Lifelong learning through the new information technologies

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1. Introduction: inquiry and policy on lifelong learning

Why should policy-making be so extraordinarily difficult in this area; why should inquiry take precedence over policy? What directions should our inquiries take?

My remarks will not be about ‘lifelong learning’ as a broad phenomenon, but rather will focus on the emerging role of information technologies (IT) in lifelong learning. We know already that the new technologies make possible learning at a distance and at times convenient to the learning—‘any time, anywhere’—in ways that enormously broaden access to learning for people in their homes and workplaces. But I do not want to suggest that the new modes of communication will soon be replacing traditional forms of continuing education. A few years ago Svante Lindqvist observed that the history of technology almost always focuses on the cutting edge of a technology that was replacing some older, traditional ways of doing something (Lindqvist, 1994). But he noted, with many examples, that the introduction of a new technology does not replace the older technology overnight. Similarly, despite the introduction of new powerful information technologies into distance education, most continuing education will continue to be provided in its familiar forms of teacher and

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2 Indeed, as Lindqvist noted, there were more horses in Germany in the mid 1920’s than there were in 1900 when the automobile was just appearing on German roads.
students together in classrooms and workshops. That is important if we are to keep the new developments in perspective.³

But while much in this realm of adult and continuing education will remain the same for the foreseeable future, much is changing. We are right to center on inquiry in this area, on research antecedent to policy, because the new technologies through which information flows is already transforming our notions of lifelong learning, from the realm of courses through the mails and one way television into forms of distance learning that challenge our understanding of how people learn.

The words I have just used are very like those which introduce the multitude of books and papers on the information revolution. That literature, is produced for the most part by those who are working in this area, who are excited by what they are doing and seeing, and above all, by the potentialities for education, both inside and outside traditional institutions, that technological developments in this area hold. It is imbued with the excitement and fundamental optimism that C.P. Snow identified as the emotional climate of engineers and scientists, by contrast with the pervasive pessimism of humanistic writing in our time (Snow, 1964).

With the engineers and scientists, I also believe that we are in a revolution in higher and continuing education, although a revolution in its early stages. I see some of its enormous positive potentialities, but also that it may well have negative effects on central elements of the higher learning, on traditional kinds of institutions and relationships that have long been associated with the pursuit of wisdom as well as of information and knowledge.⁴ Most of the new forms of distance learning thus far are found characteristically in elementary language instruction or introductory mathematics courses, or in various business-related subjects, and have been used to facilitate the transfer of specific skills and bodies of knowledge rather than to help students in ‘appreciating a poem, understanding an idea, finding significance in an historical event, following the logic of an argument, inquiring into ethical dilemmas, making rational and moral judgments—all of which require an exercise of mind that calls upon all the human faculties and which no technology, however

³ For example, Berkeley’s Extension Division, one of the most enterprising pioneers in this area, will have ‘only’ a hundred of its several thousand courses on line this year; the number offered on line by the British Open University is even fewer. But it is the rate of change that is significant here, and not the extent of supply at this early stage in the process.

⁴ On the significance of direct personal interaction for the shaping of mind: ‘In the classroom, all any of us has to work with are a text … whatever background reading our often frantic schedules will allow, and— the crucial ingredient—the power of our own feeling-imagination at its most intense … to combine with the feeling-imagination of the writer in such a way as to kindle the feeling-imagination of those who come to us to learn. From such interactions, rather than from the passive transmission of information, come those moments of revelation, however rare, that change lives’ (Mack, 1998). Whether those moments of revelation can be achieved over the Internet seems to me one of the most important questions for the future of higher education.