

ÉDITORIAL

This special issue of *Distances et Savoirs (D & S)* has been planned as a contribution to the celebration of the journal's seventh birthday. On behalf of the *American Journal of Distance Education, (AJDE)* now in its 24th year, and also the many American scholars that AJDE represents, I extend our warmest congratulations to everyone who has contributed to *D & S* achieving what editors Martine Vidal, Monique Grandbastien and Pierre Moeglin have described as "*l'âge de raison*". We extend congratulations especially to Martine, and also to members of the editorial board, the journal's staff and all those who have had their articles published over the past seven years.

As editor of *The American Journal of Distance Education* I am especially pleased to have observed the success of a new journal of high quality in our field, where there has been such a proliferation of inferior electronic journals, (most of which, incidentally, disseminate articles that have previously been evaluated and rejected by mainstream journals like ours). Having existed for decades on the margins of the educational establishment, distance education today faces a new and unfamiliar threat, coming from the uncritical explosion in popularity in the idea of learning at a distance, resulting from the Web generation's exuberance with technology. This is manifested in another explosion, that of innumerable hastily designed courses delivered in unsuitably structured systems, taught by instructors who are usually inadequately trained who have to struggle to compensate for the inadequacies inherent in their institution's systems. More than ever before, the times call for research that will guide practice, research of quality that can only come if it is grounded in sound theory. That, in turn, demands academic journals that have editors and staff with the competence to discriminate between what is well grounded and what is not. The problem that is all too familiar to those of us who teach about distance education, is how to enable our students to know how to discriminate what is valid and reliable information among the vast deluge of information available online, most of which is of dubious value and validity.

The birth and growth of *Distances et Savoirs* places a significant weight on the more positive side of this struggle between reliability and unreliability, and on the side of better understanding of what is expected in good quality research. For it is worth emphasising that as well as an explosion of poor research, there has also been growth in research that is of better quality, research that has made positive additions to the theory of distance learning, teaching and learning, management and policy. Where there has been such improvements much of the credit can be attributed to the leadership and the stimulus that has been provided by the principal scholarly journals, providing as they do, a reservoir and flow of information that is both trustworthy and carefully modulated in its claims in what is too often a field of hyperbole and misinformation. Here is where the high quality journals are proving their value, with *Distance et Savoirs* among the more recent, but no less important in this regard, providing information to be trusted because of their strict refereeing procedures, and it should be noted also, the dominant position they hold in the market that gives their editors the power to be highly selective in what they publish, a luxury that is not available to the many free-of-cost online magazines.

The Handbook of Distance Education.

It was with similar thoughts to those expressed above, centered on the same challenge of how to help students and others to identify the more trustworthy information from among the deluge of background “noise”, that I decided in 1996 to compile a book, the purpose of which was to systematically summarize the best of the research and theory of distance education in America. The book became the *Handbook of Distance Education*, a compilation of the work of 55 authors, assembled with the assistance of my (then) doctoral student and now professor, Dr. Bill Anderson. In conceiving *The Handbook* I had in mind an even earlier book, called “*Contemporary Issues in American Distance Education*” that appeared in 1990. In 32 chapters “*Contemporary Issues*” represented the ideas about distance education of most of the authors who had been published in *The American Journal of Distance Education* since it first appeared four years earlier. In effect that included everyone who was involved in serious scholarship and research in North America at that time. Having recently arrived in the United States from Europe I had been struck by the lack of self-awareness of the people involved in teaching at a distance that they constituted a field of academic study. One of the main purposes of *The American Journal of Distance Education* in 1986 was to stimulate such an awareness, and by so doing, to force the recognition of distance education as a field of scholarly study in America. A symposium of *AJDE* authors was organized with the aim of generating a national research agenda, and it was papers from that event that made up the chapters in “*Contemporary Issues*”. By 1996, it was clear that the goal of establishing a scholarly field had been advanced to a very considerable extent. Other books appeared, other journals were started, courses of instruction were set up in several universities, and the field was becoming recognized more widely within academia generally. To consolidate this growth, and also to provide a sound foundation for the emerging new generation of students who needed to know what research had already been accomplished, was the purpose of *The Handbook of Distance Education*. So successful was this first edition, that a second was commissioned and appeared in 2007.

The *Handbook* is unashamedly academic because I believe quite passionately that academics have much to contribute to counter the current exuberance for practicing distance education in the dark, -- uninformed by theory and research. They also have a special responsibility to the students, who are being served up with programs that fall far short of what informed people should be able to deliver, as well as administrators and policy makers. These latter have put far too much faith in the blandishments of the vendors of new communications technologies, missing the point that good quality distance education does not depend as much on changes in technology as it needs changes in pedagogical methods and changes in how resources are used within institutions. The potential of distance education is to deliver more educational opportunities to more people than ever before, to do so at lower average cost and, -- what is most important, -- with higher quality than most institutions can get in traditional ways. It is a cause for shame that in most countries and in most institutions this potential is not achieved. Most of what is happening in the name of distance education is simply traditional pedagogy and traditional structures of higher education with the addition of new technology, this old

pedagogy being repackaged with new labels, like e-learning, asynchronous learning, distributed learning, flexible learning, open learning, and so on. All these may be part of a distance education system, and all can be located within distance education theory, but unfortunately too few practitioners or academics have accessed the theory that pulls all the pieces together and then points to the kind of institutional re-organization that is needed to bring about a really high quality distance education program.

In conceiving the Handbook, I did not expect to solve this problem in one stroke. The roots of the problem are too deep; they lie within the culture of academic institutions as well as in institutional and national politics, and are to some extent reflected in the perspectives of those same academics we would invite to write in our book. As a step forward however, and as one contribution to better understanding of this problem, we commissioned authors who had previously written in *The American Journal of Distance Education* to write a review of the research in that part of the field he or she was most familiar with. The structure given originally to the “*Contemporary Issues*” book which emphasizes pedagogy, institutional organization, theory and policy has stood the test of time and has been followed in both editions of the *Handbook* with the addition of a section that reviews the main sectors of practice and another on international issues. So, in summary, the *Handbook* was (and is) produced primarily for scholars and academics with the intention of stimulating and supporting better research, as well as in hope that the research itself might also provide guidance for better practice than what we see around us at the present time.

The *Handbook's* relation to *Distances et Savoirs*

From the earliest days, distance education has been a field characterised by a high degree of interaction among practitioners in different countries. This tradition of international comradeship is particularly well illustrated by the membership of the International Council for Open and Distance Education, known for most of its life as the International Council for Correspondence Education (see Bunker, cited by Black, in this journal). Beginning in Victoria, Canada in 1938, ICCE brought distance educators together from all parts of the globe approximately every four years, and it was natural for these educators to use their teaching medium, the written text, to keep in touch with each other between conferences. From its inception however, ICCE/ICODE has been an Anglophone organization, and only occasionally has information about distance education in Francophone countries found its way on to the agenda. This schism between French-speaking and English-speaking distance educators has hardly changed during the Internet age, with the majority of new knowledge about teaching and learning at a distance, including that originating in emerging economies such as India and South Africa being published in English. Hardly any native English speaking students study research in other languages. In higher education institutions in the United States, French is not widely studied except by specialists in departments of foreign languages, and as a result educational developments in French speaking countries are unknown to the vast majority of education students, including those who study distance education. I understand from my French friends that study of English language journals is not as uncommon in France as is the study of French journals by Americans, but nevertheless there exists

on the French side a similar problem of insufficient awareness of research in the other language, -- though I am sure it is not as severe as the problem on our, American, side.

To take one step towards bridging this gap of understanding is the purpose of this special issue of *Distances et Savoirs*. Its conception is entirely the genius of the editor of *D&S*, Martine Vidal and I have been delighted to give support in bringing her idea to realization. What I have done under her inspiration is to identify an author from each of the six sections of *The Handbook of Distance Education*, and at my invitation, that person has written a bibliographic essay based on the seven or eight chapters in his or her section of the *Handbook*. What we hope to accomplish through this, is to give what is necessarily a superficial overview of the (mainly) American research, that will serve as a key for our French colleagues to use in identifying specific items that relate to their particular areas of interest, that they may then follow up through the references in the relevant Handbook chapter. To make the point as clear as possible, I will repeat the explanation that each of the six articles presented here in English is a summary of seven or eight Handbook chapters that were themselves summaries of research.

If our primary, or beginning purpose in making this special issue is to introduce our French colleagues to the American research literature, a second, but equally important aim of our presenting this overview is to prepare the ground for future exchanges of ideas and information between Anglophone and Francophone scholars and students in our field. I have told a little of the story, above, of how scholarship in the United States has grown from a minimal condition to a lively, though still growing, field within the span of a quarter century. We had to begin with first adventurous steps, and in retrospect our first steps were rather bold ones. In the same way, in this special issue of *Distances et Savoirs* we take a bold step, now in a new direction. In twenty five years from now, I hope that our successors will look back and see that in publishing this special issue of *Distances et Savoirs* we laid the foundation for French speaking students to be comfortably familiar with both the content and also the people engaged in research in the United States, and that Americans will be significantly more knowledgeable about the theories, the world-view and the accomplishments of their French speaking peers. This is indeed a bold vision, one that originates on the French side, particularly through the leadership of Martine Vidal, Monique Grandbastien and Pierre Moeglin, and is one that I welcome, and in the execution of which I feel privileged to contribute.

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