

## European Figures in Distance and e-Learning

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In my contribution on European figures who have really made a difference in distance and e-learning I want firstly to observe that Europe has produced, or at least been the happy host of many of the major figures in our field. A question to be returned to is whether there is a unifying theme to theory and practice in Europe, so a particular European perspective on distance and e-learning, or rather a set of theorists and innovators who happen to have been based in Europe.

Firstly we should begin with a group I can term the 'classics', or the theoretical pioneers who have underpinned work in this field on a global not just European basis over many decades.

Borje Holmberg made his contribution primarily in the field 1960-1980. He is a Swede, and worked there in the correspondence education period, before taking a Chair at the newly founded FernUniversität, in Hagen, Germany, where he was based until his retirement. He was the inventor of the term 'didactic conversation', by which he intended to identify the conversational mode necessary for the successful learning-teaching relationship in correspondence teaching. He also introduced the importance of 'empathy', that is need for the correspondence tutor at a distance from her or his student to put him/herself in their position, to imagine what it might feel like to receive suggestions for development in student work. In other words, Holmberg identified the emotional dimension of learning and teaching, which had always been submerged or even denied. Holmberg spanned the correspondence education and distance education transition, or the move in European terms from private correspondence schools such as Hermods in Sweden, to the cohort of new open and single-mode distance teaching universities, of which the FernUniversität is an early one. While his work is no longer regularly cited, the culture and practice of correspondence teaching were significantly influenced by his work, and this has fed forward in many unacknowledged ways into the digital age to the practise of online teaching, computer conferencing and online discussion. His work can be placed in a larger context which might include the emotional intensity of nineteenth century letter writing as a practice, and the development of humanistic psychology in the 1960's which saw the learner in human development terms not simply as a 'pupil' to be instructed.

Michael Moore was the creator of the term 'transactional distance' in the early 1970s. While he spent the second half of his career in the USA, he was born and educated in the UK, and spent a decade at the Open University. Moore has been active until the very recent past in Europe, giving keynotes at conferences of the European Distance and E Learning Network (EDEN) amongst others, and his work has been cited for over 40 years. It is remarkable in a number of ways, including the fact that it remained current in the transition from the pre-digital era. Moore observes that in distance education there is a distance - emotional and psychological as well as geographical - between the learner and learning materials that does not exist when the teacher is active in the same room. This distance can negatively impact on the transaction, which is the relationship between the teaching and the learning that results. Many distance education systems have adopted mechanisms that seek to diminish that transactional distance, for example through tutoring, guidance, and other learner support. Moore's



theory is one of the few or indeed may be unique in distance education in that it can be used to test hypotheses, so can be used to frame experiments in tutoring or other learner support activities to assess what change there is in the outcomes of student learning, often judged by student completion.

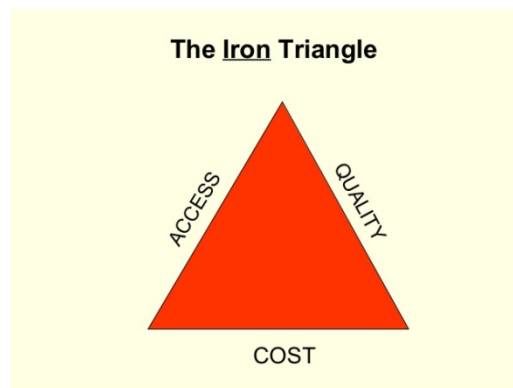
Otto Peters is our second figure from Germany, and represents that rare combination of the scholar and institutional leader. Peters in a long career is best known for his very substantial scholarly publications in this field, most notably for his commentary on the industrialised nature of distance teaching systems, known as the 'industrial model'. In this analysis Peters was the originator of the discussion of the disassembling of teaching into component parts that can be differently reassembled. That source of innovation in teaching has been subsequently much used, especially in the recent period in discussion of technology-enhanced education and the affordances of the digital revolution. But Peters was also perspicacious in his analysis that scale demanded uniform, reliable and hence industrialised processes, which now might be described as logistics. This applied not only to learning materials, which were seen in this frame of analysis as the mass produced successor to the 'craft' teaching of the individual lecturer in a classroom, but also to tutoring and learner support where quality assurance was needed to ensure that standards were defined and met in a large scale operation at a distance and out of sight of institutional managers. Peters made clear he did not advocate this industrialised model but observed it as coming into existence with the large scale distance teaching institutions of the 1970's in particular. Peters was a practitioner too as Founding Rector of the FernUniversität, Hagen, Germany, on its establishment in 1974. While there were in existence correspondence teaching institutions in both the then Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, and indeed a Research Institute in the field in Tübingen, Peters led the creation of the innovative and large scale (by European, not Asian, standards) institution that is the FernUniversität today. Peters remains active over a very long professional life, and engaged with the digital revolution, and is thus perhaps unique in being one of the very few senior figures in the field who has worked in all three historical phases in the field - correspondence, distance and the digitally enabled.

These three giants in the field thus establish Europe as a crucible for theory builders for distance and e-learning. But they have been succeeded by other notable figures, who emerge from the recent and current period, and who are all professionally active.



**Fig 1: Professors Börje Holmberg, Michael Moore and Otto Peters (left to right), at the EDEN conference, Barcelona, 2006. Photo with permission from EDEN.**

I would begin here by sketching the achievements of the very notable John Daniel, born in the UK, educated in Oxford and Paris, Vice Chancellor of the Open University for more than a decade from 1990, and subsequently Assistant Director General for Education at UNESCO, Paris for nearly a decade after that, before his move to back to Canada to head the Commonwealth of Learning. Daniel, like Peters before him, has therefore combined outstanding scholarly contributions to the field alongside institutional leadership. His most famous conceptual work has perhaps been the Iron Triangle of education, or the eponymous 'Daniel triangle', as it became known.



**Fig 2: The Iron Triangle.** (Daniel, 2011, Slide 21).

Daniel argued consistently over many years, especially in the context of global development and the need to expand educational opportunity that these three parameters of access, quality and cost were in active relationship and indeed tension. In other words the more you focused on one the more stress you placed on the others, and this could be represented graphically by triangles not of equal sides, as here, but with sides of differing lengths. The Daniel triangle has provided planners and managers with a framework to consider how they can govern priorities and resources, and has been of significant practical as well as academic interest.

Secondly Daniel is the foremost observer of the 'mega' institution, both in higher education and later at secondary school level. Daniel both observes and advocates for the creation of very large institutions, using technologies for learning, to manage the scale of need on a global scale for secondary and post-secondary education. The two books dedicated to the subject made major impact on appearance, in particular the earlier book on the mega universities where his highlighting of the scale of national open universities in India and China, with student numbers in several millions, was a revelation to many. The examination of innovative technologies for learning runs through more than 40 years of Daniel's publications, and is too extensive to elaborate here. Important to mention also however is Daniel's commitment to understanding and developing pedagogy, and the paper he co-wrote on 'Interaction and independence: getting the mixture right' was important in its day, back in 1979, in its stress on the role of the intermediary tutor for learner support.

Manuel Castells may usefully be sketched in here, not so much as a scholar of distance and e-learning in particular, although he has held a Chair at the Universitat Aberta de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain for many years, but as a leading and widely cited sociologist of technology and communication at

world-level. His legitimate place of note in this context derives from the fact that through his theory-building of the networked society he has revealed the ways that e-learning as one dimension of digital communication has played a significant role in restructuring society. A notable but lesser known scholar Christine von Prümmer, of the FernUniversität, Germany, was early and perhaps the first to focus on gender issues for women students in distance education. Her book on the subject in 2005 followed a long period of publication of articles and research reports, and represented the most authoritative account on how distance education served, and sometimes did not serve women, and how their social contexts and resultant needs for support were not researched and met. Often swimming against a tide of ignorance or worse, Von Prümmer asserted the agenda for women students with courage and resilience from an institutional position that did not provide the security of senior status. Greville Rumble of the Open University founded the scholarly examination of the costs and economics of distance education, setting out in his widely cited book of 1997 frameworks for understanding how the financial models for distance education differed from campus based education. He set out in particular the ways in which capital and recurrent costs differed, and later went on to examine how online learning demanded a rethinking of the costing structures of distance education.

Gilly Salmon also for much of her career at the Open University gained enormous attention in her focus on how learning and teaching interaction could be managed online. Her work in the first 10 years of the digital revolution on computer conferencing drew on the tradition initiated by Holmberg for conversations that supported learning. Her very practical approach gave name to the now ubiquitous 'e-tivity', an online and interactive activity intended to support active learning.

The most recent developments in open, distance and e-learning have also seen scholarly leadership from Europe. Firstly Martin Weller has established himself as a leader in the field of open education, both in institutional leadership with his early pioneering work with the Open University UK's OER Social Learn, and in his scholarship in the OER field. He has also paid particular attention to digital scholarship, identifying the ways in which the digital world has been changed and enabled by affordances such as blogs, of which his own 'the Ed Techie' is a notable example. Weller has gained respect by walking the walk in his publishing activities, ensuring that his books appear online and free at the point of use. Fred Mulder, former Rector of the Open Universiteit of the Netherlands has also demonstrated leadership at a global level through his tireless advocacy as well as scholarship on the potential of OER to further develop the revolution in learning that open education has offered. Mobile learning too has seen some notable scholars, from the OU UK Agnes Kukulska-Hulme and Mike Sharples, and from the University of Wolverhampton, John Traxler, who have all been in the forefront of study of the ways in which the advent of online with portable devices such as smart phones and tablets have changed the ways in which learning can be organised and practised

Lastly, there should be space too for Ros Morpeth, Director for two separate terms of the National Extension College (NEC), in the U.K. The NEC was founded by Michael Young, who was the first to coin the term 'open university' in the 1960's, and whose name is important to weave into any account of distance education in Europe. The NEC offers a range of qualifications in the school and post-school sectors for learners who would otherwise be excluded from opportunity, in particular due to geographical or health reasons. The NEC met significant financial challenges in the early 2000's, and after a take-over by another organisation the whole new institution was declared bankrupt and NEC's valuable property was sold off to meet the debt its new partner had, unbeknown to the NEC, brought to the marriage. Faced with the immediate prospect of NEC closing and failing the thousands of learners studying with it, as well as the end of educational opportunity for similar

learners in the future, in 2011 Morpeth came out of retirement and through her single-minded and courageous leadership rescued the College and continues to lead it back out of the financial quagmire in which it had been dumped. In 2014 Morpeth was recognised by the *Times Educational Supplement Newspaper* as Further Education Leader of the Year, citing her 'tenacity and inspirational leadership'.

To return to the question I began with, can we discern in this broad picture of leading figures in distance and e-learning in Europe some common themes that allow us to talk about 'European distance and e-learning'? Or do we rather have an extraordinary range of leaders and innovators who happen to be European because of cultural and educational strengths in the European continent, but who have little overall in common?

There are at least two potential unifying factors. Firstly European distance education was characterised in the period 1970-1990 by its adoption in 7 countries of an open university or single mode teaching university as the primary driver of massified higher education opportunity for adult part-time learners. It is noteworthy that a significant majority of the individuals whom I have identified in my portraits of European leaders and innovators spent some or all of their careers in these larger universities. While European education remains significantly divided by cultural traditions, and can be divided not only by the languages of Europe but also into Napoleonic, Humboldtian and Anglo-Saxon groupings in educational traditions, the open universities of Europe have, at least until 1990 or so, provided the most significant focus that is recognisably European. Over the last 25 years however there has been so much development driven by the digital revolution in so many different kinds of post-secondary institution that variety within Europe rather than European commonality is the predominant characteristic. This difference can be observed in the two main professional associations in Europe, namely the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), which derives from the earlier phase of open university domination of the field, and the European Distance and E-Learning Network (EDEN) which on a larger scale represents the wider and more heterogeneous range of actors.

The second potential unifying dynamic in Europe is of course the European Commission, the executive as well as to some considerable extent the political driver of a European framework for the 27 member countries (the U.K. still being a member at the time of writing). The European Union formally does not govern education policy in the member states, but this boundary has been breached for many years as the E.C. has a major and legitimate role in supporting education and training for economic and social development. It has also driven the development of common higher education qualifications across all EU member states in order to support easier movement of labour across the EU, a remarkable achievement that has stimulated major unifying conversations about the nature and purpose of higher education, including e-learning and open education, across the Union.

Overall and in conclusion I would suggest that the answer to my question as to whether the characteristics of leaders and innovators in this field allows us to speak of European distance and e-learning, is at least partially in the affirmative. The Open Universities of Europe have allowed many of the leaders here identified to flourish and develop their ideas, at least in part in reference to each other, and programmes and projects funded by the European Commission have over many years allowed cross-national European teams in this field to work and learn together. At the same time I should add that professionals in this field in the European continent despite these high levels of cross-national work continue to a considerable extent also to work within separate intellectual traditions as well as language groups, as a panoramic of the journals in French, Spanish and English would for example reveal. I am aware that my account here will reflect my own limited awareness and may not

do justice to figures unknown to me in some countries. If that is so, I can only apologise. But overall this field reveals, as do many others, as much diversity in character in Europe as it does commonality, and this I suggest remains the intriguing, engaging and challenging nature of the European identity over and above its many countries, languages and histories.

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