The Hidden Curriculum in Distance Education

An Updated View

By Terry Anderson

I once had a discussion with a colleague at a traditional university who argued that the "distance" in distance education was maliciously designed to maintain distance between students and teachers. Lately, a barrage of criticism describing distance education as a thinly veiled conspiracy to advance "technoglobism" and the "commodification" of education has flooded the academic and popular press. Such criticism is both baffling and unnerving to us older "distance educators," who have spent our careers trying to increase access to affordable and quality education—using any and all available means.

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Inspired by this conversation, I searched for and discovered a body of academic work about what is termed the "hidden curriculum"—studies that focus on unveiling the supposed "real" agenda of formal education. I intend this article to begin a discussion about the distinctive "hidden curriculum" of distance education, focusing on both its positive and negative expressions. And I conclude with an updated view of the "hidden curriculum" of traditional, campus-based education, grounded in an emerging worldwide context of broadening educational choice.

The phrase "hidden curriculum" has circulated with great intuitive appeal among educators for the past 50 years. However, it seems to be defined as much by a lurking suspicion of conspiracy as by any single or precise definition. But educators seem to have used the term, historically, in three primary senses:

1) to mean a kind of *indoctrination* that attempts to maintain social privilege—or esoteric knowledge and practices—and that is imposed together with the formal, taught curriculum

2) to refer to the subtle effects of the *setting* in which formal education occurs

3) to refer to the *unstated* rules necessary for successful completion of formal education studies

All three senses of the term are captured by Sambell and McDowell (see *Resources*) when they describe the hidden curriculum as "an apposite metaphor to describe the shadowy, ill-defined, and amorphous nature of that which is implicit and embedded in contrast with the formal statements about curricula and the surface features of educational interaction."

Regardless of the many meanings of the term, investigative research and writing about the hidden-curriculum concept is usually motivated by a single goal—to make explicit and visible what was formally invisible. Theorists, critics, reformers, and apologists each argue that, once revealed, the hidden curriculum becomes negotiable and visible to all participants including teachers, students, and society in general. Exposure, in turn, allows for remediation, change, defense, and improvement of—or at least informed dialogue about—formal educational processes and structures.

The concept of the hidden curriculum rarely has been applied to distance education, though the related discipline of educational technology frequently has been accused of hiding a multitude of agendas. However, the setting, the technologies used, and the nature of the learning activities involved in formal education have always been important components of the study of any hidden curriculum. When these defining characteristics change, one can expect changes in the hidden curriculum as well. Thus, the distinctive physical and interactional context of distance-learning environments may define a different conception and experience of the hidden curriculum than that experienced by participants in traditional campus-based education.

DIMENSIONS OF THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Ahola (see *Resources*) has usefully broken the omnibus concept of hidden curriculum into four basic dimensions. These are—
- learning to learn;
- learning the profession;
- learning to be expert; and
- learning the game.

Each is highly applicable to distance education.

Learning to Learn. Interaction between and among learners and students is a critical component of quality education programming. In order to engage in these interactions, students learning at a distance must master a particular set of education and communication technologies, since all interaction in distance education is, by definition, a mediated process. The degree of sophistication of these technologies varies from posting a letter to being fully immersed in a virtual reality system. Thus, distance education forces students to become competent and skillful users of a variety of communication tools, and to master the personal time-management and organizational skills associated with functioning in time- and/or place-shifted contexts.

These tools must be mastered in addition to standard educational activities like reading books, attending lectures and discussions, undertaking library searches, and mastering the tools associated with completing projects and papers (for example, word processing, graphics, and presentation tools). Distance education thus imposes additional technological barriers (and thereby demands acquisition of new skills) that may usefully be described as part of a hidden curriculum.

This need for additional, often unadvertised, technological mastery has some immediate implications for access and equity. Despite recent advances in reducing the "digital divide" in developed countries, the challenge of providing universal access remains. Further, simple access to generic Internet services often masks considerable differences in the quality of these interactions.

An ever-rising technological bar restricts access to multimedia, broadband *resources* (including net-based video- and audio-teleconferencing) to those with newer, more expensive machines, as well as assorted peripheral devices such as scanners and video cameras, and to those living in areas where there is affordable access to high-speed networks. In addition, continuing barriers to access for handicapped participants remain problematic.

Beyond physical access lies competency with the tools themselves. Manifest differences like typing speed and opportunity to practice with tools that are powerful and easy to use are often compounded by latent differences among students regarding their attitudes toward and phobias about technology. Most of us know people who are uncomfortable with techno-

logically mediated communications tools or who have political or religious reasons for not acquiring the tools or the skills needed to use them. These learners have been cut off—either willingly or coercively—from a growing body of educational opportunities and the potential benefits associated with a steadily growing investment of public *resources*. The intrinsic technological basis of much distance education thus becomes a hidden curriculum that may constitute a significant barrier to participation.

Revealing this aspect of the hidden curriculum requires institutions to be explicit about such requirements, to provide alternatives and "work-arounds" for those for whom access is limited, to be informed of the technological capacity of their student body, to provide self-assessment activities for students to gauge their capacity to learn in this environment, and to provide high-quality training and student support services when remediation, technical assistance, or personal support is required.

None of these services is inexpensive and all must be integrated seamlessly into any distance-education system. This is especially problematic in "dual-mode" institutions, which find that they must duplicate for distance learners the support services already provided on campus, even though lower numbers of distance students may make such measures cost-inefficient.

A second component of the "learning to learn" agenda for distance education refers to the capacity to learn outside a paced and structured classroom context. Much distance-education programming is unlike this safe and familiar terrain. It comes in many formats, and the skills necessary to learn are directly related to the instructional and technological design of the distance-education program. For example, the personal and technical skills needed to participate effectively in a monitored videoconference classroom at a remote location are far different from those required to learn effectively in the kinds of self-paced instructional formats supported by correspondence or computer-assisted instruction at home.

Common to all forms of distance education—and a significant component of the hidden curriculum—though, is an absence of close, face-to-face contact with peers, which leads to reduced opportunities for student-faculty and student-student interaction. There is growing evidence that close and personal interaction is possible, and indeed is regularly experienced, when accomplished and experienced technology users communicate with one another using currently available telecommunications devices. But such communication, while effective, often remains a lonely experience.

Nearly all distance-education students and teachers, moreover, come from a background of classroom education. As a result, they retain deeply ingrained models of in-person peer groups, teacher directedness, and paced delivery and evaluation. Distance-education models that depart from these norms create hidden curricula that compel students to "learn to learn" in different ways, as well as in different contexts. Apple and King (see *Resources*), for instance, note that "learning the role of student is a complex activity, one that takes time and requires continual interaction with institutional expectations." How does one learn these new student roles and expectations—or even know that they exist—when students must consider the growing smorgasbord of educational choices provided by thousands of disparate distance-education providers?

The "learning-to-learn" dimension of the hidden curriculum in distance education is thus in many ways more complicated and elusive than its counterpart in traditional campus-based education because of significant diversities in form, broadened ranges of participants, and major differences in course administration. Both institutions and publishers have developed numerous familiarization and self-assessment programs to help students acquire these skills, and these are often incorporated into well-designed distance-education programs.

The current rush to create online programming, however, tempts institutions, teachers, and students to assume the direct equivalency of distance and campus-based education.
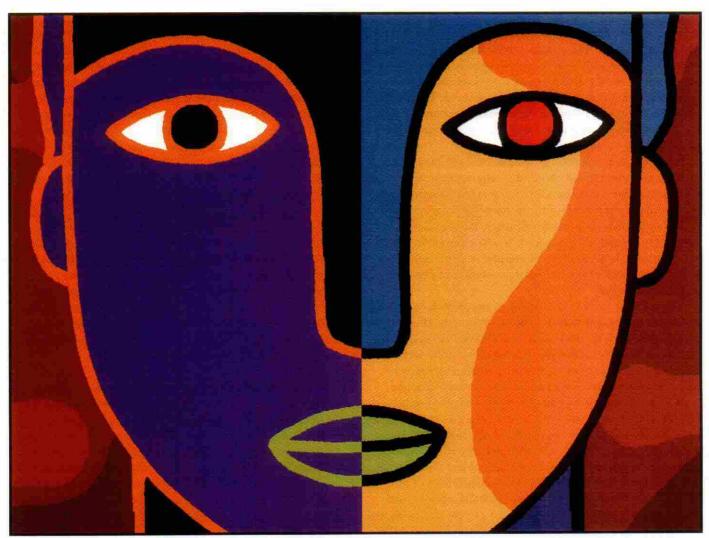
Learning to learn in a virtual environment also forces students and faculty to confront many epistemological challenges. For example, creating and sustaining authenticity in a virtual-learning environment is a challenge that demands a very sophisticated understanding of virtuality, including key components like role play, placelessness, anonymity, and online culture. Obviously, these elements of the virtual, embedded in networked forms of distance education, contain a great deal of undiscovered hidden curriculum of which both faculty and students need to be made aware.

Learning the Profession. Bergenhenegouwen (see *Resources*) refers to the "learning-the-profession" dimension of the hidden curriculum as a relatively benign and necessary aspect of professional education. This dimension is most apparent in the pre-service programs of professional faculties and technical training programs, but it is also a component of most forms of postsecondary education (especially at senior levels of study). In their first experience of formal education, for example, students learn the "profession" of being a student. In both campus-based education and group-based forms of distance education, the class or cohort becomes a social group that modifies participant expectations and behaviors. The role of instructors is also critical because their implicit and explicit guidelines, prescriptions, and modeling create a hidden curriculum that socializes participants to the roles, first of student, and later of professional.

Learning the profession begins with acquiring the competencies and technical skills associated with performing specific tasks required by the discipline or profession. But a critical additional component includes providing opportunities for interaction with practicing professionals, and acquisition of the attitudes, norms, and "expert thinking" that define true professional practice. Distance education has inherent advantages in revealing this dimension of the hidden curriculum because most distance-education students are studying part-time and many are already active in established professional communities.

Thus, their education is in many cases already grounded in opportunities for "reflection in practice." Ironically, though, there are growing trends for younger, on-campus students to enroll in one or more distance-education courses and, for students to complete full degrees at a distance in fields in which they have had no direct experience. Thus, it cannot be assumed that these now-typical opportunities for learning the profession are, in fact, an implicit component of all distance-education experiences.

Two strategies historically have been used by on-campus

schools in response to the need to "learn the profession." The most widespread is the incorporation of cooperative education programs and provision of additional "out-of-class" opportunities for professional socialization. Although it is possible for distance-education programs to provide equivalent cooperative programs or "out-of-class" activities, distance-education faculty often find it more difficult to arrange for and support such activities. This is largely because students are dispersed beyond the immediate physical network of professionals and workplaces where opportunities for on-campus students are usually located. Thus, distance-education programming relies more on students themselves to arrange and create opportunities for professional socialization. This additional requirement is often hidden, and students lacking the necessary skills and contacts within the profession may find themselves at a distinct disadvantage compared with more "connected" peers.

A second strategy commonly used by traditional programs is to incorporate guest speakers, case studies, and shared class expertise to develop professional experience. These activities are often richer and easier to coordinate in a distance context than in traditional campus-based environments. Many of the new part-time, online master's degrees now being offered use mostly problem-based or case-method learning activities. These approaches are designed explicitly to allow busy professionals to engage in study "anywhere/anytime," yet still engage in a great deal of collaborative learning based on past or current experience.

Informal sharing of experiences is often the most valuable result for groups of professionals engaged in formal education, and it is likely that it constitutes a significant enhancement to both pre-service and professional education delivered at a distance. A second advantage of the distance-education context is the ease with which guest speakers can participate in distance education programming (either live, via prerecording, or through participation in asynchronous communication formats). It is much easier and less expensive to attract busy "guest speakers" to participate in a class if they can do so without leaving their home or workplace.

A final component of the hidden curriculum related to learning the profession is the capacity of distance education to continue the learning process throughout the career(s) of professional workers. Though the rhetoric of "life-long learning" argues for the need for continuous learning, it may mask an unseen burden when employees are expected to donate significant amounts of personal time to acquiring job-related competencies. Often this continuing education takes time away from other obligations or potential opportunities for social contribution including family, church, community, or professional service. These temporal demands are certainly not confined to distance education. But the capacity to access formal or informal educational opportunities "anywhere/anytime" may place additional burdens and stress on already over-committed distance-education students.

In sum, the "learning-the-profession" dimension of the hid-

> **The opportunity for the new providers to compete with established institutions is increased by the long historical advance of academic arteriosclerosis.**

den curriculum of distance learning seems to be neither advantaged nor disadvantaged when compared to campus-based education, though arguably it is more pervasive when formatted for distance delivery.

Learning to Be Expert. This dimension of the hidden curriculum refers to the acquisition of the specialized skills and practices that distinctively mark discipline-based or professional expertise. Bergenhenegouwen more cynically defines this dimension of the hidden agenda as "university bluff," or learning to *act* like an expert even in the absence of any genuine expertise! Markers of expertise serve as a filtering function, allowing us to pay more heed to those whose knowledge and skill at applying and interpreting specialized knowledge are valuable than to those who lack such knowledge or communication skills. But we also see many examples where such markers serve only the personal interests of "acknowledged" experts and can actually impair the emergence of new paradigms of knowledge and/or exclude particular groups from otherwise deserved positions of authority.

This dimension of the hidden curriculum in distance education is rendered more complicated (perhaps to distance education's advantage) by the fact that expertise is exhibited in more manifest forms in mediated contexts because both teachers and students are forced to make their knowledge more explicitly public. In some cases (such as correspondence and computer-mediated communications delivery), this means that the participants in a dialogue must defend their comments and arguments in asynchronous, replicable text format—forcing more thoughtful and defendable interaction than is typical in oral exchanges.

In other contexts (video- and audioconferences), distance teachers report having to be more explicit and better prepared and to rely less on body language, enthusiasm, and a "magnetic personality." Thus, distance education seems to provide a more level playing field for the emergence of true, instead of counterfeit, expertise. As noted in the discussion of "learning to learn" above, however, the expert must acquire additional skills related to operating communications technologies in order to reveal his or her expertise.

In nearly all cases, distance education is more visible than what takes place behind the closed doors of the classroom. "Experts" must thus be prepared and capable of defending their claims to expertise. One could therefore conclude that the "learning-to-be-expert" dimension of the hidden curriculum is in fact more authentic and truthful in distance education when compared to its traditional campus-based counterpart.

Learning the Game. The final dimension of the hidden curriculum is "learning the game." Snyder's classic text (see *Resources*), for example, describes a particular set of invisible aspects of the learning environment as experienced by engineering

students at MIT. He found that a hidden curriculum reinterprets the formal curriculum, forcing students and faculty to determine what is really important and how pragmatic (as opposed to learning-centered) they must be to survive. Perhaps most significantly, Snyder argues that this hidden curriculum "determines, to a significant degree, what becomes the basis for all participants' sense of self-worth and self-esteem." Thus, the hidden curriculum extends beyond sociological discussion to influence the critical self-conceptions of participants.

Is the "game" played any differently in a distance-education context? Advocates of distance education have argued for radically re-conceived notions of teaching, learning, and testing in such settings. However, to date I have seen far more examples of traditional instructional designs—usually mirroring the norms of existing campus classrooms. The formal rules of the game are generally the same in both distance and campus-based education. Papers must be completed, tests written, presentations delivered. Given the ever-rising numbers of full-time, campus-based students enrolling in distance-delivered courses, this likeness should come as no surprise, since many distance courses are designed for these same campus-based students.

However, the lack of meaningful opportunity for intense peer-to-peer consultation (especially in those forms of distance education based on individualized, self-paced study) greatly restricts the most valuable source of knowledge about how to play "the game" by both students and faculty. This is the dialogue that takes place among peers who are mutually engaged in developing coping strategies to ensure success. The higher dropout levels associated with independent forms of distance education have been attributed to lack of academic and social integration and a host of course and personal factors. But dropout may be at least as much related to a failure on the part of students to understand and manipulate the hidden curriculum in such settings, so as to "win" the game.

As in other dimensions of the hidden curriculum in distance education, moreover, "the game" itself is more novel due to lack of previous game-playing experience. Students in traditional settings can usually count on a full complement of appropriate skills acquired through years of classroom-based primary and secondary school experience.

Finally, many of the support structures that are usually established to act as advocates for students and faculty, such as student unions and faculty associations, are much less developed (or, indeed, nonexistent) in distance-education than in campus-based settings. Unsuccessful attempts in the early 1990s to establish a multi-institutional association for distance-education students demonstrate that providing advocacy and cultural support can be a very challenging task in a distance-education context. But efforts to facilitate face-to-face contacts and informal mediated opportunities for communication (for example "coffee rooms" in computer conferences) continue,

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and may ultimately provide sufficient opportunities for distance-education students both to learn and to successfully "play the game" in this dimension of the hidden curriculum.

STUDYING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

Gordon (see *Resources*) argues that research on the hidden curriculum can only flourish when approached with an "emphasis on hermeneutic meaning." He thus reminds researchers that the hidden curriculum doesn't really exist, except as constructed in the minds of students and faculty. To be sure, we may hope to find its traces through analyzing artifacts like computer conference transcripts of distance-education interactions, by carefully examining virtual campus structures, and by studying the behavior of distance-education students.

But the usual survey evaluation and feedback forms that dominate distance-education research—largely based on their traditional classroom counterparts—are not likely to provide the depth of understanding needed. Therefore, the most comprehensive and most valuable research approaches undoubtedly will focus on in-depth interviews combined with direct observation. This is more challenging in a distance-education context due to the lack of accessibility of student subjects to the researcher. Nevertheless, it is the only viable method available to us through which to learn anything meaningful about what participants are experiencing.

Revisiting the Hidden Curriculum of Campus-Based Education. Most researchers who deal with the concept of hidden curriculum have assumed that the only educational context is the traditional campus and the classroom. They have rarely framed their search for "the hidden" with any clear alternative to this traditional paradigm in mind. The increasing variety and popularity of distance-delivered instruction renders this assumption invalid and for the first time allows us to examine campus-based designs in direct comparison to a set of extant and clearly viable alternatives.

The most obvious characteristics of the hidden curriculum of classroom-based instruction revealed by referencing this "post-hegemonic" educational context are the physical constraints placed upon the participants in campus-based education. Reducing physical barriers and thus increasing physical access to educational opportunity has always been the major rationale for engaging in distance delivery in the first place. Educators now have to be explicit about the costs and benefits of requiring both students and faculty to gather physically at a single location at a precise time. Such meetings are expensive (including, at minimum, transportation costs for all parties as well as meeting room costs) and restrictive (allowing only those whose lifestyle and physical presence permit time- and place-based participation).

The benefits of such forms of education may indeed be high, and attaining particular kinds of learning objectives may in fact be tied to the need for the kinds of communication-rich environments provided by synchronous, face-to-face interaction. But much, and perhaps most, of such interaction in today's face-to-face classroom consists of only transmission-focused discourse (as in the traditional lecture), where there is little evidence to suggest that presence in the same room at the same time makes any significant difference to learning outcomes.

There are assuredly some educational objectives and social needs in which face-to-face, real-time interaction in a common physical setting is both valuable and necessary to achieve the goals of a given curriculum. The existence of a clear alternative, though, means that thoughtful educators are now forced to define and construct a clear rationale for grounding education in *any* environment—be it campus- or distance-based. Distance-education alternatives force institutions to confront the great untested (and hidden) assumption that campus-based education is always superior to that delivered in less physically restrictive contexts.

Hidden-Curricula-Based Criticism of Distance Education. As argued earlier, distance education, like all forms of formal education, clearly has a hidden curriculum. But it is manifestly unfair to single out this particular form of education as intrinsically more insidious than its campus-based counterpart. Much of the current criticism of distance education stems from a largely unrealized romantic ideal of higher education, in which small groups of brilliant undergraduates cluster around wise and caring professors who have no responsibilities other than to help them achieve scholarly enlightenment. This vision hardly exists in the modern university—on campus or at a distance!

The intrinsic technological basis of distance education has been criticized as a means of control and has been seen as a mechanism for profit-making companies that produce communications and information-processing technologies to exercise undue influence on the curriculum. At one level, this criticism is as valid as conceiving of campus-based learning as a conspiracy among the construction companies, utility providers, or janitorial services that benefit economically from the construction and operation of campus-based education.

At the same time, it is true that large sums of capital are being attracted at unprecedented rates to for-profit, distance-education programs and institutions. When the CEO of Cisco Systems, John Chambers, commented in 1999 that "e-learning will make e-mail look like a rounding error," he let loose a flood of eager investors wanting to be in early on the "next big thing." The for-profit, Net-based education providers who have survived the dot-com meltdown are concentrating on easy education marketplaces. They are developing programming in disciplines like business, engineering, and computer

science where knowledge is changing rapidly and the industries are generating large enough profits to justify large investments in the "intellectual capital" of their employees. They are *not* focusing on the larger societal or personal learning needs that have, at least traditionally, been a defining component of higher education.

Furthermore, distance education requires types of capital and operational funding that differ from those of the more traditional modes of delivery. In some cases this funding has come from the private sector, which views the expansion of "lifelong learning" as a profitable enterprise. But such privatization is not unique to distance education, as demonstrated by the rapid growth of physical campuses in suburban locations owned by fast-growing for-profit providers like the University of Phoenix.

Distance education has also been criticized as a conspiratorial tool of those who promulgate a world view that seeks to create a globalized and homogenized culture and economy. Similarly, it has been argued that distance education is a prime tool for "disembedding" existing social relations from their more "natural" local contexts and cultures. In contrast, I would argue that "disembedding" of this kind can equally create a capacity to view one's individual (and necessarily limited) existence effectively from *outside* a particular, and necessarily limiting, world view.

This is far from detrimental, and is in fact a defining characteristic of constructivist education. Distance education thus serves to re-contextualize knowledge by forcing students into unfamiliar circumstances. Like campus-based education, it certainly has the potential to be used—either wittingly or unwittingly—to promote a particular cultural or ideological point of view. But good education, however it is delivered, should develop critical capacity and the motivation to reveal hidden bias. Furthermore, distance education allows students and professors unusual opportunities to engage collaboratively with individuals drawn from different cultural, economic, and political systems—thus helping us increase our knowledge of one another and the finite boundedness of our global home.

IN CONCLUSION

The pervasive restrictions of physical and temporal access associated with campus-based learning clearly have their parallels in technology-based restrictions in most forms of distance education. Each creates barriers and each carries with it a significant hidden curriculum. Those educational systems and individual teachers that are best able to make clear their grounding assumptions, goals, and processes—and to ensure that these are aligned with the most effective use of tools to overcome space, time, and distance—will be able to make the best decisions and to build the most responsive educational programs, whatever the mode of delivery. Those who are ideologically married to any single form of instruction will only obfuscate the decision-making processes that currently challenge students, faculty, and society in an increasingly complex world of educational provision.

In Christensen's terms (see *Resources*), distance education is in many ways a "disruptive technology." It provides a form of education that is often cheaper, more convenient, and (at least initially) not in active demand by existing producers or customers. Distance education is therefore especially threaten-

RESOURCES

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ing, and provides an easy target for those who find a conspiracy hiding behind any disruption of the "good old days."

But distance education is also a significant contributor to the ongoing increase in the percentage of adults engaged in postsecondary education. This growth is difficult to sustain in developed countries alone, and for many citizens of the world there is no practical means to create the number of campus-based universities that would be needed to meet such demand. Thus, quality distance education, designed to allow for discourse and co-creation of knowledge by both students and teachers, can be a democratizing and benevolent response to both personal and societal needs. Like other forms of education, its hidden curriculum can and should be made visible so that informed and intelligent choices can be made by those affected.

It is also becoming apparent that there is a rapid convergence in the technologies used in both distance and campus-based education. As a result, many aspects of the hidden curriculum formerly related only to distance-education settings are increasingly shared by both contexts. Future investigations no doubt will yield useful findings about the common *and* the unique hidden curricula of both forms of postsecondary education. Certainly such a development would contrast favorably with what now seems to be a predisposed quest for proof that one form of higher education is either more insidious or better than the other.   ☐