

## WHO WILL BE THE CHARLES MARTEL OF DISTANCE EDUCATION?

Two recent articles, one in *Contemporary Education* (Simonson, 1997) and one in the *American Journal of Distance Education* (Simonson & Schlosser, 1999) discussed the importance of distance education and the need for theory. The *Contemporary Education* article includes a story about the stirrup as a technological innovation that changed society. Jim Finn (1964), a professor from the University of Southern California, who many consider to be the founding father of instructional technology, told the story first in 1964:

The Anglo-Saxons, a dominating enemy of Charles Martel's Franks, had the stirrup but did not truly understand its implications for warfare. The stirrup made possible the emergence of a warrior called the knight who understood that the stirrup enabled the rider not only to keep his seat, but also to deliver a blow with a lance having the combined weight of the rider and charging horse. This simple idea permitted the Franks to conquer the Anglo-Saxons and change the face of western civilization. Martel had a vision. He did not invent the stirrup, but he knew how to use it purposefully.

Finn went on to say that the acceptance or rejection of an invention depends as much on the condition of society and the imagination of its leadership as on the nature of the technolog-

ical innovation itself. The Anglo-Saxons had the stirrup but did not know how to use it.

Distance education is an innovation of the twenty-first century, even though the concept has been around for more than 100 years. Distance education can be defined as institutionally-based education where the learning group is separated and where telecommunications technologies are used for the sharing of learning experiences. This definition has prompted the development of "Equivalency Theory" that was discussed in the *American Journal of Distance Education* article. This theory states that the more equivalent the learning experiences of distant students are to that of local students, the more equivalent will be the outcomes of the learning experiences for all.

This approach to distance education advocates designing a collection of equivalent (not equal) learning experiences that may be different for each student. The teacher provides learning experiences, defined as anything that is observed, felt, heard, or done. Local and distant students have fundamentally different environments in which to learn. It is likely that different students in various locations, learning at different times, may require a different mix of learning experiences. Some may need a greater amount of observing while others require a larger dosage of doing. The goal of

instructional planning is to make the sum of experiences for each learner equivalent. Just as a triangle and square can be considered equivalent if they have the same area even though they are different geometrical shapes, the experiences of local and distant learners should have equivalent values even though they may be very different.

For example, if library resources are important to a course or unit, then library resources should be available. This does not mean that distant learners in a university course will need access to a modern research library. It *does* mean that the educational equivalent of the resources found in a library should be as readily available to the distant learner as to a local student, whether electronically, through collaborative agreements with local libraries, or through the delivery of library resources to the distant student.

Most important, providing equivalent learning experiences requires application of sophisticated instructional design strategies and use of powerful telecommunications technologies. Distance education is changing the process and techniques of teaching and learning, yet few have realized the potential of this powerful innovation. Telecommunications technologies make possible virtual schools and universities

that bring learning to students anywhere and in any place. As Finn noted,

The Anglo-Saxons used the stirrup but did not comprehend it, and for this they paid a substantial price... It was the Franks alone—presumably led by Charles Martel's genius—who fully grasped the possibilities inherent in the stirrup and created with it a new type of warfare supported by a novel structure of a society which we call feudalism... For a thousand years feudal institutions bore the marks of their birth from the new military technologies of the eighth century.

Who will be the Charles Martel for distance education? Who will identify the unique application of distance education that will change society?

#### REFERENCES

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