

CONNECTION

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OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Remember when *competencies* were called *skills*? Or when *enrollment management* was called *admissions*? Now, higher education's lexicon is about to be amended again.

"The term *distance education* will be outmoded 10 years from now," predicts this issue's lead author, educational technology expert Chris Dede. "There won't be any such thing as face-to-face education, either. There's just going to be something called *distributed learning*."

Dede, a professor at Virginia's George Mason University who is on leave exploring instructional technologies for the National Science Foundation, made a similar observation at a recent New England Board of Higher Education conference on "Higher Education in the Virtual Era" — a gathering held in Boston at precisely the time when the annual spring swarm of moving vans snarling the city's Fenway area confirmed the enduring power of real brick and ivy campuses to attract living, breathing students.

The distributed learning model is based on the premise that no single style of teaching, no single source of information and no single level of technology promises the best education for every student. "Old-fashioned" face-to-face interaction between teacher and student has a place; so does virtual reality.

Indeed, only now is a sufficient range of technologies becoming available to create a true "network" of learners, linked interactively to seemingly infinite information resources, as well as such critical aids as tele-mentoring and tele-apprenticeships. "Distributed learning is sometimes face-to-face, sometimes across distance and sometimes involves teaching-by-telling," Dede told the group in Boston. "But it often involves other kinds of pedagogy that aren't now part of our repertoire, yet are needed to prepare people for the incredibly chaotic knowledge-based society we seem to be moving into."

If a fellow student or instructor on the network doesn't know the answer to a question about astrophysics, maybe the NASA engineer that pops up in the corner of your computer screen will. Or maybe you'd prefer to don virtual reality equipment and find out for yourself with a walk along the wing of the space shuttle.

The 200 or so New England academics who had converged on Boston to hear Dede and other experts speak on higher education in the virtual era were keenly aware that the proliferation of the Internet and advances in technologies such as desktop video would increasingly enable New England students to pursue college-level programs without leaving their hometowns — or even their homes.

Some understandably viewed the whole matter with a good bit of trepidation. The mere mention of technology-based higher education ventures such as Mind Extension University or the University of Phoenix still raises goosebumps under many a tweed jacket. And to be sure, distance education, from the start, has promised winners and losers.

The winners certainly include students who are "placebound" for one reason or another, as well as students who feel more comfortable asserting themselves in a virtual classroom and those who would never have had the opportunity to rub shoulders with Professor Jones on a real campus anyway.

Technologically savvy faculty who can adapt to new roles as facilitators or learning coaches also seem poised to flourish under the new model, to say nothing of telecommunications companies who will collect handsome fees for all the hook-ups that will be needed and copyright lawyers facing a bonanza of "fair use" cases.

But there are also potential losers, chief among them: faculty — and students — at institutions who wrongly see distance education primarily as a labor-saving strategy; states and institutions saddled with *yesterday's* telecommunications infrastructure; and purveyors of traditional campus services — cyberstudents can eat at home.

Still, Dede's model would seem to bring out the best that educational technologies and distance education have to offer, while preserving the indisputable role of thoughtful faculty and human interaction. Distributed learning promises to be more than just another catchphrase.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.