Theory of Distance education

As with all new fields of study, a well thought out theory is needed to be a standard to guide future decisions to keep the new ideas organized and coherent. According to Keegan (1995),

“A theory is something that eventually can be reduced to a phrase, a sentence or a paragraph and which, while subsuming all the practical research, gives the foundation on which the structures of need, purpose and administration can be erected. (p. 20)” (Simonson et all, 2015, p. 41).

Simonson has provided a theory on which to center this expanding field of distance education. Simonson theorized that if distance learning is to be successful, then the learning must be equivalent to learning in a traditional setting (Simonson et all, 2015). Learning will always vary by individuals, whether they are physically sitting next to each other, or communicating solely through the internet because everyone integrates new knowledge into their existing schema differently. Simonson’s basic premise is that if the learning experiences are not identical, because that is not possible for unique humans, but instead equivalent, then a student should be able to transfer from a distance learning course midway into a traditional course with little if any lacking knowledge. But, this does not mean that the two courses themselves should be identical. Instead, the distance course needs to be specially designed so that the learning experience is in fact equivalent to the traditional course. For example, a distance learning course for an elementary child should designed differently from the traditional version, taking the child’s mental development level and technical skills into consideration. “Identical traditional and distance-delivered courses are not likely to be effective, rather, a variety of equivalent instructional approaches should be provided for students – local and distant – to learn from” (Simonson et all, 2015, p 50). So in other words, thoughtfully design the courses so that the learning outcome is the same, whether through distance or traditional courses.

Still, even with Simonson’s solid theory, there are several other theories to be considered. Keegan (1996) classified theories of distance education into three groups: theories of independence and autonomy, theories of industrialization of teaching, and theories of interaction and communication.

Michael Moore’s theory of distance education – “independent study” fits into the first of Keegan’s groups. This theory is composed of two parts, the two-way communication between the two physically separated parties and how responsive the program is to the individual needs of the learner. Simonson’s equivalence theory is similar to the second part of Moore’s theory, in how they both agree that the instructional approach should be tailored to the needs of the learner. A distance course will need to have a different design than a traditional classroom to meet the needs of the learner for equivalent learning outcomes. A classroom has frequent interaction between classmates and the instructor, while a distance learning course requires more autonomy on the student’s part. This means that the distance course needs to be designed with this consideration in mind for equivalency learning. (Simonson et all, 2015).

I think Simonson would agree with Holmberg (1995) when he stated,

“Though it is an effective mode of training, distance education runs the risk of leading to mere fact learning and reproduction of accepted “truths.” However, it can be organized and carried out in such a way that students are encouraged to search, criticize, and identify positions of their own” (Simonson et all, 2015, p. 48).

So like Simonson postulated, if distance learning can be carefully designed using a variety of equivalent instructional approaches, the learning outcomes can be individualized as students work through the course on their own, maximizing the learning outcomes. Though the theories may seem dissonant at first glance, they harmonize with the idea that distance learning may be the key the possibilities of the idealized individualized learning experience.

References:   
Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., & Zvacek, S. (2015). Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education, Sixth Edition. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing