same thing at

the same time, *e-gramm* makes the most of one of the key advantages of learning in non-formal contexts.

- e) Many students prefer to be ‘corrected’ in privacy by a machine rather than in public by a teacher. When interacting with *e-gramm* they feel less time pressure than when required to answer in front of a class.

E-gramm and other similar UNED projects are reflective of the UNED’s commitment to offering only innovative, high quality OER. The UNED sees OER as central to the development of distance learning in particular, and more broadly to Spain’s development as a fully fledged participant in the knowledge society. In no sense should OER be seen as second-class alternatives to textbooks and classrooms; OER delivered through the new technologies offer the possibility of far better learning experiences than were available to previous generations.

The Metamorphosis of Distance Education in the Third Millennium *Institutions, Programs, Technologies, Roles... The Same?*

Profound transformations are taking place world-wide, and the Open and Distance Education institutions must play a leading role in the promotion of innovation in academic and professional training.

The Latin American region faces a number of challenges in reaching consensus over action lines for Open Distance Education institutions in the future. This is due to the diversity of problems and national and local contexts that ODL actors must cope with at the present time. In order to develop common strategies and coherent action lines, comprehensive analysis is needed.

These current problems of the Open and Distance Education institutions must be highlighted in the context of the values and the priorities of the region as well as their previous history and framework of relationships that determine different ways to face these problems and to solve them.

In this transition period, the national situation and each institution's own situation is extremely different and, therefore, each case requires a determined will, effort and creativity to reach the levels of desired growth and evolution.

Although many voices affirm that the future is too complex and uncertain to try to predict it, there are others like the one of Federico Mayor Zaragoza (1999)¹, former UNESCO Director General, who thinks that "the uncertainty of the future could only be acted on based on our ability to foresee the future and act accordingly".

Knowledge is the key factor of the future: its production, application and use in the different fields of life. Consequently, education is the main instrument to guide societies through complex processes of transformation and modernization. In this context, Distance Education plays a leading role due to the richness of alternatives, opportunities and possibilities it offers.

Many studies indicate that well developed countries are built on effective education systems that include solid and ongoing programs for innovation and growth. This statement acquires special importance for the case of Latin-America, where many of its more important institutions are showing serious limitations to adjust their models, structures and procedures, in order to adequately respond to new demands of the society. Educational institutions are therefore a decisive instrument for development, and they can not afford to further postpone the needed transformation of the institutions themselves or their networks and channels for cooperation.

With this background, the International Council for Open and Distance Education will organize its next International Conference in Mexico, that will be hosted by the Toluca Campus of the Technological Institute of Monterrey, from October 3 to 5th, 2007.

¹ Mayor Zaragoza, F. (1999) **Los escenarios y Alternativas de América Latina y El Caribe en el Horizonte 2020** en López Segrera, Filmus, coordinadores (2000) *América Latina 2020*. FLACSO-UNESCO - Temas Grupo Editorial. Buenos Aires.

The main idea is to think on the challenges of the region in the 21st century in terms of capacity training through the Open and Distance Education modality. The conference will emphasize the importance of incorporating different instruments, tools and concepts, in order to propose substantial and integrated changes to the resources and models used.

Prestigious experts in this field will meet to discuss the main problems that nowadays concern the Open and Distance Education professionals and institutions in Europe, Latin America and North America. The discussions will aim at making concrete proposals for researchers, academics and decision makers.

The intention is to bring together the knowledge, experiences, opinions and points-of-view of various experts in the field and debate the different sub-topics proposed for the duration of the event:

a) The developments of Distance Education in different Social, Cultural, Economic contexts.

b) The new profile of distance programs in the third millennium.

- Is there a hegemonic profile?
- What changes are required for future programs?

c) The role of technology in the transformations experienced by this modality.

- Does it promote such changes or does it just a necessary compliment?
- Does technology direct the changes or do the modalities spur changes in the technology?

d) The structural configuration of institutions that develop Distance Education.

- Are "mega-universities" really the institutions of higher learning in the future?
- Does the structure of Virtual Universities correspond to the model of the University as we know it?
- Is the bimodal configuration the answer to the current challenges facing the development of the modality in the University?
- What role can consortiums play in the current development of Distance Education?

e) Distance Education's Image in Society in the Third Millennium.

- A New Image? What factors would favor the acceptance of this modality today?

f) The actors in Distance Education.

- New roles or reinvent the classic ones?

g) Does F2F Education promote the "culture" of Distance Education?

- Projects supporting Distance Education
- Should there be a combination of modalities apart from the use of different techniques in F2F Education?

The ICDE International Conference in Mexico will be a significant platform for debating different issues of the region. It will be an excellent opportunity to strengthen or to establish solid institutional partnerships, to explore new alternatives of cooperative work, to listen and to learn about the latest research in the scope of education. We look forward to welcoming you in Mexico! Bienvenidos!

Marta Mena

Buenos Aires, March 2007