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Until recently, there was a general lack of theory on distance education from the United States and most theories were from other countries. Keegan (1996) categorized theory of distance education into three different categories. They include theories of independence and autonomy; theories of industrialization of teaching; and theories of interaction and communication. A fourth category synthesizes existing theories of communication and philosophies of education (Simonson et al., 2009).

Charles Wedemeyer thought that distance learning necessarily included the independence of the student and the integration of technology to help facilitate the independence. Wedemeyer also separated teaching and learning and believed that a key to successful distance learners was the relationship they have with the instructor (Simonson et al., 2009). Another theory that falls under the category of independence and autonomy is the theory of independent study and theory of transactional distance formed by Michael Moore (Simonson et al., 2009). Moore’s theory looks at the amount of independence by a learner and the distance between the learner and teacher (Simonson et al., 2009). Moore’s theory states that there two elements of distance education which include two-way communication and the responsiveness of a program to the learner’s needs. Moore’s theory states that the learner has to have a high degree of independence and autonomy.

Otto Peters viewed distance education as a form of industrialized teaching. The conventional teaching method is considered preindustrial and distance education could only be accomplished with the aid of the technology that is now available to teachers and students (Simonson et al., 2009). Peters based modeled his theory using economic and industrial theory. Peters’ categories to analyze industrialized education include rationalization, division of labor, mechanization, assembly line, mass production, preparatory work, planning, organization, scientific control methods, formalization, standardization, objectification, concentration and centralization. In Peters’ theory, the teaching process is altered because of the increase of machines and automation (Simonson et al., 2009).

Holmberg developed a theory of distance education that is a form of communication theory. He calls it guided didactic conversation (Simonson et al, 2009). In Holmberg’s theory, he assumes that the core of teaching includes the interaction between teacher and learner; an emotional involvement; and strong student motivation among other things. Malcolm Knowles based his theory on the idea that people achieve adulthood when they recognize themselves as being self-directed (Brookfield, 1986). His theory is based on adult learners. Finally, the equivalent theory states that distant education does not need to be exactly the same as but needs to be equivalent to traditional education (Simonson & Schlosser, 1995).

The best framework for teaching at a distance falls under the category of independence and autonomy. To be successful in a distance learning program, a student needs a certain level of independence, self-motivation, and autonomy. A student who does not have the level needed would find distance learning too overwhelming.

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