

# **DISTANCE IS DEAD, LONG LIVE DISTANCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For many educators, the phrase 'from distance education to e-learning' conjures up the view of an 'evolutionary' progression beginning with correspondence study and developed through more sophisticated technologies to its current identification with computers, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. For others, particularly those with little knowledge or experience of (and often equally little interest in) the field of distance education, e-learning represents a new phenomenon with the potential to transform traditional higher education.

Both views reflect confidence in an expanded potential, but 'e-learning', the term currently used to denote these expanded possibilities, represents a narrowing of rhetoric resulting in conceptual confusion which continues to create uncertainty amongst administrators, faculty, students, and researchers.

## **Introduction**

The title of my paper puns constitutional continuity that flows from the proclamation made on the death of a monarch – 'The King is dead. Long live the King' - in order to pursue two ideas. Firstly, while some critics like to argue that older forms of distance education are dead, theoretical continuity clearly exists in distance education, now driven by communication technologies. Secondly, who are the courtiers to the new king and how do they address the new monarch?

In whatever guise the phenomenon of teaching and learning takes – 'open learning', 'flexible learning', 'e-learning', 'e-education', 'blended learning', 'virtual learning' and so on – it is clear that it has gone far beyond a tipping point has become much more than 'distance learning' (Mersham 2008, p33). But what is 'more'? To investigate this

question, I survey the recent research literature relevant to these questions. Along the way I will touch upon terminological concerns and pedagogy related to this question<sup>1</sup>. I begin with a very brief historical overview.

## **History**

Anderson and Elloumi (2004) argue that distance education has 'aggregated' through four generations, beginning with correspondence study, through those characterized by the mass media (television and radio), synchronous technologies (video- and audio-conferencing), and computer conferencing, to the emerging fifth generation, 'the educational Semantic Web'. Each new generation has been added to the preceding ones, with the result that currently all five are operating in the overall educational context at the same time.

During the first three generations, distance education was a relatively minor, and marginalized activity, conducted and promoted by a small group of educators dedicated to broadening access to educational programming to unserved or under-served populations of students. They used a variety of media and media combinations to offer programmes to students who, because of barriers of distance or personal circumstances, were unable to participate in educational programmes at traditional institutions. Within traditional institutions, serving non-traditional students was usually viewed as secondary to the core institutional mission. Student numbers served by distance education programmes were small, and institutional support limited and focused on ensuring that such programmes did not detract from the institution's reputation (Thompson and Irele, 2003).

With the power and reach of the Internet, distance education has been 'reincarnated'. Renamed first as 'online learning', then as 'e-learning', it has moved from the periphery to centre stage. This rapid movement into the mainstream of higher education reflects a new image for distance education promising a technology-based transformation of education (Katz and Ohlinger, 2000).

The changes have had a profound impact on its recognition and adoption by traditional contact educational institutions. It is no longer an alternative primarily for non-traditional students but is rapidly being incorporated into programmes serving

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1. The views discussed here are also informed by ten years as a distance student, twenty years as a communication professor in various contact institutions on three continents and two years as a communications professor 'convert' in distance education in New Zealand.

traditional campus-based students under its newest banner, 'blended learning' (Thompson and Irele, 2003).

### **Terminological concerns**

In spite of this movement into campus-based education there is a consistent lack of agreed meanings about the terminology used to describe this amalgam. 'Web supported', 'web assisted', 'fully online', 'blended' and 'hybrid' are but a few of the terms currently used (Petrova and Sinclair 2008, p113).

The concept of Lifelong Open and Flexible Learning (LOF), the successor to the ODL (Open and Distance Learning), is well established conceptually in Europe (Mersham, 2008). It excludes reference to e-learning but the term 'open' describes the students flexibility and choice over what, when, at what pace, where, and how they learn (clearly excluding blended learning at contact based institutions. The term 'e-learning' itself suggests a biased view of education from the communication perspective, comprising one letter representing a property of technology (e for electronic) and the anticipated outcome (learning) for one participant in the interaction (Thompson 2007, p162). Although some might argue that the learning refers to an outcome for all participants, the ubiquitous use of the term 'learner-centred' as a quality indicator leaves little doubt as to whose learning is being designated. Critics refer to the "E is for Everything" pointing out that there are few devices today that do not contain an electronic chip of some description, making the 'property' meaningless.

The term 'distance' in distance education is assumed by many outside the field to refer simply to a physical property, namely the physical space that separates learners from the institution, teacher and each other (Thompson 2007, p161). Therefore when arguing for the revision of terminology, some contend that information and communication technologies effectively dissolve that space making it inappropriate to keep distance as the defining characteristic of teaching and learning supported by such technologies.

Apart from the inadequacy of using one physical property such as 'electronic' for defining the complete process of teaching and learning, we find the tendency of replacing the property of distance with another physical property 'online', 'electronic' (shortened to 'e') or 'blended'. All of these, on their own are conceptually confusing and just as inadequate as a single defining property of the phenomenon. For example, 'online', which originally referred to actual connection to a physical line, provides

little conceptual guidance as a definition in an age when connections are increasingly made through mobile, wireless means as they are through physical lines.

Similarly, the 'e' in e-learning stands for electronic, which appropriately applies to a wide range of technologies, although it is used almost always — but not exclusively — in reference to computer networks and computers. Saba (2005) suggests that none of the terms currently proposed to replace distance education has been demonstrated to be a valid descriptive, explanatory, or organizing construct.

Regarding e-learning Thompson (2007, p162) notes: "In response to a perceived need to shift the focus from the instructor or the institution to the student, new terms have been coined that effectively eliminate one half of the social interaction formerly referred to as education". Clearly, the missing half is the interaction between tutor/lecturer and learner and this is a 'communication' issue.

Substituting 'learning' for 'education' is happily uncontested within the call to 'democratize' education by empowering students or learners: name the promise (learning) and it is brought into being by 'linguistic fiat'. This falls into a wider, optimistic view of technology generally (Boshier and Mun Onn, 2000), and e-learning's ability to deliver a variety of astonishing results divorced from any need to understand how and why it works from a communication perspective (Mersham & Viviers, 2007; Viviers and Mersham 2007).

Similarly 'contact learning' is not useful as a term to delineate institution-based delivery. Distance education practitioners argue that they also provide 'contact', albeit via electronic media and claim they were never limited to merely bridging a physical distance. Their perspective "recognised that 'distance' was a factor that strongly influences all interpersonal interaction, including that known as 'education'"(Thompson, 2007 p162).

Accordingly, in distance learning scholarship, 'distance' has refers to both a physical space that needs to be bridged, and importantly the psychological distance that characterises any educational activity. Saba (2003:17) argues that:

[Physical] separation can be bridged by communication technology, a fact demonstrated by the teachers and students everywhere. But if students and teachers are separated by the total lack of dialog, as occurs in many classrooms across the country and around the world, bringing them together until they stand nose to nose will not offer a solution.

Claims of contact proponents that face-to-face tuition does not involve distance can be questioned when a lecture is given in a 250 seater lecture theatre.

Undoubtedly the issue of dialog equals one of communication, fundamental to understanding the broader educational challenges. Consequently, the concept of distance as separation without dialog is relevant to both technology mediated and face-to-face education.

There have been clear differences between contact and distance institutions. While distance providers have increasingly tended to engage themselves fully in e-learning, contact institutions have made uncoordinated, departmental or faculty focused piecemeal efforts to incorporate e-learning (OECD, 2005). There is considerable resistance to e-learning among contact practitioners for various reasons, but a consistent claim is that 'contact' automatically (and unproblematically) means 'better communication' because it infers face-to-face communication.

The European Commission warns that universities are failing to address the European lifelong learning agenda and substantially increase participation in their educational programmes. Universities are accused of offering the same courses to the same age groups and not really open to other types of learning and learner groups. This trend towards a different model is part of the modernization agenda for Europe's universities. (Mulder 2006, p3). Interestingly because open and distance learning institutions have traditionally targeted the lifelong learners, and provide a model for this kind of delivery, they are regarded as being in the best position to provide these offerings (Mulder, 2006, p.3).

Consensus on terminology remains a long way off. One cannot expect colleagues in contact institutions to define e-learning in the way that 'fully' distance providers do. As research carried out by Halperin (2008, pps 96-111) shows, the impact of institutional factors in e-learning is crucial when theorising about e-learning. "Hybrid" (Cookson, 2002) and "blended" (Ginns & Ellis, 2007) modes of implementation, most often refers to learning technology integration into traditional on-campus education. Because these take place within the physical environment of the university, and since learning technology is meant to complement, rather than to replace the existing system, the role played by the pre-existing institutional context becomes all the more important. Different opportunities, challenges, and concerns are brought to the fore, calling for more research into hybrid e-learning which "largely remains an under-

researched phenomenon requiring further exploration" (Halperin 2008, p101). The importance of research in this area is highlighted by the growing pervasiveness and anticipated growth of this integrated mode across the higher education sector (Allen & Seaman, 2004).

For research into hybrid e-learning, the institution into which e-learning is introduced cannot be seen to represent a plain variable. There is considerable criticism of the over generalised and over standardised assumptions about the character of universities and traditional learning prevailing in the literature (Ehrmann, 1995; Saba, 1999). Ehrman (1995) points to the mechanical conception underlying comparative studies of technology-based methods vs. traditional methods. These studies assume that higher education is machine-like, and that each institution is a slightly different version of the same ideal machine. The phrase "traditional methods" is used to represent some widely practiced method that presumably has predictable, acceptable results. In reality, university learning is not so well-structured, uniform, or stable that one can simply compare an innovation against traditional processes. A variety of inconsistent goals, unclear methods and processes, and uncertain organisational boundaries seem to describe both institutions and their courses (Ehrmann, 1995; Brown and Duguid 1998).

The diversification of learning technology implementation in higher education and the diversity of hybrid models employed illustrate the influence of particular socio-organisational elements on the actual use of the technology (Halperin 2008, p102). It is therefore suggested that a systematic analysis of the institutional context within which learning technology is implemented and used is essential for understanding both the processes and consequences of e-learning (Mersham 2008; Halperin 2008).

### **Pedagogic design and distance education**

According to Kirkwood and Price (2008, p10), "some distance educators continue to expound a technologically deterministic view of teaching and learning". For example, Beldarrain (2006, p. 147) declares that 'emerging technologies are changing practices in online distance learning and influencing theoretical frameworks' for teaching and learning. This assertion however, is based upon the expression of aspirations by some teachers and instructional designers that draw upon the potential of new software tools to enhance distance education. Technologies can enable different pedagogical models to be utilised by distance educators, but they do not in themselves bring about changes

in the practices of teachers and learners. Commonly, technologies are used by teachers to supplement their existing ways of working.

The pedagogy or learning activities in e-learning exist in direct and mutually dependent relationships with one or more technologies that support their effective use (Anderson 2007:2). This capacity for technologies to support and allow certain activities while preventing others has been referred to as the *affordance* of that technology (Gibson 1979). It is not solely the property of the technology but rather the way the application is used in real contexts by both experts and novices that define its affordance (Anderson 2007:2)

However, Kirkwood and Price (2008, p11) state that in "various distance education institutions we have found ample evidence of the failure of technology-led innovations to achieve the transformations expected by educators". New e-learning opportunities are under-utilised and ineffective when they have been grafted onto courses that are rooted in pedagogic models and practices with which they are not aligned. For example, Erlich, Erlich-Philip and Gal-Ezer (2005) report that web resources and communications facilities were little used when added to existing distance education courses. Others have found that making two-way communication available, such as computer-mediated conferencing, is unlikely to be sufficient to achieve worthwhile teaching and learning outcomes, when it is simply added to an existing course intended for individual study (Fung, 2004; Kear, 2004).

If a course has been designed with a didactic approach to teaching, with all the necessary materials being provided for learners and with assessment that rewards only the outputs from each individual student, there is little room for exploiting the pedagogic potential of communications media. Similarly, if a course 'package' provides everything those students will need for assessment purposes, learners see no benefit from consulting 'external' sources of information (Kirkwood, 2006).

Conversely if, a course has been conceived and designed based upon a model that assumes communication with other learners and/or drawing upon online information resources will be not only desirable, but necessary features of the learning experience, it is very likely that learners will engage actively with these activities (Kirkwood, 2008). Integrated course design of this kind would require the educational rationale to be made explicit, not simply assumed to be self-evident, and the expectations of learners to be managed appropriately.

Collaboration and team working are vital aspects of the learning process, and the product of shared endeavours through communication should be taken into account (Macdonald, 2003, Mersham & Viviers, 2007).

Kirkwood and Price argue that

... "outcomes should be conceived in terms of the knowledge and understanding of the subject matter that learners are expected to demonstrate, the cognitive skills (e.g. analyse, review, evaluate, etc.) necessary for the intellectual processing of information and data, *and the key practical skills of handling information and communicating with other people* (2008, p12, emphasis mine).

Anderson (2005) emphasizes the flexibility of individuals to learn together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationship in e-education. His definition acknowledges that learning can be a social activity, but not excluding individual learning or learning that extends beyond cohort and especially face-to-face groups. Rather, the definition focuses on the needs of users to control, in various dimensions, their learning while not excluding the opportunity to meet with, share and develop knowledge and understanding in many types of social context. "This control extends to cross the traditional bounds of time and space to encompass learner negotiation of the media of learning, the content of study and especially the relationships that are utilized as components of learning activity" (Anderson 2005).

A key area for research lies the communicative affordances offered in e-learning, since this offers to uncover 'something new' in the conception of communication in the e-learning context. E-learning varies the relationship among the elements of speaker/writer, audience, and the message content. For example, a single teacher, lecturer, or course e-tutor may at one time address a whole class of e-learners; at other times, the communication may be one- to-one; and at yet other times, a single e-learner may send a message to the class as a whole on a bulletin board or as part of an ongoing small group dialogue meeting the aims of social constructivist pedagogy.

These patterns of communication and interaction have been shown to be affordances that are not necessarily present in face-to-face context, and the asynchrony available to e-learners potentially makes for a more reflective dynamic. Critically, from the point of view of communication theory, the student is more in control of the rhetorical process. For the tutor, the technology provides 'opportunities of manoeuvre' – to create communication patterns and opportunities - not available in non-mediated communication (Anderson 2007).

I now turn briefly to some critical concerns around the broader discourse of technological optimism and human communication.

### **The death of communication**

Some communication scholars, grounded in the paradigms of the humanities, find themselves concerned about questions of "What is 'real' and 'authentic' communication in the context of e-learning?"

Throughout the discourse of communication studies we find reference to the 'ideal type' form of communication as interpersonal, two-way, face-to-face, dialogic and synchronous (Van Schoor, 1979, 1986). O'Sullivan *et al.* (1994, p42) aver that interpersonal communication is typically understood as face-to-face, direct 'persona to persona' communication, which is unassisted, uninterrupted and unmediated by media technologies. Interpersonal communication occupies "a central position" in the communication panoply of contexts (Tyler, Kossan & Ryan, 2002, p 184). As Trenholm (2008, p140) avers, interpersonal communication "is arguably the most important form of communication that humans undertake".

To what extent can we talk of interpersonal communication in the e-learning context if it is not face-to-face? Is interpersonal communication, for so long held up as the 'ideal-type' of dialogic, synchronous communication, really the philosophical benchmark we have made it out to be?

We cannot easily transpose such 'ideal types' into the new electronic environment because many of the codes of interpersonal, face-to-face communication (non verbal, gestural, haptic, etc) are not present in the online environment. For example what lecturer in communication has not referred to the oft cited proposition that in face-to-face communication, the words we speak actually account for less than 10% of the

meaning that we convey, while body language accounts for more than half of our message (other metalinguistics codes such as tone of voice supposedly communicates the rest) (cf, for example, Peart and Macnamara, 1996, p130, Weaver 1996, p17).

Weaver (1996, p19) warns that "Eliminating direct contact in interpersonal communication almost has the effect of taking the personal out of interpersonal communication". While in a sense all communication might be argued as interpersonal because it is between people, it is "generally reserved for two-person, face-to-face interaction" (Trenholm, 2008, p141).

### **The death of physical place and space**

The techno-cynics claim that CMC has led to the elimination of space (distance) and of place (Augé 1995; Castells 1996; Hardt and Negri 2000).

Electronic communications obliterate our sense of place because it presents information in a decontextualised fashion — as if it emerged 'from nowhere' because it entails a separation of social place from physical place (Meyrowitz 1985, p115).

Place becomes devoid of sense; it no longer matters where one is; as a result communication loses its historical sense, and becomes abstract and individuated (Van Loon, 2008, p46).

According to Van Loon (2008, p46) the crisis extends to the personal level.

Without place it becomes more difficult to attain a sense of integrity; one's comportment — and the interpersonal responsibilities that go with it — becomes loosened and disconnected from faces and from face-to-face encounters. In the interfaciality of electronic communications, those who are involved are invited to suspend claims to authentic being in favour of playful and performative assertions.

This is similar to what Castells (1996) calls 'the space of flows' which becomes radically separate from the 'space of places'.

## **The death of distance**

As I have argued above, the changes occurring in the field of distance education have had a profound impact on its recognition and adoption by traditional educational institutions.

However, even though we may insist that distance education has begun to achieve long-deferred recognition for the benefits it provides, this established field of practice and research is threatened with remarginalization. This threat has taken the form of an almost universal rejection of the term 'distance education' in favour of new terms coined to describe a type of education characterized not by 'distance', which is of interest to a relative minority like those of us gathered here today, but rather by the term 'electronic' (using the shortened to 'e' described above), which is of greater interest to most people. It is unnecessary to repeat here the numerous accounts of the world's ever deepening love affair with technology in general (i.e., all things 'e'), or the computer in particular. We are all part of that story! The problem lies with those who 'hype' the value of the technology treating it as 'King' rather than interrogating the "other bits" that make up the educative process (particularly that most human of activities, communication). As Boshier and Mun Onn (2000, p, 1) put it:

A curious coalition of right and left interests quietens voices that would otherwise raise awkward questions. The radical right and neo-liberals like the Web because it seems efficient. It nicely fits the exhortation to "do more with less." Moreover, it straddles national boundaries and coincides with the interest in internationalizing education within the context of the global economy. For entirely different reasons, anarchist-utopians like the Web because it enables them to bypass and subvert unequal power relations that infest much of formal education...indigenous people, women and others typically locked out of formal education, love it.

Techno-utopians delegitimize older forms of correspondence or distance education by claiming the convergence between telecommunications and computers represents a paradigm shift (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1996). The argument goes that the discontinuity between current and earlier attempts to reach off-campus learners is so profound as to render the past meaningless.

In fact, e-learning conferences are characterised by 'paradigm shift' presentations, delivered in enthusiastic, almost breathless addresses packed with buzzwords and unproblematized invocations about empowerment and the latest 'breakthrough' in

technology which turns out to be one or other new piece of software. Techno-utopians are often consultants or industry representatives with one or other service or product on offer.

Those who reject the term 'distance education' often argue that it is associated with a marginalized activity, particularly correspondence study; that many 'e-learners' are physically present on campuses rather than at a distance; and that 'distance' references physical proxemics characterized by institutions and teachers at the centre, a perspective that is inappropriate in a 'learner-centred' context.

Although the change to 'e-learning' terminology may be inevitable and permanent, the reasons for change presented above have at best only partial validity, and that substitution of the term 'e-learning', while solving some difficulties, introduces others.

## **Presence**

Does one have to be 'in' a place physically to be 'present'? In current theory, the answer appears to be 'No!'

Thompson (1995, p4) asserts that the use of CMC transforms the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, and new modes of exercising power, which are no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale.

As a logical consequence of this, the sense of what it is to be human has changed dramatically as well (Hayles 1999). A human being 'wired up' to the network is "a rather different organism than a human being that is not connected" (Van Loon, 2008, p106). The human being, as a social animal, adapts to the electronic space by adopting different modalities and techniques of association. Moreover, it is argued by some scholars that given this changed the nature of our spatial and temporal orientation to the world, the way we perceive, think and make sense of the world has also changed (Fuller 2005). We have become 'networked beings'.

In the world of e-education, the nature of the networked being contains a radically different understanding of 'presence'. It is no longer dominated by the 'face-to-face' encounter, but engages in a 'simultaneity of presences'. An example is the 'online forum', entailing the multiplicity of the presences of the participants described by Nowotny (1994) as an 'extended presence'. The extended presence is derived from

what McLuhan and Fiore (1967) termed an 'all-at-once-ness' or what is today better known as 'the virtual' (Van Loon, 2008, p107).

McLuhan (1964) consistently reminded us that media are extensions of human faculties and this provides the basis of his phenomenological excursions into analysing different types of media forms. In this sense, we can apply what this 'extension' entails, phenomenologically, to e-education. First, extension relates to space. By extending human faculties, media spatialize the human being as 'being there' - the 'there' becomes an extended simultaneous 'networked' presence. Second, extension relates to 'place' - being able to be 'present' in more than one 'space' or 'place' at any one time. Third, extension relates to time. Being there becomes 'prolonged' (an extended 'present'). So, for example, unlike synchronous forms of online communication, which require real-time online participation, asynchronous communication media (ACM) provides the flexibility required by many distance learners so that they can log on to the system and participate in a conference or forum at any time. According to Hopkins, Gibson, Ros i Solé, Savvides and Starkey (2008) it is for this reason that ACM conferencing is unlikely to be completely replaced by synchronous forms of online communication in the foreseeable future.

In parallel with this extended presence in time, the extensions of human faculties produce increased immediacy and instantaneity. The 'extended presence' enables greater synchronization between different communication flows resulting in a diversity of interactions engaged in 'wherever and whenever'; hence, McLuhan's concept of 'all-at-once-ness'.

The removal of time and space restrictions and the interactive nature of ACM conferencing provide numerous additional advantages.

### **Online presence on interaction**

Much of the research on CMC focuses on the importance of 'social presence' (for example, Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001), a concept first mooted thirty years ago (Short, Williams and Christie, 1976). This theory predicted that the fewer non-verbal cues conveyed by a medium, the lower the level of social presence. Walther, Anderson, and Park (1994, p. 426) describe the principal claim of social presence theory as follows:

Social presence, or the salience of another person in an interaction, is said to depend on the number of channels or codes available within the medium; the fewer the channels, the less attention paid by the user to the presence of other social participants. As CMC filters out nonverbal channels—channels that are generally rich in interpersonal information—social presence should be lower, and messages presumably are more impersonal.

This theory, therefore, suggests that interaction is likely to be a relatively less in e-education given the lack of non-verbal cues. However, in his social information processing theory, Walther (1992) rebuts the ‘cues-filtered-out’ perspective, arguing that actors engaged in CMC environments ultimately overcome the limitations of this restricted form of communication and exhibit socially revealing, relational behaviour. An early prediction was that ‘given sufficient time for multiple message exchange and development ... relational patterns in CMC and face-to-face settings should become similar’ (Walther *et al.*, 1994, p.466; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hara et al., 2000; Rourke & Anderson, 2002).

A significant development from Short *et al.*’s (1976) original formulation of social presence is that social information processing focuses on the individual, and takes the medium for granted. According to Walther (1992, p. 68):

...the term social information processing is used to describe the (individual) cognitive processing of socially revelatory information (a subsequent communication based on that information), rather than the social (conjoint) processing of information (about a medium).

Rourke *et al.* (2001, p. 51) define social presence as ‘the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry’. Similarly, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001, p. 4) define social presence as the extent to which participants are able ‘to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as “real people”’.

It is not clear from the research, however, what effect these social aspects have specifically on overall learning outcomes and the extent to which participants engage in higher-order critical inquiry in ACM conferences. Some research suggests that social presence and group cohesion are a necessary condition for successful online conferencing, but an excessive amount of socializing may hinder achievement of pedagogical goals – unsurprisingly not unlike situations found in contact institutions .

Likewise, Garrison and Cleveland-Innes stress that, although it may be a necessary condition, online socialization on its own is not sufficient for pedagogical goals such as reflection to be realized:

...interaction is not a guarantee that students are cognitively engaged in an educationally meaningful manner. High levels of interaction may be reflective of group cohesion, but it does not directly create cognitive development or facilitate meaningful learning and understanding. Interaction directed to cognitive outcomes is characterized more by the qualitative nature of the interaction and less by quantitative measures. There must be a qualitative dimension characterized by interaction that takes the form of purposeful and systematic discourse. (2005, p. 135)

In this view, the tutor is a facilitator whose main role is to moderate and ensure a sense of coherence in the online discussion. The degree of intervention required by the tutor will vary depending on the purpose and aims of the conference, and the extent to which students are participating. The tutor's main goal is to engage the participants 'to enable "meaning making" rather than content transmission' (Mersham & Viviers 2007; Mersham 2008; Salmon, 2003 p.52). Therefore, subject expertise is not the only requirement. The ability to support and engage in and encourage communication is just as important.

Another model regarding tutor role has been proposed by Anderson et al. (2001). These authors introduce the concept of 'teaching presence', which they define as 'the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (2001, p. 5). 'Teaching presence', rather than 'teacher presence', is used in recognition of the fact that learners may also assume the role of teacher.

However, in spite of the above Hopkins *et al.* (2008, p29—42) in a wide ranging survey of existing research, conclude that there is a lack of evidence for claims made for the potential of CMC in e-education to promote higher-order critical inquiry and the social construction of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

While distance education has been reincarnated in a new amalgam that offers social constructivist pedagogy through enhanced communication it appears that it will never be understood again in its older form.

Clearly there are relatively few examples of published research that describe in detail and evaluate tasks that involve negotiation of meaning, synthesis or assimilation of socially constructed knowledge. Research is therefore sorely needed to shed light on what type and how much tutor intervention is most effective in promoting higher levels of critical inquiry.

Clearly the role played by institutional context is important in analysing the different opportunities, challenges, and concerns that are foregrounded, calling for more research into hybrid e-learning which largely remains an under-researched phenomenon requiring further exploration.

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