

Chapter VI

Ethical Concerns with Open and Distance Learning

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ABSTRACT

Some of the more important ethical concerns associated with open and distance learning are not those that may be faced by learners. Instead, the challenges faced by those that design ODL or use it in their teaching can be seen as increasingly important. These challenges include globalization, which has emphasized instrumental rather than social aims of education, and the use of cognitive rather than affective pedagogies. For ODL designers and teachers, this has resulted in a concentration on cognitive tasks and market-driven aspects of open and distance learning at the expense of the social harmony that might otherwise be achieved. The overarching ethical concern for ODL practitioners should be to implement an appropriate pedagogy that will satisfy both instrumental and social aims. While this can be achieved, in part, through the use of the pedagogies outlined in this chapter, the problem is seen as being associated with deeply interwoven social and cultural contexts. Consequently, there is a greater responsibility for all ODL practitioners to ensure that the choices that they make are ethical at all times, irrespective of the demands of any employer, institution or authority.

Meanwhile, so long as we draw breath, so long as we live among men, let us cherish humanity. Seneca, Roman Philosopher, CA 4BC-AD65 (Seneca, 2007)

PROLOGUE: ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND ODL

Increasingly, the enthusiastic adoption of Open and Distance Learning Systems (ODLS) in higher education has resulted in the increased availability of tertiary courses for students and benefits for the organizations that provide it. The concurrent emergence of theory and practice related to open and distance education (ODL) has highlighted emotional and psychological issues, and it has raised questions related to the role of virtual learning environments and pedagogies in promoting human and social needs. The future development of ODL as a mature discipline requires mutual trust between students, teachers, developers and researchers. This development is at a critical stage, because rather than anticipate ethical problems, and plan appropriate procedures to meet the challenge, it has too often been the practice for those associated with ODL to take the easiest and most pragmatic path, without adequate consideration of the long-term effects of their work on individuals and society. As Russell (2005) suggests, “It is...possible for educators to become overly preoccupied with online technologies, financial considerations, and utility at the expense of ethical and community considerations.”

It is likely that the statement in the code of ethics from the Australian College of Educators that “Teachers are responsible for what they teach and for the way that they relate to students” (Haynes 1998, p. 176) probably has counterparts in similar ethical codes from other countries. It suggests that there is a continued ethical responsibility that must be faced by every individual working with ODL which cannot be excused by any characteristics of the technology itself, or

by institutional constraints. One of the problems associated with ODL has been that the long-term consequences of choices between alternatives are often unclear. Russell (2004) suggests that examples of irresponsible behaviour, including the actions of surgeons, motor vehicle manufacturers and operators of radiation equipment, are more easily identified when there is an empirically verifiable cause and effect.

In this respect, a comparison between the work of scientists and practitioners involved in ODL is instructive, in that disinterested observers can identify moral dilemmas more easily with the work of scientists. This is because the potential of a technology to result in harm is clearer when death or a physical injury is likely to result from its use. In the case of ODL designers and teachers, alleged disadvantages such as psychological effects, or long-term changes to the nature of society, are likely to be disputed.

Two examples related to scientists’ approaches to moral dilemmas illustrate this point. Jungk (1958) describes the attitude of scientists who worked on the first atomic bombs. He gives the example of a brilliant mathematician at Los Alamos, whose work had contributed to the first nuclear explosions. However, his interest was in science rather than in the effects of his work on people. He did not watch the trial explosions of the bombs, and refused to look at pictures of destruction that they had caused. A second example can be found in the work of Louis Feiser (1964), whose work contributed to the development of napalm. Feiser’s book describing his experiments is a well-written explanation of the scientific method used to develop napalm. However, despite discussion of incidents in his personal life (and unlike Oppenheimer, 1948), there is little evidence that he was preoccupied with the moral consequences of the technology that he was developing. Indeed, in an interview with the New York Times (“Napalm inventor discounts guilt”, 1967), Feiser stated that he felt no guilt about his work, and that it was not his business

to deal with political and moral questions. It is this same concept of the pure technician who is not accountable beyond his area of expertise that is criticized in Sammon's (1992) condemnation of Albert Speer as a moral failure.

While scientists' awareness of consequences and moral culpability can sometimes be criticized, as with the preceding examples, the potential for harm is clear when the technology in question is clearly related to some physical injury. ODL also requires the use of technology, but it is very different in nature; it has not been planned with the intention of causing harm, and some practitioners will overlook the possibility that ethical dilemmas may result from the adoption of distance learning unless the focus shifts to the learner. Indeed, for some writers in this field, there is a preoccupation with issues that may confront the user, such as plagiarism or online behaviour, at the expense of issues facing designers, developers and teachers. ODL usually requires a virtual learning environment (VLE) in which teachers use a range of online tools to teach students or to help them to reach their educational goals. While ODL is a convenient term to describe a range of environments, tools, and associated pedagogies, it is however, not monolithic in nature. Conceptually, it is not like a black box containing mysterious individual components.

Although there can be robust debate about the best ways to conduct ODL, it is likely that some approaches will be more effective than others in promoting student learning. In addition, as technological effects are unlikely to be limited to student learning, indirect effects can be expected, such as changes in students' ability to relate with others in society. It follows, then, that decisions to prefer one ODL technology over another is an ethical decision, because varying amounts of good or harm flow to the individual and society as a result of it. DiBiase (2000) has observed of distance education that "...professional educators have a moral obligation to students, and to society, to provide the highest quality education possible

by means of the most effective means available" (p. 132). Consequently, the teacher is under an obligation to not knowingly implement any practice that will cause harm. There is a continuing responsibility for students' welfare, including that of adults, in this respect.

It is, however, difficult or even impossible to establish causal relationship between a specific ODL technique and the behaviour or attitudes of students. We can readily test cognitive outcomes and determine whether a given ODL approach has contributed to specified knowledge, but cause and effect observations based on empirical phenomena are easier to understand than their affective counterparts. For example, it would be more problematic if an ODL teacher observed that some students were intolerant of others, and linked this behaviour to teaching practices used. Nevertheless, the lack of certainty in establishing such a link does not mean that the consequences of choosing a particular pedagogy should be ignored.

As Zembylas (2005) argues, online pedagogies are about more than knowledge and its conceptual and aesthetic organisation. Specific interactions are mediated by the technology, but they are still fundamentally constructed by learners and teachers. Similarly, Meyer (2005) maintains that the Internet is the product of design choices and choices about how to use it.

Consequently, although the effects of a given ODL technology are linked to the characteristics of that technology, fundamentally, people make ethical decisions and they must accept responsibility for them. Given this observation, it is useful to note some of the ways in which ODL has been used in recent times, and for what purposes.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE GROWTH OF ENDS: MEANS INTERPRETATIONS OF ODL

The growth of globalization in recent years has been accompanied by an increased use of online

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technology. For Castells (1993), the transformations in the world economy represents a revolution whose core is based on information technologies. These changes have been accompanied by extensive changes in education. Torres (2002) argues that there have been changes in the kinds of goods and services that are available to people. One unwelcome change, however, is the failure to cater for noneconomic needs. Yang (2003) explains the inability of globalization to cater for what Welton (1995) describes as the “lifeworld.”

With market mechanism at its core, globalisation undermines certain basic human needs...it does not necessarily cater to non-economic needs. The need to provide for ourselves, to give, create and invent, to do things for ourselves and one another...all this is subverted by the market. (Yang, 2003, p. 272)

Kellner (2000) suggests that important consequences of these new technologies include the further colonization of education by business at the expense of politics and culture, and the undermining of democracy through the hegemonic influence of capital at the expense of other domains of life. For Streibel (1988), the technical nature of the delivery system has the capacity to shift educational interactions away from interpersonal interactions toward procedural skills and information-processing functions, while Hylnka and Belland (1991) maintain that enquiries related to educational technology seemed to be limited to enquiries about outcomes of technologically-based learning systems.

Writing in the pre-online era, Murphy and Pardeck (1985) suggest that technology advances a world view that shapes social existence, while Apple (1988) argued that computer technology embodied a form of thinking that oriented a person to approach the world in a particular way. The technical logic involved in this approach was seen as replacing critical, political and ethical understanding.

For ODL practitioners it is increasingly likely that ODL will be presented as an environment in which cognitive outcomes are emphasised at the expense of affective. If choices in ODL environments are linked to business attitudes toward issues such as social responsibility, there are some indications that ethical choices will be restricted. May (1986) describes the ways in which profit-oriented pressures can act as countervailing pressures to the ethical motivations of professional engineers, while in an article originally written in 1970, Friedman (2001) remarked that:

...there is only one social responsibility of business -to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud. (p. 55)

Although it is not at all certain that the majority of business people would agree with this position, the choice between alternative pedagogies in ODL are influenced by a mindset that both sees social responsibility as someone else’s problem, and does not always recognise that there are choices to be made. Where a given pedagogy is seen as efficient in achieving measurable ends and is consistent with existing practices, concerns such as civic engagement, democracy and personal relationships will be marginalized. This does not mean that ODL practitioners are consciously acting in an unethical or antisocial manner; as Milojevik (2005) argues, hegemonic futures eliminate alternatives by not contesting them or making them illegal or unpopular, but by making them invisible. To extend the metaphor of the information superhighway, it is as though a driver can follow the brightly lit signs indicating the most direct route to a destination, but does not notice other signs and destinations.

It is less likely that those involved in ODL will notice that ethical choices are available to them when the predominating ethos supports corporate

capitalism rather than the imperatives of society. In this respect, the observations by Aronowitz and Giroux (1993) concerning beliefs about schooling in the USA can also be applied to other areas, including ODL. Aronowitz and Giroux maintain that under the Reagan/Bush administration in the USA, the notion of schooling as a vehicle for social justice and public responsibility was “trashed for the glitter of the marketplace and the logic of the spirited entrepreneur” (p. 8). For universities, the implication of this observation in recent years in some developed countries has been that vocational aspects and profit have been considered as more important than earlier concepts of the university that involved a liberal tradition. Evans and Nation (2000) suggest that the notion of the university as a “critical community of scholars” has changed into one of the university as an educational corporation. ODL has been seen as an important means of providing an education for students and an income stream for higher education. While there is always a choice between competing pedagogies and tools in ODL, it is nevertheless likely that, in practice, choices may be restricted by prevailing expectations of the purposes of ODL and the ways in which it is used.

Summer (2000) suggests that some of the ethical problems that have been discussed in this chapter can be seen as a choice in distance education between serving the “system” or the “lifeworld.” She raises the question of whether the chosen technology used in distance education enhances social learning, or whether it makes educational transactions more efficient by enhancing individualized learning. It is possible that a concurrent solution to this dilemma may be implemented which simultaneously enables ODL to be used in both areas, and the choice may not be between two polar opposites. It is important to note, however, that Summer’s discussion of these issues provides an ODL context for a debate that predates online learning and has continued for more than a 100 years. Matthew Arnold (1882) cautioned against the “unfettered pursuit of the

production of wealth” at the expense of social issues, while Watt (1929) maintained that moral principles should be applied to economic activities, and Mumford (1934) explained his concerns about the tendency of capitalism to use machines rather than further social welfare, and for machines to modify the cultural forms of civilization. Collectively, the continued debate of such issues over time, despite enormous changes in society and technology, prompts a reflection about the ethical use of ODL in the near and distant future.

It seems reasonable to suggest that improvements in available ODL technology will, in turn, enable more ethical choices to be made. Arguably, there will be increases in bandwidth, and technologies such as video conferencing will become more common. A consequence of the increased use of interactive technologies could be that students’ emotional and social needs could be catered for more effectively. While this scenario is initially attractive, it does not, however, meet the objection that an educator’s choice of ODL technology may be driven by a complex mix of factors, of which the availability of a technology may be only one of many. Stewart and Williams (1998) remind us that social choices are inherent in the ways in which technologies are selected and implemented, and these in turn shape further change. Hence, the question of ethical choices in ODL discussed in this chapter is as much the question of globalization and related political, economic and social factors as it is of the characteristics of available technology.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIETY OF HUMAN INTERACTION AND OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

An in-depth exploration of ethical issues associated with ODL needs to establish that there are preferred alternatives to the pedagogy associated with globalisation and procedural means-ends techniques such as those discussed earlier in this

chapter. It is also important that ODL developers know (or reasonably ought to know) what consequences their actions may have on society, in addition to any immediate effects on the learner. As Weckert and Adeney (1997) suggest, while experts ought to be accountable for their actions in their professional fields, to be held accountable, a person must have caused the event or knowingly allowed it to happen.

It seems clear that an ODL pedagogy which teaches a body of knowledge, but undervalues key aspects of human interaction and the impact of distance education on society must be seen as limited. Where these interactions are relevant in determining learners' emotional states, or in ascertaining what is of value to them, there are contingent links to questions of ethics.

There are indications that some pedagogies used in ODL can be considered to be more appropriate than others. This is particularly true when ODL is compared to face-to-face alternatives. While it is likely, as Russell (1999) indicates, that there is no significant difference between face-to-face and online teaching, much of this research overlooks interpersonal and affective aspects of the respective learning environments. Palmer (1995) maintains that face-to-face communication is the paradigmatic social context and medium, and it is critical for interpersonal processes. In contrast, online technologies have a reduced capacity to support affective relationships.

It is not that ODL is incapable of transmitting emotions or allowing learners to become involved in affective issues; it is, rather, that ODL practitioners do not always consider these factors when designing or using distance education. If there is a continued tendency to overlook these areas, users will look to traditional experiential contacts with other humans rather than online environments, and the notion that ODL does not cater for interaction as well as face-to-face environments will become increasingly self-fulfilling. As Nie (2001) explains, although people can convey emotion

through technologies such as e-mail, the fundamentals of our socio-emotional well-being are found in something other than computer screens. It is not surprising that some distance education texts do not have any references to issues such as ethics, emotions, or the affective domain in their index; it is not on the authors' radar.

While affective issues and the emotional aspects of education have traditionally been under-represented in the literature, there has nevertheless been an acknowledgement of the importance of these issues. Research from the predigital era (Mehrabian, 1981) has emphasised the importance of subtle behaviours to convey feelings, and in the ability to infer attitudes from behaviours. McNess, Broadfoot and Osborn (2003) note the importance of a teacher's ability to emphasise and build relationships with the learner, while Jones and Issroff (2005) argue that for online communities to be successful, developers and designers need to pay attention to social as well as technical issues. Sunderland (2002) identifies a psychological and communications gap between instructors and learners, and suggests that it is necessary to pay attention to the affective needs of the distance learner as well as their pedagogic needs.

One of the most critical areas of difference between online and face-to-face environments is that the more traditional environments facilitate nonverbal communication. Lyons, Klunder and Tetsutai (2005) argue that an important group of learning indicators becomes more difficult because they rely at least partially on nonverbal communication, and this is atypical in most online environments.

A related but often neglected issue in this discussion is the role of emotions in ODL. Recent related research in this area include the ideas of Damasio (2000), who has argued on neurological evidence that emotions are essential to rational thinking, and Planalp (1999), who has suggested that emotions are connected to moral meaning through recognition of facial cues in face-to-face interactions. Boler (1999) has suggested that emo-

tions have been suppressed or ignored in education, but they are nevertheless important. Because emotions give us information about what we care about and why, they shape how we treat other people and inform our moral assumptions.

Picard (1997) summarises the current position on the importance of emotions:

The latest scientific findings indicate that emotions play an essential role in rational decision making, perception, learning, and a variety of other cognitive functions. Emotions...influence the very mechanisms of rational thinking...the new scientific evidence is that too little emotion can impair decision making. (p. x)

It is also likely, as Picard and Klein (2002) argue, that the accomplishment of productivity and efficiency goals are not enough, and that the view of the user as part of a productivity equation should be replaced by one in which humans who interact with computers are seen as affective beings “motivated to action by a complex system of emotions, drives, needs and environmental conditioning in addition to cognitive factors” (p. 142).

It follows, then, that if emotions contribute to moral assumptions and the way that we treat others, then any pedagogy related to ODL should provide a role for emotions. In particular, the teacher needs to be able to recognise the emo-

tional state of students and modify what is taught appropriately. For example, in a conventional face-to-face class, (with or without ICT), teachers have a reasonable opportunity to determine whether students are confused, satisfied, angry or distressed. In some online environments, teachers can recognise problems as they arise and modify their teaching accordingly. This process is outlined in Figure 1.

However, this situation is not true of all online environments. In some cases, the nature of the medium being used hinders teachers’ recognition of students’ emotions, and provides limited opportunity for feedback and interaction. Part of the problem, as Tiffin and Rajasingham (2003) suggest, is that instructional research has focused on cognitive issues:

Instructional research has been preoccupied with the cognitive aspects of instruction and with measuring standardised outcomes. We lack the research methodologies that can take into account the impact of smiles and frowns and laughter and explosions of anger. (p. 30)

Studies that compare online and face-to-face environments are often based on test scores, which themselves are based on cognitive rather than affective learning. It is appropriate to consider online environments in terms of communication theories, to see how they are related to

Figure 1. Affective steps for teachers in online environments

Affective step	Online teachers’ questions
Recognition of feedback related to students’ emotional state	Can the teacher obtain immediate feedback of the emotional state of the learner in this online environment? (e.g., observation of facial expressions and body language as with face-to-face interactions)
Modification of ODL practices	In what ways should online instruction be modified to enable informed and ethical practice?

understandings of affective issues and emotions, and to determine whether improvements in ODL technologies will enable more ethical choices between alternatives.

COMMUNICATION THEORIES AND ONLINE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

In simple terms, it can be argued that the increased adoption of broadband technologies will allow greater interactivity, together with an increased capacity for affective engagement. However, this solution is only partial, as it relies on a technicist approach to a complex issue, which in turn is inextricably bound up with its social, political and cultural contexts. The meaning of “technicist” used in this chapter draws on Lankshear’s (1997) understanding of an amalgam of ideas in which technical purposes are privileged over social approaches. In the case of ethical concerns and ODL, this could result in the proposed solution becoming part of the problem, when other causes of restricted alternatives become invisible.

Several communication theories, including those of psychological distancing, information richness, and electronic propinquity are relevant to ODL. The greater part of these theories predate online learning, but it is likely that the research is still relevant. Wellens (1986) described a *Psychological Distancing Model*, where “immediacy” was related to the number of information channels, and the reduction of telecommunication bandwidth leads to a progressive decrease in sensory modalities with the movement from face to face to videophone, telephone, and written forms of communication. The number of information channels and their bandwidth used in ODL are likely to be important in transmitting both cognitive and affective information.

A related theory is that of media or *information richness*. This theory argues that learning is related to the characteristics of the communications

channel, and, as bandwidth becomes wider, learning becomes richer. Walther (1992), for example, saw CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) as a lean channel while videoconferencing was seen as moderately rich. Daft and Lengel (1986) argued for the existence of a hierarchy of information richness based on the potential information-carrying capacity of the data. They classified information mediums then available in order from highest to lowest. The application of this theory to more recent technologies, as used in ODL, suggests that face-to-face teaching or synchronous video conferencing would be seen as richer than text-based environments such as online discussion groups, and would potentially enable choices to be made that promoted an instructor’s knowledge of a student’s affective state.

An additional perspective is provided by the earlier work of Korzenny and Bauer (1981) in their theory of *electronic propinquity*. This theory refers to the degree to which members of an organisation experience communication satisfaction. One of the components of this theory is related to bandwidth, which was defined by these authors as the information transmission capacity of the available sensory channels for vocal and nonvocal, and verbal and nonverbal communication. Face-to face conferences involve all five channels available for communication and these were defined as having a wide bandwidth; in contrast, video conferences have only two channels (visual and auditory) available and were defined as having medium bandwidth, while audio only conferences have only one channel available and were defined as having a narrow bandwidth. The bandwidth component of this theory suggests the existence of a hierarchy, in which the reduction in the richness of information available for students is accompanied by a related reduction in the teacher’s ability to discern the emotional state of students when communication channels between teacher and student become leaner. That is, when teachers attempt to assess the affective components of students’ learning, an information-

rich environment such as a face-to-face class or video conference will contain more cues than an information-poor environment such as text-only e-mail. When teachers are considering the best ways to use online technologies in their teaching, some pedagogies are preferred because they give the teacher more information about their students' underlying affective state. Such information is important in identifying contingent values and beliefs, and in the case of ODL practitioners, it assists them in making ethical decisions.

PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL ODL USE

The following ethical principles of ODL use for designers and teachers can be derived from the preceding discussion, including consideration of factors such as globalization, affective issues, psychological distancing, media richness, and electronic propinquity.

Where possible, identify any commonly-held affective objectives and community norms, together with the ideals for the society of which they are related. This is a *prerequisite* to choosing individual techniques such as those in the remainder of this list. The privileging of social objectives over their more instrumental counterparts may result in an approach that is uncommon in ODL.

- The incorporation of some face-to face interaction through blended learning or experiential rather than wholly mediated distance education solutions should be helpful. The inclusion of direct human relationships will provide an increased opportunity for affective interaction and will enable students to match the relational cues derived from face-to-face contexts with available information in ODL environments.
- High bandwidth solutions including the use of desktop video conferencing and streaming video can be a useful option for an online

course that relies heavily on e-mail or text-based communications.

- Consider the use of synchronous technologies, such as live chats and video conferences. Immediate feedback is valuable when teachers need to assess affective issues such as the emotional state of their students and make ethical decisions based on the resulting information.

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND ETHICAL CHOICES IN ODL

In Bertolt Brecht's play, *Life of Galileo*, Brecht (1995) uses the example of Galileo's moral dilemma to reflect on the individual responsibility and ethical decisions faced by scientists. It is relevant to a discussion of ethics and responsibility associated with ODL:

To what end are you working? Presumably for the principle that science's sole aim must be to lighten the burden of human existence.

If the scientists, brought to heel by self-interested rulers, limit themselves to piling up knowledge for knowledge's sake, then science can be crippled and your new machines will lead to nothing but new impositions.

You may in due course discover all that there is to discover, and your progress will nonetheless be nothing but a progress away from mankind. The gap between you and it may one day become so wide that your cry of triumph at some new achievement will be echoed by a universal cry of horror. – As a scientist I had a unique opportunity. In my day astronomy emerged into the marketplace. Given this situation, if one man had put up a fight it might have had tremendous repercussions. Had I stood firm the scientists would have developed something like the Hippocratic Oath, a vow to use their knowledge exclusively for mankind's benefit.

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As things are, the best that can be hoped for is a race of inventive dwarfs who can be hired for any purpose. (p. 100-101)

If ODL practitioners are not to be regarded in the same way as Galileo's "inventive dwarfs," they need to accept responsibility for the distance learning tools and pedagogies that they employ, including their effects on society. An ethical designer or teacher involved in ODL will consider issues relating to emotion and affect in addition to cognitive and means-ends concerns.

As ODL grows into a mature discipline, its adherents should be able to look past the constraints imposed by globalisation, and the socially constructed uses of ODL that have often been typical of its use. To revisit the metaphor of the information superhighway for a final time, the choices made by those involved in ODL should not be restricted to those roads that have been chosen by others.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future research on this and related topics should include the notion of ethical responsibility for the pedagogies that distance educators employ. In particular, the notion that good or harm might result from the use of particular techniques or tools used in virtual learning environments has been undertheorized. This gap in the research literature (and accounts derived from current practices) often fails to consider the long-term implications of distance education practices for issues such as interpersonal relationships, harmonious communities, and civic engagement. This is especially the case when consideration is given to interactions and beliefs that extend beyond the immediate parameters of scheduled class activities.

The instructor's ability to recognise students' emotional (or affective) states in distance educa-

tion is critical for ethical understanding. This is because ethical judgments are largely dependent on what people value. Research that emphasises the cognitive domain or instrumental tasks at the expense of the affective domain neglects an important area. Reliable instruments and techniques are needed to enable the identification of these affective states.

Recent research into communities of practice and sociocultural contexts suggests that informal communities allow involvement in shared enterprises. This involvement, in turn, provides understandings of community and learning that are grounded in everyday experiences as much as in the structured offerings of institutions. For distance education, the challenge is to understand the ways in which these perspectives contribute to the identity, value systems and behaviours of distance education students.

The technology used in distance education advances a view of the world that shapes social existence. A revised world view may result from this process which in turn is likely to contribute to future ways in which technology is used. There is a corresponding need for researchers to make explicit what transformations are occurring during such processes.

Finally, the nexus between globalization and technology prompts exploration of links between market forces and the nature of distance education. The characteristics of higher education, when offered in distance education mode, may show a predilection for instrumentalism that is in sharp contrast with traditional liberal concepts of education. The resulting tension may reflect an existing trend in some higher educational institutions; however, it may also be an indication that the move to online learning represents a more fundamental shift in the nature of higher education. Future research in this area could well reflect on the aims of higher education, and the role of distance education in achieving these aims.

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