

COVER PAGE

Absence as opportunity: learning outside the institutional space and time

Dr Arwen Raddon
Centre for Labour Market Studies
University of Leicester, 7-9 Salisbury Road
Leicester, LE1 7QR, UK

Email: arwen.raddon@le.ac.uk

Absence as opportunity: learning outside the institutional space and time

Keywords: Distance learning; absence; time and space.

Abstract

The apparent absence of learners from the spaces and times of the institution is usually seen as a negative element of distance learning, positioning distance learners as other to the "norm" of the present, on-campus, traditional student. This paper explores the narratives of a group of distance learners, highlighting that these learners primarily see being outside the spaces and times of the university as an opportunity. Rather than creating a sense of otherness, it is regarded as giving a sense of control, allowing space and time in which to take up their studies alongside demanding jobs and caring roles.

Introduction

Physical presence within, or absence from, the specific space and time of the educational institution is central to what is recognised as distance education. The idea of physical and spatial separation across time and space is often used to differentiate distance learning from so-called "traditional" forms of education. For example, Perraton (2000: 13) defines distance learning as 'an educational process in which a significant proportion of the teaching is conducted by someone removed in space and/or time from the learner'. Physically, the university campus has been the 'dominant spatial form of higher education...since the Middle Ages' (Cornford and Pollock, 2002: 172). This has remained the case despite changes in terms of who is admitted and what is studied:

Throughout its history, most people with a university education have 'gone to' a university and they have gone to it with others. (Cornford and Pollock, 2002: 172)

The apparent absence involved in distance learning means that many regard it as an inferior and marginalised form of education (Kirby, 1993). Considered as a substitute for the real thing (Gilliard, 1993), distance learning is not only seen as an 'emergency measure' (Peters, 1998: 218), but as a 'pathetic and almost contemptible activity' (Holmberg, 1989: 20) for those who cannot 'avail themselves of the traditional forms' (Garrison and Shale, 1990: x). Hierarchical conceptions

of time, space, presence and absence clearly underpin such views of distance education. This positions distance learning and learners as other in relation to "traditional", "real", on-campus, face-to-face education. Indeed, the inference of learners' failure to avail themselves of an on-campus course, is that learners are responsible for ensuring their access to education, rather than the "traditional" system's failure to make learning available to them. Thus, distance learning provision is rejected as a "second best" approach and as lacking, rather than recognising the power relations surrounding attendance of, and participation in, on-campus education. This reflects the wider social perception that presence is not only linked to having power, but is seen as central to our very being:

Presence is valued, held up, invested with power... Presence, it appears, constructs, connects, holds together... is the determining feature of being, subjectivity, ideology, textuality, systems of speech and writing, presentation and representation... Presence is, non-presence is not. Such is the construction of presence, even absence, its taxonomic opposite, is seen as a formation and formulation of it... The force of this relational schema has led to the conceptual figuring of absence and absences only because there is presence, or a register of presence, to begin with.
(Fuery, 1995: 1)

To be present within a given time and space is simply to be, while being absent from it is almost to not exist. Although, as Fuery (1995: 2 original emphasis) argues, rather than a binary of being/not being, absence can be a potential state of presence that is '*held-in-readiness*'.

Indeed, as Massey (1994) argues, presence with specific spaces and times does not guarantee our access to a more authentic experience. This would require that spaces and times were static, rather than fluid, multiple and relational. Moreover, Massey maintains that identities related to certain spaces (e.g. as a learner) are not bounded by those spaces, but extend and exist beyond them; they are interrelated with multiple social and economic relations, and with time. Thus, as Canning's (2002: 41) study of online distance learning in the workplace demonstrates, learners do not necessarily 'lock-on' to the official learning spaces provided for them. Learners develop their own spaces in which they feel comfortable, or in which they feel they have sufficient time and space to focus on their studies. As will be highlighted here, this apparent absence from the times and spaces of the educational institution – or being present as learners in spaces and times other than the university – is seen by this group of distance learners as a major opportunity. Rather than creating a sense of otherness, it is seen as giving a sense of control, allowing space and time in which to take up their studies alongside demanding jobs and caring roles. Notably, learners' narratives

highlight that distance learning is in fact seen as the "norm" for professionals engaging in continuing professional development.

Research methodology

This paper draws on the findings of research that focused on issues of time, space and distance learners' experiences of combining home, work and studying. The data collection involved a multi-methods approach, including a postal survey, observation, in-depth interviews over time, and learning journals. The data explored here comes from the survey (N=64) and in-depth interviews (N=11). The respondents were studying on a postgraduate distance learning programme with a "traditional" university in the UK. The following table outlines some of the basic details of the survey respondents.

Survey Profile

		% *
Sex	Female	66
	Male	34
Age	20-29	6
	30-39	30
	40-49	50
	50-59	14
Marital status	Single	16
	Married	56
	Divorced	14
	Other	14
Children	Yes	48
	No	50
Work	Full-time	91
	Part-time	8
		N=64

* Where percentages do not add up to 100, this is due to spoilt or missing cases.

The subsequent interview element of the research was carried out over two years, following a small group of distance learners through their two-year Masters programme. Where survey responses are cited in the text, these are numbered as (SR1), indicating survey respondent 1, and so on. The interviews were conducted in a number of ways, responding to the preferences and availability of respondents. This involved using in-person, telephone and email interviews. The majority of interviewees chose in-person or telephone interviews. The following table outlines some of the basic information about the interview respondents. Names are replaced with pseudonyms. Given the small number of respondents, specific information such as job roles and location are not given in order to ensure anonymity.

Interviewee Profile

Interviewees	Interviews conducted
Beth, late 20s, working full-time in public sector, living with partner	4
Ian, 40s, working full-time in private sector at time of first interview in fairly senior role, living with partner	4
Jane, 40s, working part-time in public sector in fairly senior role, living with children and partner	5
Janet, 40s, working full-time in public sector in senior role, living alone	4
Jim, 40s, working full-time in public sector in fairly senior role, living with partner	4
Liz, 30s, working full-time in public sector, living alone	1
Marie, 40s, working full-time in private sector, living alone	4
Mark, 30s, working full-time in public sector at time of first interview, living half the week with his child and half the week alone	7
Rachel, 40s, working full-time in public sector, living with her child	1
Rose, 40s, working full-time in public sector, living alone	5
Sue, 40s, working full-time in private sector, living with partner and children	4

Absence as opportunity: learning outside the institutional space and time

This group of distance learners saw engaging in a distance learning programme, as opposed to on-campus education, primarily as an opportunity. Rather than creating a sense of absence or

otherness in relation to the idea of a "real education", distance learning was considered as facilitating access to education by not requiring their physical presence in the times and spaces of the institution. One survey respondent, for example, noted that there was:

No need to live near university. Not tied to attendance at university/college (SR 14)

Similarly, another wrote that their expectation of distance learning was:

To be able to complete an academic course without having to attend a university either full or part time. (SR 23)

For another, their geographical location meant that not having to be present in the university was important, although studying on their own was their main priority:

I did not want to travel to classes - living on an island makes this very time consuming. Most importantly I prefer studying alone. (SR 42)

Similarly, in the interviews, Rachel stressed that distance learning offered opportunities not previously available. This was particularly as she was seconded abroad, but wanted to do a course in a specific subject area and with a British university:

...it's great. The fact that there was the opportunity which you just never used to have, makes a huge difference. Particularly for someone like me. I mean if you're here [in the UK], then there's lots of things you can do part-time, or evening classes or whatever. But when you're all that distance away, you're a bit stuck aren't you? So it's great. (Rachel)

Indeed, Rachel had been disappointed to find that many of the courses she looked at were not what she considered as "*truly* distance learning", since it was important to her that the programme would not require her attendance. In this way, absence is not perceived as problematic or as alienating, but as an opportunity to do something she wants and needs to do. Janet, too, felt that her busy and unpredictable work schedule meant that learning at a distance was the only possibility for her to study. Being absent from the institutional space is equated with controlling her own time:

...you cannot really attend anywhere from here because you're so busy with the...[job]. And you're involved early morning till sometimes late evening. And that would have been an impossibility for you to be released to attend college, university or whatever. So distance learning

is a lot *better*...but you've got time to do it, in *your own* time, at home, at weekends and stuff like that. (Janet)

Jim was seeking a course in his particular area of expertise, but he also wanted to minimise the need for attendance due to his health. This led him to consider distance learning, despite having had poor past experiences of studying on correspondence courses. On this occasion, as well as the area of study, two further aspects motivated him. Firstly, his need to upgrade his qualifications in order to ensure his future employability and, secondly, the physical demand and fatigue of trying to attend lectures after work:

...if I had to go up to [university in the nearest city]...two nights a week, or three nights a month, I wouldn't be able to do it. I would get to the end of the day and go "No, I *really* don't feel like it". [Distance learning] is an ideal solution, it's excellent for people like me. I mean because of the epilepsy, I'm registered disabled. Um-because of the health issues and the no need for a seminar...[this university] is better for me than [another distance learning institution that required presence at seminars]. (Jim)

Since it was not possible to be physically present at the university, Jim accepted the absence involved in distance learning, weighing this up against opportunity it afforded him. This decision also reflected where Jim was in his life and career. Part of him would have liked to re-live his undergraduate days, browsing in the university library. However, he could not afford to give up work to study full-time. Likewise for Rose, part- or full-time attendance at a university was seen as unrealistic, due to where she was in her life and career. Again, the fact that this was a distance learning programme was an important factor in her decision, since she "needed to do it" but had little time to spare. Like Jim, Rose had enjoyed being a full-time undergraduate in the past. However, she needed to "pay the bills" and "keep a roof over my head". Thus, financially and practically, in terms of travel and stress, it would not have been possible to study any other way:

...as I said, full-time would have been difficult because of financial reasons. Erm- and trying to do it part-time and going up to the university to attend lectures, I think it would have been too much, I wouldn't have done it actually. I don't think I would have done it. (Rose)

Mark also admitted that he was a little "envious" of someone he knew that was studying full-time, attending lectures and spending time in the university. On reflection, however, he was happier working and studying at the same time, since the practical link between his learning and work was

important to him. Moreover, he particularly "liked the approach of distance learning", since he would not need to get time off work to travel to the institution.

Likewise, Ian saw distance learning as particularly appropriate for him due to his long work hours and his lack of need for presence and interaction with others:

...the work I- I do, generally it's a full-time job anyway. Um- and therefore with that all the problems you get with having to fit things in as we were saying earlier. So it was always likely to be self-study...it had to be distance learning, self-study, because I would never get time off work um- and I'm the sort of person who can cope with studying on his own. So, you know, [this learning provider] was always sort of- at the top of the pile shall we say. (Ian)

Ian had been made redundant just days before this interview, so it is understandable that he spoke about the need to balance his full-time job with his studies. Nevertheless, he still felt this way even after having spent some month searching for a new full-time job while doing temporary, contract work. Indeed, Ian often talked about being personally suited to distance learning. For example, he described himself as "the sort of person that's happy to study alone", having previously studied for his professional qualifications by distance learning. While he felt that not everyone would be able to cope with distance learning, since "a lot of people need to interact with others", he often stressed that he was "basically a fairly self-contained individual", a "fairly disciplined person" and that "a lot of it probably comes from me as an individual and my personality". When asked if he would recommend distance learning to other people, he contrasts his own approach with his partner's needs as a learner:

My partner on the other hand is someone who just wouldn't get on with it. She does need the interaction. Therefore, when she's done a- a year or so ago, a...Diploma, that was very much an evening class, um- yes, assignments to do, but very much practically-based. So that she is gonna' be more of an activist, whereas I'm perhaps gonna' be more of a- a- theorist-reflector. So I think you- I would need to have- understand people's preferred ways of learning. (Ian)

Ian draws here on learning styles discourses (e.g. see: Honey and Mumford's (1982) activist, theorist, reflector, pragmatist styles) and on the psychological discourses of connection and detachment (e.g. see: Gilligan, 1982/1993) to characterise himself as the ideal distance learner. Thus, he presents himself as the right kind of person to deal with absence from the spaces and times of the institution and from the lower level of interaction with other learners. Again, absence

is seen as an opportunity rather than a sense of otherness, or as lacking authenticity when compared with physical presence in an on-campus programme of studies.

Control

The vast majority of these learners wrote or talked about gaining a level of control through this absence from the spaces and times of the university; although times and spaces of learning are subject to a range of power and social relations, and to negotiations around other roles and responsibilities. In response to the questionnaire survey, for example, when asked what their expectations of learning at a distance were, one respondent simply wrote, "Control" (SR 12). Other examples include:

I could control and study what I wanted at my own pace and style. (SR 57)

Freedom to study at a time which fitted in with my work and family. (SR 42)

This control is a common theme in the literature, as well as promotional material for distance learning courses. Roche, for example, sees distance learning as:

...a way of learning which enables you to manage your own learning. You are in charge. You choose the time, the pace and the place. (Roche, 1988: 60)

As Nowotny (1994) remarks, having a sense of control over our own time is important to our sense of autonomy and meaning, and to our levels of stress. However, writers such as Edwards and Usher (2000) have questioned this perception of learner control. University students are traditionally disciplined and regulated through the practices of 'observation, normalisation and examination' (Edwards and Usher, 2000: 60). Such practices assume physical presence in an institution, 'at particular times in specific places' (2000: 57). Since this presence seems to be removed in distance learning, we might suggest that distance learners have more freedom and autonomy. However, Edwards and Usher argue that techniques of discipline are not removed simply because distance learners are absent from the institution, but have shifted towards confessional practices of 'reflection and self-surveillance'. Thus, while distance learning may be seen as more open, they argue that the institution retains control over the system and the learners in what are often more subtle, far-reaching ways.

Nevertheless, learners, by their absence, can also resist institutional forms of control such as deadlines, or guidelines for how long to study each week. Equally, this absence may open up spaces in which to question institutional knowledge or practices (Cook, 1989; Jarvis, 2001). Whatever the reality, the individual perception of this group of distance learners is certainly one of a greater degree of control over when and where they study due to their absence from the university. This is often contrasted with the need to attend institutional activities in specific times and spaces. However, distance learning was also seen as the sole opportunity to study, given their particular circumstances. In this way, absence from the times and spaces of the university is simply about access to education.

All of the interviewees felt there was simply no other way to fit their studies in alongside their multiple roles and responsibilities. Similar views were expressed in the survey, for example:

It was the only way that I could study considering all my other commitments. (SR 31)

As Forbes notes:

...as students combine education with the rest of life, making a little room among family, career, travel and other commitments, the topic of distance education is often raised as the answer. (Forbes, 2000)

Contact with other learners

One less positive aspect of this lack of physical presence that learners occasionally reflected on was their contact with other learners. A lack of communication and interaction with tutors and other learners is seen as one of the major shortcomings of distance learning (Sumner, 2000). However, these learners did not necessarily talk about this lower level of contact in terms of creating a sense of otherness and exclusion, although contact with administrative staff, in particular, was valued by many learners. Indeed, despite some respondents' wishing they had more contact with other learners, they often prioritised the other demands in their lives, and their wish to "get on" with their studies, over having contact with other learners or, indeed, with tutors. For example, most respondents did not make use of the online communication facilities which were designed to increase learner-learner and learner-tutor communication. This was generally due to a lack of time, with learners prioritising other activities in their home and work lives. This lack of

take up of possible avenues of communication might suggest a need to make this kind of activity an obligatory rather than optional part of distance learning. However, this institutional control of learners' time and space might also dissuade some individuals from taking up their studies.

As noted, these learners consistently emphasised the fact that the ability to study by distance learning was central to their choice of programme. Interviewees were asked whether, in an ideal world, they would like to study full- or part-time. They consistently stated that they preferred to study by distance learning. Indeed, some commented that, had they needed to attend lectures and study on-campus, they would either not have considered studying at all, or they would have given up their studies when they encountered problems. Jim, for example, reflected:

If I had had the same health/work problems on a traditional course I would probably have had to drop out by now, and the demands of a 9-5 are bad enough already. (Jim, email)

The tradition of presence in the times and spaces of the university is seen as restrictive and out-dated: blocking rather than widening access to education. Thus, the vast majority of respondents were positive about not needing to be present within the institution, seeing distance learning as an opportunity and, moreover, as a choice. It is worth noting, however, that choice is often mediated by an individual's gender, class, responsibilities and so on (Hughes, 2002). Thus, respondents' decisions to study on this distance learning programme were fairly constrained by paid work and caring roles, and by the area of study. Learners often noted that the course they wanted was only offered by distance learning, thus limiting their options in that sense.

Importantly, Mark also noted that distance learning was seen as more "feasible" by and for employers, particularly since it meant that workers were not studying in the time of the workplace, and/or did not need to be absent from the workplace to attend a university. Indeed, when reflecting on his motivations for studying on a distance learning programme, Jim remarked that it was hard to get time off work and, as such, to be visibly absent from the workplace:

It is also increasingly difficult to get many organisations to give you the relevant time off for study, particularly as you get into higher level (read higher visibility) roles. (Jim, email)

Employee's time is highly valuable to employers (Adam, 1995, 2001). Ian commented that, while there may be financing for further professional development, many employees would have to study in their own time. This made distance learning the preferred option:

And *also* with the modern workplace...it's relatively cheap for a company to er- throw £2000 at me for a year's study, but to give me some time off work? No, no, it actually starts to cost a lot more...so having worked in a number of major companies, they're- they're *normally* happier for people to study by distance learning methods. Quite happy to throw a bit of money at the problem, but it tends to be I think people's *time* that is more valuable to an employer...most *good* companies will fund studies, but it's gonna' be self-study, residential weekends, you know, not huge amounts of time off work. (Ian)

Interestingly, we gain here a sense of the lack of control that learners actually have over their time and space. Absence from the times and spaces of the educational institution is preferable to absence from the workplace, for which there are greater penalties, such as losing one's livelihood. As such, distance learning is seen as the norm for employees wanting to study and develop themselves. As one survey respondent stated:

I didn't purposefully choose a DL course. This particular course most closely met my learning/ development requirements. Allows flexibility - to fit in with work/ home commitments. (SR 11)

Notably, 44% of survey respondents had studied by distance learning before, with one respondent saying this was the third time they had studied by distance learning. It remains important to ask why these individuals feel such a strong need to literally squeeze studying into their already busy lives. For example, this can be driven by strong demands from the workplace, and the idea that continuing professional development aids survival and flexibility in the labour market (Raddon, 2004).

Overall, the wish and/or need to study, combined with lack of time due to the various demands on learners' work and home lives, meant that distance learning was often the only means through which these individuals felt they could study. Moreover, these factors also mean that being a distance learner and being absent from the times and spaces of the institution are seen as normal rather than as "other". Equally, both learner and employer see distance learning as an opportunity. Rather than a simple binary of absent and present, inside and outside, these learners' stories highlight the complexity and sometimes contradiction of their position as distance learners.

Conclusions

This article has explored the idea of absence as an opportunity. While the absence involved in distance learning is usually seen as a negative aspect of the learning experience, positioning the distance learner as other to the traditional on-campus student, these learners' narratives highlighted that this was not necessarily the case. Absence from the spaces and times of the university is seen as giving access to education in a way that would otherwise not be possible alongside demanding jobs and caring roles. Equally, while some learners might wish they were able to attend an on-campus course, they also stated that they would not wish or be able to attend a full- or part-time course. Despite an impact on contact with other learners, the importance of this opportunity for the learners involved cannot be overlooked. Rather than being a second choice, it is often the only choice and it is important to recognise both the problems raised by absence from the institutional times and spaces, but also the vital opportunity it provides to access education and for personal development.

References

- Adam, B. (2001) *When Time is Money: Contested Rationalities of Time and Challenges to the Theory and Practice of Work*, Working Paper Series No. 16 (School of Social Sciences, University of Cardiff).
- Adam, B. (1995) *Timewatch: The Social Analysis of Time* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- Canning, R. (2002) Distance or Dis-stancing Education? A case study in technology-based learning, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 26(1), 29-42.
- Cook, J. (1989) The Liberation of Distance: Teaching Women's Studies from China, in: T. Evans and D. Nation (Eds) *Critical Reflections on Distance Education* (London, Falmer Press), 23-37.
- Cornford, J. and Pollock, N. (2002) The university campus as a 'resourceful constraint': process and practice in the construction of the virtual university, in: M. R. Lea & K. Nicoll (Eds) *Distributed Learning: Social and cultural approaches to practice* (London, Routledge Falmer), 170-181.
- Edwards, R. and Usher, R. (2000) *Globalisation and Pedagogy Space, Place and Identity* (London, Routledge).
- Forbes, J. L. (2000) Perspectives on Lifelong Learning: The View From a Distance, *First Monday*, 5(11). Available online at: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue5_11/forbes/index.html. (Accessed June 2005).

- Fuery, P. (1995) *The Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification and Desire* (London, Greenwood Press).
- Garrison, D. R. and Shale, D. (Eds) (1990) *Education at a Distance. From Issues to Practice*, (Florida, Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company).
- Gilliard, G. (1993) Deconstructing contiguity, in: T. Evans and D. Nation (Eds) *Reforming Open and Distance Education, Critical Reflections from Practice* (London, Kogan Page), 182-195.
- Grace, M. (1994) Meanings and motivations: women's experiences of studying at a distance, *Open Learning*, 9(1), 13-21.
- Jarvis, P. (2001) Serving the System – by Jennifer Sumner: a response, *Open Learning*, 16(1), 88-90.
- Kirby, D. (1993) Is it Time to Rid Universities of Distance Education?, *Journal of Distance Education/ Revue de l'enseignement à distance*, 8(2). Available online at: <http://cade.athabasca.ca/vol8.2/> (Accessed June 2005).
- Holmberg, B. (1989) *Theory and Practice of Distance Education* (London, Routledge).
- Massey, D. (1994) *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge, Polity Press).
- Honey, P. & Mumford, A. (1986) *The Manual of Learning Styles* (Berkshire, Peter Honey).
- Nowotny, H. (1994) *Time: the modern and postmodern experience*, Trans. Neville Plaice (Cambridge, Polity Press).
- Hughes, C. (2002) *Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research* (London, Sage).
- Perraton, H. (2000) *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World* (London, Routledge).
- Peters, O. (1998) *Learning and Teaching in Distance Education, Analyses and Interpretations from an International Perspective* (London, Kogan Page).
- Raddon, A. (2004) *Surviving and thriving in the labour market: Distance learners' narratives of flexibility and insecurity*, paper presented at Centre for Labour Market Studies, Distance and E-Learning Group, University of Leicester, 17th February 2004.
- Sumner, J. (2000) Serving the System: a critical history of distance education, *Open Learning*, 15(3), 267-285.