

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND ONLINE INSTRUCTION: Profession or Field?

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Jim Finn (1953), a highly respected educator and theoretician, wrote extensively on whether the audiovisual field was a profession. After careful study and extensive explanations, he concluded that, “the audiovisual field is not yet a profession” (p. 17).

He identified the six most widely accepted indicators of a profession. A profession has at least these characteristics:

- An intellectual technique,
- An application of the technique to the practical affairs of society,
- A period of long training necessary before entering into the profession,
- An association of the members of the profession into a closely knit group with a high quality of communication between members,
- A statement of enforced standards and statement of ethics, and
- An organized body of intellectual theory constantly expanding by research.

Finn went on to support his claim that the audiovisual field was not a profession by citing the poor quality of research and the absence of theory used to guide the practice of the audiovisual field—and he asserted that a field was of a somewhat lesser status than a profession.

Over the last fifty years, many have taken Finn to task concerning his position about the audiovisual, instructional media, instructional technology, and instructional systems movements. Today, Finn’s arguments remain valid to many.

Finn asserted that one important component of any field wishing to become more professional was the use of clear and accepted definitions of the terms by practitioners, and the most important term was the name of the field itself. He implied that research and practice could not be conducted effectively without clear terminology.

Distance educators should pay heed to Finn’s arguments. Distance education has been defined numerous times, and many definitions

seem almost mutually exclusive. Keegan (1986) reviewed the various definitions of distance education and identified six shared components of the various definitions:

1. Separation of the teacher and learner
2. Role of an educational organization
3. Role of technological media
4. Two-way communication
5. Separation of the learner and the learning group
6. Industrialization

Keegan's work became the foundation for more modern definitions of distance education, including the one proposed by this journal. Distance education is defined in the *Quarterly Review of Distance Education* as "institutionally-based, formal education, where the learning group is separated and where interactive technologies are used to unite the learning group."

This definition has recently come under attack by vendors of online learning materials who question the need for distance education to be institutionally-based. Keegan stated that what differentiated distance education from self study was when an educational institution, preferably an accredited one, offered instruction. This is not to say that self study is not credible and that it is not possible to learn from self study, but only that self study is different than distance education.

Private companies offer a large number of self study courses online, and many of them

are excellent. One beauty of online self study courses is that any person who registers can take these courses at any time. There is no instructor, because "the lessons and courses are designed for individual use without the need for an instructor," according to company advertisements.

However, based on the definition of distance education published by this journal, the online instruction offered by these companies would not be distance education, but would be *distance self study*, primarily because of the absence of an educational organization and the lack of a teacher or facilitator.

Actually, the debate about the definition of distance education probably needs further study, especially with the massive growth of offerings from the private sector. The editors of the *Quarterly Review* would be interested in publishing a serious investigation of the definition of distance education and the relationship between distance education and self study.

As Galen (129-199 A.D.) was to have said, "The chief merit of language is clearness...we know that nothing detracts so much from this as do unfamiliar terms."

REFERENCES

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