

Chapter XXXVII

The Paradox of Equal Access

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ABSTRACT

Distance education is defined as a system that can provide access to people who – because of work commitments, personal and/or social circumstances, geographical distance or poor quality or inadequate prior learning experiences – do not have the opportunity to study full time (Badat, 2004). It is seen as a way to correct inequalities, improving access to higher education for poorer or disadvantaged students. However, though distance education is seen as a feasible approach to achieve universal access for populations that might not otherwise receive a college education this chapter argues instead that universal access is just a form of rhetoric by which cultural social class and inequities are reinforced and reproduced (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century offers educational access not known in any century before us. Course content is being made available via open, shared courseware to potentially millions of users worldwide (Caswell, et al., 2008). Dubbed the OpenCourseWare Initiative, course content can include “a professor’s lecture notes, video of course lectures, exams, reading materials, or any other resources used to teach courses at universities and institutions worldwide” (p.3). In fact, a search of the OpenCourseWare Consortium

website (www.ocwconsortium.org) revealed 29 countries as participants including the United States and 26 affiliates such as the California Psychological Association. At first glance it would seem that the boundaries of access are finally being crossed and the technology of online learning is “democratizing education and breaking down elitist walls of the ivory tower” (Carr-Chellman, 2005, p.1). While it is true that boundaries of access are being crossed with technology the types of educational programs available to differing segments of society varies greatly. One need only examine the actuality of access via distance edu-

cation and the types of credentials being offered to the economically disadvantaged and minorities worldwide to realize that the elitist walls are still very much in tact despite efforts to equalize education. Drawing upon Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital this chapter offers a framework that provides an alternative lens from which the construct of equal access to distance education can be viewed.

BACKGROUND

Distance education is a field which represents the setting in which social practices take place. The content that is offered, especially across cultural boundaries is representative of the group that designed it and is not necessarily sensitive to the individual cultures accessing the content. Each field within society is structured according to what is at stake within it. For example, in the educational field cultural capital is accumulated in the form of academic qualifications whereas in the economic field individuals compete to accumulate capital in the form of money (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 as cited in Makoe, p. 364). A problem arises, however, when the word universal is attached to the offerings of distance education implying a sort of cultural norm.

Bourdieu (1990) asserts that habitus shapes group thinking and it is this dominant group thinking that replicates social roles often determining the content of educational offerings as well as establishing who receives access to various types of credentials. In other words, the habitus of differing societal segments determines to what type of education that a person is given access. Understanding one's habitus is crucial to understanding why it is so often difficult to effect change within the educational system regarding the economically disadvantaged and minorities. In addition, understanding the role of habitus is also a key to understanding the rhetoric of distance education which speaks of empowerment and

equal access but in actuality the actual behaviors accompanying the rhetoric are often unempowering and traditional (Merriam, 2007).

There are studies that question the effectiveness of distance education's claims to universal access for the economically disadvantaged and minorities. For example, Makoe's (2006) study of distance education access among disadvantaged Black South Africans found that it is important to take into consideration the habitus of the population which includes the broader context of socio-economic and political frameworks that influence their attitude toward learning and education. In addition, it is equally important to be cognizant of the broader context of the socio-economic and political framework of the entity offering the educational content. Makoe's (2006) study reveals that the apartheid education objective was to teach non-white young people that their inferiority was natural. The idea was to establish two types of political class – an upper social class, the 'whites only' elite, and a majority 'non-white' laboring class to perform unskilled labor for the industrial economy (Reddy, 200, as cited in Makoe, p.362). But what does this mean for a distance learner that is from a disadvantaged minority or impoverished background? Makoe (2006) argues that each student brings with them to their habitus their own cultural capital to the educational table. Some individuals in society have more cultural capital than others. Those who have more cultural capital (which tend to be the dominant, ruling class) feel more comfortable in school, communicate more easily with teachers, and are more likely to do well. Makoe (2006) asserts that the economically disadvantaged or minorities often will have skill and communication barriers limiting their participation and performance. Like habitus, the acquisition of cultural capital and consequent access to academic rewards often depends on the cultural capital passed down by the family, which in turn, is largely dependent on social class (Dumais, 2002). Not surprisingly, minorities and the economically disadvantaged

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