

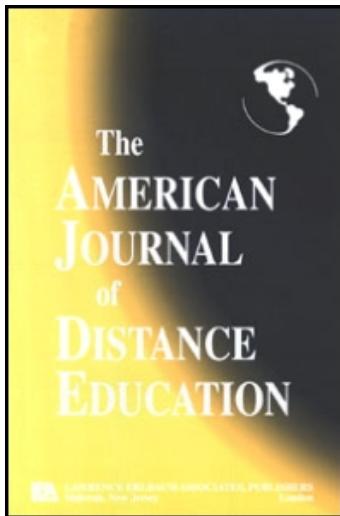
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### Interview: With Farhad Saba and Rory McGreal, Wedemeyer Award Winners

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## INTERVIEW

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### **Speaking Personally—With Farhad Saba and Rory McGreal, Wedemeyer Award Winners**

Charles E. Wedemeyer believed that technology had the ability to bridge the gap between the practice and possibilities of extension and adult education. He worked during his lifetime to extend his ideas regarding education—so much so that, from his work and through collaboration with others, the FernUniversität and the British Open University were established (Moore 1999). Since 1987, the Wedemeyer Award has been granted to both practitioners and researchers who have made a significant contribution to distance education. This award, connected since its founding with *The American Journal of Distance Education* and with the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, has honored sixteen outstanding researchers and practitioners of distance education since its inception (Moore 1987). Recently Stevie Rocco, instructional designer at The Pennsylvania State University, had the opportunity to speak with two of these award winners: Dr. Farhad Saba, a researcher who was the award's first recipient, and Dr. Rory McGreal, last year's awardee and a practitioner of distance education. This dual interview highlights some differences in scope and philosophy between these two segments of the field, and offers two unique perspectives on the field of distance education.

Farhad Saba is professor of Educational Technology at San Diego State University, where he teaches courses in multimedia, cyberspace, and distance education. Dr. Saba is also CEO of Distance-Educator.com, Inc.

Rory McGreal is professor and associate vice president, Research, at Athabasca University. He was formerly the executive director of the distance learning network TeleEducation New Brunswick. In addition, Dr. McGreal was involved with the development of one of the first repositories for learning object metadata, the TeleCampus.

**Stevie Rocco:** Tell us a bit about your background and how you came to the field of distance education.

**Farhad Saba:** I was born in 1945 and raised in Tehran, Iran. As I was growing up, I was struck by abject poverty in the country. In high school, I learned that per capita income per year was two hundred dollars, and the rate of illiteracy was between 75% and 90%. When I came to the United States to pursue my higher education in the mid-1960s, I was determined to learn about radio and television with the intent to use them for improving education in Iran. I returned there in 1973, armed with a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in Broadcast Communication Arts from San Francisco State University and a doctorate in Instructional Technology from Syracuse University.

After six months of basic training in the military in lieu of two years of service, the government at that time allowed those with higher education to work in civilian posts. As such, I was selected by the National Iranian Radio and Television to help in expanding its instructional services throughout the country. I managed the Educational Radio and Television of Iran from 1973 to 1978. In 1979, I returned to

the United States and was director of Telecommunications Division at the University of Connecticut until 1984.

Rory McGreal: I entered university late as a mature student and took a number of individualized self-study courses in my program. Later, while teaching high school in a remote community in northern Quebec, I participated as a learner in distance education delivered from the Université du Québec and McGill University. I was the on-site animateur for a McGill education course, which was delivered using videotapes. Later, I worked as a volunteer in Seychelles, Indian Ocean, and there was responsible for creating self-study materials for learners in work-study programs. I returned to Canada and completed my master's dissertation on creating these materials. I then worked for four years in the Middle East as a computer coordinator and technology department head in English as a second language programs. While there, I worked with teams implementing Computer Assisted Language Learning lessons.

On returning to Canada, I became heavily involved in distance education, implementing a computer-based audiographic network in more than 160 schools, aboriginal reserves, and young offenders units in Northern Ontario. From there, I worked as executive director of TeleEducation NB, a province-wide distributed education network. As part of this project, we created the TeleCampus, the world's most comprehensive directory of online courses. In addition, we helped create a learning export industry for the province. While there, I studied for my doctorate at a distance from Nova Southeastern University. My dissertation was a systems analysis of the TeleEducation NB network.

SR: What are the main responsibilities of your current work?

FS: Since 1984 I have been professor of Educational Technology at San Diego State University, where I teach courses in distance education, cyberspace, and multimedia. I have also maintained an active research project in distance education.

SR: Which publication research project is that?

FS: Over the years, I have engaged a number of our graduate students, many of whom are professionals on their own right now, to assist in researching the concept of "transactional distance." We have accomplished this by adopting discourse analysis for data collection and system dynamics for analyzing the data. This research project is still continuing, and I have several students in the master's and doctoral programs at San Diego State University who are currently engaged in at least one aspect of using system dynamics and discourse analysis to better understand the relation between "structure" and "dialogue." Most of the results of this research project have been published in various publications. These have included research monographs of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education, *The American Journal of Distance Education*, and the recently published *Handbook of Distance Education*.

SR: Dr. McGreal, what are the responsibilities of your current position?

RM: I am presently associate vice president Research, Athabasca University, Canada's Open University (<http://www.athabascau.ca>). Athabasca University is now a candidate for accreditation by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. My responsibilities include building up the research profile of the university in all subject areas.

SR: In what areas of research are you currently working?

RM: I work helping researchers in all areas of the arts and sciences. Personally, my research at the moment is focused on learning objects.

SR: When did you first attend the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning? Can you comment on the differences in presentations and workshops from your first attendance at the conference to today and what these differences indicate about the field of distance education?

FS: I have been a regular participant since 1986. In the mid-1980s, distance education was still practiced by a few professionals in higher education, the military, and the private sector; it had not become the focus of attention that it is today. So, the number of participants was far less than what it is today, perhaps one-tenth. Also, most of the participants were somewhat familiar with each other's research and development work in the field. The general atmosphere of the conference was naturally more intimate, and discussions were more focused. I have the proceedings of the earlier conferences in my library and frequently refer to them in researching for articles and presentations. Earlier conferences, as evident in the proceedings, were held around a theme, such as evaluating distance education programs.

Today, distance education has become a central issue in all sectors of education and training. This has been reflected in the growing popularity of the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. Each year, in the past decade, we have seen more new faces at the conference. It indicates not only that the field is becoming more prominent but also that the Conference in Madison has established itself

as the leading venue for serious scholarly discussions and presenting recent research and developments in the field.

Despite its growth, the Conference has kept its early charm and grace. Especially in its new location, one has the option of holding a small discussion with a few, or join a larger presentation or keynote address. These are truly exciting times for distance education, and the participants in the Conference have witnessed this increasing popularity and excitement over the years.

RM: This year was my first attendance at the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning.

SR: Can you comment on differences between earlier distance education conferences and current ones in general, besides the Wisconsin conference? And how did the presentations in Madison this year differ from those you've attended elsewhere?

RM: The presentations at Wisconsin were more practical demonstrations showing what the presenters did. I find more theoretical papers at other conferences.

Generally, the biggest difference in other conferences over time is the acceptance of the World Wide Web. I can remember earlier conferences when a distance education old guard presented very anti-technology views and were openly hostile to the Internet and computers, considering them elitist.

Presentations today are almost always conducted using PowerPoint or similar technology. There is still, in my opinion, too much defensiveness displayed by distance education presenters. I believe that Tom Russel and others before him turned that page with the "no significant difference" phenomenon. Why do researchers persist in adding to this already extensive body of comparative research when there

is a crying need for research on distance education policy, cost-effectiveness, scalability, and other issues? Person-to-person interactivity is another distance education area that has just about been beaten to death. More emphasis should be placed on learner-content interactions or on-task learning, particularly on the effects of games and simulations on learning. Person-to-person interactivity can help in motivating students and it seems to have a serious positive effect on retention, but content-interactivity and application of concepts produces learning.

SR: What specific kinds of research would you recommend be done on the use of games and simulations?

RM: I would like to see instructional designers and teachers, rather than starting with educational objectives and then trying to fit games into the course, take a good game or simulation—for example, SimAnt or Civilization—learn it, and then extract useful and relevant objectives and design tasks/lessons for the achievement of those goals using the game. Then, report on this.

SR: Dr. Saba, when you won the Wedemeyer Award in 1987, what technologies were of interest? Were there issues of teaching and learning that were notably different from today?

FS: I was fortunate to receive a grant from Northern Telecom (now Nortel) in the form of an in-kind donation of equipment for conducting research on the concept of transactional distance, developed by Dr. Michael Moore. At the time, Nortel had just invested 500 million dollars to develop one of the first digital integrated voice and data telecommunications systems, with video upgrade capability. This

system was called the Meridian DV-1. Today, the affordances of this system, which was sold at one hundred thousand dollars per unit, are available on most high-end desktop computers. But, the system was truly revolutionary at the time and provided us the virtual contiguity that was essential to testing the relation between the concepts of dialogue and structure, as they affect transactional distance.

Using this integrated voice-and-data system, which worked on an ordinary copper wire phone line, we designed a certificate program about static electric safety for plant workers of one of the Nortel chip manufacturing facilities in Southern California. We were able to present voice instruction as well as text in synchronous mode during the course of instruction. This allowed us to examine the concept of transactional distance and develop the system dynamic models that became the subject of the article that received the Wedemeyer Award.

In a sense, we conducted one of the first, if not the first type of teaching and learning that is now known as online learning. This experiment allowed us to examine the forward looking ideas of Moore and Wedemeyer. Without Meridian DV-1 we would not have been able to do the groundbreaking study, which led to verifying key theoretical concepts of distance education in later data-based and theory-driven studies.

SR: Dr. McGreal, when you won the Wedemeyer Award last year, what technologies were of interest?

RM: I am presently interested in delivering mass individualized learning over the Internet using Learning Objects (LO). I believe that LOs can be adapted at different levels of granularity (lessons, modules, courses) to fit content designed for a

wide variety of teaching/learning approaches and methodologies.

SR: How do you see learning objects impacting the development and delivery of content in the field?

RM: Once interoperable repositories of learning objects are in place, I can see students accessing materials themselves, teachers pointing to materials for their courses, course designers incorporating them into their classes, for use in both distance and face-to-face courses. Down the road, nearly ALL content will be delivered this way. E-books or mobile computers that can be used as e-books will be available to all and the content will be read from them rather than paper books.

SR: From your perspective, what exciting things are happening in the field of distance education today?

FS: Since I became interested in distance education many years ago I have always thought that one day it would become the main form of teaching and learning. But the dramatic global changes of the late 1990s that propelled distance education from its peripheral position to the mainstream in the United States were truly remarkable and exciting. Currently in the United States, there are thousands of professionals who are actively involved in some form of teaching at a distance and millions of students who are enrolled in courses that are taught at a distance. These developments are indeed exciting and are in sharp contrast to a decade ago when a few faculty and students were involved in the field.

Also, an increasing number of periodicals, conferences, and organizations have emerged in recent years that are dedicated to distance education. The number of scholarly books, instructional textbooks,

and how-to books about distance education are increasing too. It is great to search the databases of online bookstores and see several new titles about the field each year. I think we all can agree that the field has grown tremendously and has provided us with unprecedented opportunities for practice, research, development, publishing, and presenting in various venues.

RM: The interoperability of learning objects based on international standards opens up exciting possibilities for the mass customization of learning delivered on a global scale. The costs of computers, telecommunications, and particularly wireless devices are dropping and their power is increasing exponentially. Metcalfe's Law stating that the power of networks increases exponentially can now be applied to learning networks, where learners connected via the Internet can interact with each other in learning communities to create scalable learning systems accessible from anywhere.

SR: Compared to ten years ago, what new challenges or issues exist today?

FS: The dramatic growth of the field in a relatively short period of time has created new challenges for us. Right now, I think there is a chance for fragmentation in the field. There are new professionals, associations, and even publishers in the field who are unaware of its foundations and its theoretical and research-based historical development. Consequently, we have seen new terms, such as eLearning, popping up that are not grounded on well-thought-out ideas. In a recent class session, I asked a colleague who was invited to present to our doctoral students if educational radio and television could be classified as eLearning because they are electronic media. Without hesitation, she responded, if they are streamed on the Internet, yes! It is

this sort of uninformed opinion presented in respectable venues that is challenging the conceptual unity of our field.

One of the major strengths of the Conference in Madison has been in bringing practitioners from business, academia, and government together. This is an important function because I see people in business are gravitating toward the sources of information that carry the label of eLearning. However, I do not see the literature of eLearning, blended learning, online learning, asynchronous learning, Web-based learning, and so on, presenting a coherent and well-thought-out point of view. I could accept *eLearning*, *blended learning*, or other new terms as valid if their proponents demonstrate that such concepts are sufficiently different than distance education and if they explain certain aspects of the field that the literature of distance education has not. But, I have not seen any convincing evidence. On the contrary, I see a lot of newcomers to the field who are confused by these, at times, contradictory terms. The hype that has surrounded some of these concepts, unfortunately, diverts the attention of our new potential allies away from the seminal works in the field. They are, at times, attracted to the shallow magazine articles that try to explain the field in ten bullet points.

**SR:** What particular aspects of distance education do you feel need to have a stronger research focus? Why has more not been done already?

**FS:** There are very few scholars who are engaged in research in the technical sense of the term. I think we need to conduct research on all aspects of distance education. We are at a point, however, that without serious funding, researchers in the field will not be able to provide us with the range and depth of results that we need to

support the field in a meaningful way. We need to organize better and present a solid case for research to private foundations and federal government agencies that are more likely to provide us with the resources that we need.

We need to organize better, not only to attract more resources but also to conduct research with sufficient depth and breadth. Some of the more successful research projects in which I was involved in recent years required the participation of several colleagues at various institutions throughout the country. We need a national organization for research in distance education that would advocate the need for such studies on behalf of scholars in the field and assist them in securing government as well as private funds. Such an organization would also be able to disseminate research results with sufficient credibility.

**RM:** As I mentioned previously, we need to have much more research into the cost-effectiveness and scalability of online learning. This emphasis would naturally lead to research in the policy area because the main impediment to the cost-effectiveness, scalability, and growth of distance education is policy. Credit transfer policy is one such impediment.

**SR:** Can you describe the kind of policy change that is needed?

**RM:** The biggest change would be to free up schools from bureaucratic constraints and allow greater experimentation in the technical tools, pedagogical approaches, class sizes, learning environments, marketing, and delivery of courses. Certainly accreditation policies and the sharing of credits among institutions is a large hindrance. National and state regulations on who can deliver into a state from outside should also be amended. There are many others.

SR: Compared to other countries, what challenges or issues exist today in the United States that might not exist in Canada or countries involved in the Commonwealth of Learning?

FS: The U.S. distance education enterprise, both in the public and the private sector, is going through a rediscovery of the concept. In the United States, private corporations as well as institutions of higher education invested billions of dollars in supporting distance education in the 1990s. Now, most of these institutions are taking a second look at the concept and reappraising their earlier decisions and actions. I think this might be true in Canada and other countries involved in the Commonwealth of Learning as well, but as is usually the case in the United States, the scale of the changes is massive and is bound to impact other countries dramatically. We have already seen this in the closing down of the U.S. Open University and Fathom and in the merger of companies such as SmartForce and SkillSoft, which have strong ties to Europe but operate out of the United States.

RM: In the United States, and to a lesser extent in Canada, there is a rapidly growing home schooling movement. This growth is being fueled by the perception (not the reality) that the public schools are becoming more violent and untenable. At the same time, there is a growing corporate presence in the schools and higher education establishments. These trends are sustaining the opinion that supporting distance learning is counter to supporting a healthy public education system. The challenge for distance educators is to strongly promote open learning in the public sector as well as in the private sector, without being perceived as supporting the corporate agenda. This task is made more difficult when the private sector is

responding to technological change more quickly and creaming the more profitable eLearning courses.

SR: Dr. Saba has noted that several terms, among them *eLearning*, are not yet well defined in the field of distance education. How would you define *eLearning*?

RM: I would prefer a broad definition. If a learning instance includes the use of a computer and/or the Internet, then it is *eLearning*. Hybrid forms of *eLearning* and "traditional" education are the norm now. I would venture to guess that there are almost no courses taught in postsecondary institutions that do not involve computer use now. I believe that most university courses have at least a small Internet component. This means that nearly all learning has a distance education component now. The distinctions are becoming blurred, and I wonder how long any formal definition of the field will last.

SR: What was one of the most interesting topics you saw or discussed at last year's conference? Why do you pick that one?

FS: I think the panel discussion that Dr. Chère Campbell Gibson organized on research on distance education was extremely interesting and enlightening. I thoroughly enjoyed the presentations by my colleagues about the studies that they had conducted recently. I also was enlightened by those of our colleagues who manage and administer distance education. They provided us with valuable information about the kinds of research studies that are truly needed for advancing the field.

I also became concerned when some of the "research" papers did not include any theoretical foundations whatsoever. Although they contained impressive statistical tables, I could not see their relevance to

learning more about the field conceptually or advancing its agenda practically. We need to become more vocal about the foundations of our field and educate the newcomers about its fundamental concepts.

RM: I was very interested in the research workshop as it brought out the concerns of distance education researchers from different backgrounds. I picked it because I am responsible for research at Athabasca University. Another interesting topic was on using learning objects presented by one keynote speaker (Bill Horton) and several presenters.

SR: How would you characterize this particular conference and how might it, either now or in future, help expand the knowledge base of the field?

FS: The Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning has clearly emerged as the main event for professionals in our field. When people ask me which conference they should attend, Madison is the first that comes to my mind, and this is the conference that I have been recommending for years. I am confident that in its new charming and spacious location, it can grow even more as it has in the past few years.

RM: The Madison conference has for a long time been known as one of the premiere conferences for distance educators. I would recommend that they take a look at the opinions and views expressed at the research workshop and skew future conferences toward the research that was considered needed by the participants, particularly in policy, cost-effectiveness, and scalability.

SR: Where do you see the field in terms of theory and practice within the next five to ten years?

FS: The focus in the past few years has been on “best practices” in the United States. As much as I like the concept, I think practice devoid of theory is similar to flying without a flight plan. We need to advocate the need for theory building in an atmosphere where people are understandably result oriented. We need to ask practitioners, especially in business, to take a step back and see how much time and money they have invested in eLearning and what has been the return on their investment. We have to demonstrate that theory-driven research-based practice can provide them with a better assessment on how well or poorly they are doing, rather than following self-appointed experts and their best-practice tool kits. Very often, the tools are not right for the job because they are chosen arbitrarily without attention to seminal principles of the field that are supported by theory and research.

SR: Dr. McGreal defines eLearning as any “learning instance [that] includes the use of a computer and/or the Internet.” Is that the same sense you would give this term?

FS: As I understand, the “e” in eLearning stands for “electronic.” Radio and television are also electronic media. So, why should eLearning be limited to the computer and the Internet? The term is not adding anything new to our understanding of the field. It is, in fact, misleading and confusing and focuses the attention on the physical attributes of media. Although the term has generated numerous articles, there is little or no theoretical or conceptual literature supporting it.

SR: Dr. McGreal, where do you see the field in terms of theory and practice within the next five to ten years?

RM: E-learning is the fastest growing phenomenon in education today. The majority of courses taught in higher education in North America now house at least one Web component and many courses whether on site or at a distance are available fully on the Web. Check out the TeleCampus at <http://www.telecampus.edu>

Web access is becoming ubiquitous, even in developing countries, and more and more learners are going to be learning at a distance using the Internet. The digital divide will become more of a literacy divide as many who find they have access will not have the literacy skills

needed to make use of the opportunities. For those with literacy skills, the access to knowledge will create a knowledge explosion that will transform society and even our nineteenth century educational system.

SR: Dr. McGreal, Dr. Saba, thank you for your time.

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