Theories of Distance Education

Distance education theories, developed from leading scholars in the discipline, such as Holmberg, Wedemeyer, Moore and Peters, can be categorized into three broad groups

1. Theories of autonomy and independence:

Borje Holmberg, Charles Wedemeyer, Rudolf Delling, and Michael G. Moore developed theories of distance education that placed the learner in the middle of the educational process (Keegan, 1996; Saba, 2003). According to Saba (2003), "the centrality of the learner is one of the distinguishing features of distance education, and understanding this fact is essential for discerning why it is essentially different from other forms of education.

2. Theory of industrialization:

Otto Peters, Desmond Keegan, Randy Garrison, and John Anderson are theorists in distance education that have developed theories that are mainly interested in how the field functions and how it is organized. Structural concerns and issues (e.g. industrialization) are the main foci of this group of theories, along with how those issues influence the teaching and learning process.

3. Theories of interaction and communication:

Contemporary ideas and views of Holmberg, John A. Baath, Kevin C. Smith, David Stewart, and John S. Daniel highlight the constructs of interaction and communication as important factors in distance education

4. Theory of Independent Study:

Building on the work of Wedemeyer, Moore (1983) formulated a theory that investigates two variables in distance education programs: learner autonomy and distance between learner and teacher. The latter variable became known as "transactional distance", which is used to define the unique relationship between the student learner and the teacher. For Moore, two factors are the essence of 'distance' – two-way communication (dialog) and the level of responsiveness to the needs of the individual learner (structure). Moore's concept of transactional distance is important because it grounds the concept of distance in education in a social science framework and not in its usual physical science interpretation this is a significant paradigm shift The second

part to Moore's theory involves learner autonomy; due to the distance between the teacher and the learner, a distance education student must accept responsibility for the learning process. Moore categorizes distance education programs into two categories: (1) learner-determined or "autonomous" and (2) teacher-determined or "non-autonomous". In order to determine to degree of autonomy, Moore utilizes the following three questions:

• Is the selection of learning objectives in the program the responsibility of the learner or of the teacher (autonomy in setting of objectives)?

• Is the selection and use of resource persons, of bodies and other media, the decision of the teacher or the learner (autonomy in methods of study)?

• Are the decisions about the method of evaluation and criteria to be used made by the learner or the teacher (autonomy in evaluation)?