THE “DISTANT FUTURE” OF CASE TEACHING

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Abstract

Increasingly, academic and further education are offered via the Web. It may be said that the increase in the number of courses and programs available through this channel has not been matched by an increase in the quality of teaching and in examples of excellent use of technology itself. Efforts to develop and sustain teachers and teaching methods, as well as systems of delivery, therefore, seem to be necessary, if not already overdue. This paper outlines some recent trends in Swedish distance education, among them learning centres and the Swedish Net University, and tries in that context to identify the place and form of case teaching in a probable and probably not so distant future.

KEY WORDS: Distance education, trends, case teaching, the Web

INTRODUCTION

During the last ten years or so, there has been an increasing interest in distance education in Sweden. One of the “landmarks” of this interest was the establishment in 2002 of a special government agency for distance higher education, called the “Net University” (Nätuniversitetet). During its first two years, extra money was awarded to universities that provided distance education with a focus on distribution over the Web.

The purpose of this paper is to give a brief description of the developments of Swedish higher education from a distance education viewpoint and complement that with some highly speculative thoughts on the place and future of case teaching in that context.

DIFFUSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SWEDEN – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The first version of distance education in Sweden emerged in the form of correspondence studies at the end of the 19th century. The primary target group was the general public, and the courses were aimed at general education, such as languages and art, as well as regular courses from the public school system and more specific professional training, e.g. engineering and other technical areas.

The first major effort with a focus on radio and television came as late as 1967 with the “Committee on television and radio in education” (TRU). Despite the name, it was not a committee in the regular sense but a more or less full-fledged production organisation, which after a trial period was incorporated into the educational part of the Swedish national television company. The focus of this organisation was on education in general but the productions from this organisation also included television programs for the technical universities and a basic university course in business administration that was distributed via the national television and radio networks.

A year later, distance education as an alternative to traditional academic education was first mentioned. As a result, decentralised university education was tried in the northern part of Sweden 1970-71, with success. The purpose, however, was primarily to relieve the pressure on the universities from an
increased number of students at the end of the 60’s and beginning of the 70’s, rather than a bid for distance education per se. Instead, the strategy for bringing higher education to new target groups was to establish new, geographically dispersed learning institutions. During the 1960’s, this resulted in three new universities, two of them in Northern Sweden. During the 1970’s, a number of subsidiaries to the old universities were established. During the 1980’s, these were elevated into regional university colleges and new such institutions were also established. They differ from the old universities in that they do not have all disciplines and in most case no doctoral studies. Today, there are around 35 university colleges and around 10 “proper” universities.

To a large extent, the emergence of a distance higher education is linked to the new university colleges. University West, e.g., is one the smallest regional universities but number three overall in terms of the proportion of students that participate in some form of distance course or program.

Parallel to this trend, most Swedish municipalities have established “learning centres” (LC), with computers and television studios, where students can participate in distance courses. The range of these centres is quite wide, from one or two rooms on top of the public library to fairly large establishments where also on-campus education courses and programs are offered.

It should also be noted that the term “flexible” has been widely used in the political and public discourse on distance education (or “distance teaching” as it used to be known), almost to the extent that “flexible education” and “distance education” sometimes have been used as synonyms [see e.g. Bergviken Rensfeldt 2004].

FROM A “NET UNIVERSITY” TO “NETWORKS AND COOPERATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION”

When the Swedish "Net University" (NU) was established, it was emphasised that it was not a new university. Instead, it was described as a different way to study at universities, independent of time and space, a meeting place was maybe the most common metaphor. Its most prominent outward sign was, consistent with this: a Web portal, from which all courses and programs that adhered to some basic criteria could be searched. Today, around 2.700 courses and around 100 more extended programs can be found.

NU started a new trend in Swedish distance higher education through its focus on the Web. Earlier versions relied instead on televised lectures and seminars, supported by the LC’s mentioned earlier. The NU initiative is overall seen as successful, since its inception was followed by substantial increases, both in courses offered and students enrolled. Today, around 20 % of the students are enrolled in distance education, primarily in web-based courses, while more traditional distance forms have declined.

One feature of this increase, which has to do with the overall objective to broaden the student population, is that the distance students at NU are older, have more children, live farther from the university campuses and more often have a working class background, compared to the average campus student.

It may be debated whether NU is a meeting-place, rather than a university in itself. It is true that it only markets courses and programs that are submitted from the member universities, but at the same time it seems to have had a somewhat polarising effect on the institutions of higher education. Instead of a desirable integration and joint development between on- and off-campus educations, there are signs that educators active in distance education turn to one another, regardless of affiliation, rather than to their closest colleagues.

Also, different projects, initiated by the NU, have led to closer cooperation between distance educators at different institutions but at the same had distancing (sic!) effects on cooperation on campus. The same can be said of the financial support from NU, aimed both at developing new distance courses and at establishing support structures for distance education and flexible learning in general.

One way of summarising these changes is to say that NU both signals and drives a “paradigm shift” in the perception of distance higher education. The importance or even dominance of this shift was underlined last year, when the former Council for renewal of higher education was terminated and its basic tasks in the development of Swedish higher education were transferred to the government agency behind NU. As a result, it was renamed the Agency for Networks and cooperation in higher education (NSHU).
Most notable is, perhaps, that alongside its earlier brief of supporting ICT-based distance education, it will now also be responsible for pedagogical development within all areas of higher education. These parallel trends towards both convergence and distancing can be observed in other aspects of higher education as well.

**HIGHER EDUCATION – THE “DISTANT” FUTURE**

When writing about “the University of the future”, Brown & Duguid [1995] maintain that the basic characteristic of higher education is that it provides an entrance into “communities”. If we accept their premise that this is the primary task of a university, we must also ponder if and how this task is transferable to distance education.

In a similar vein, Collis & Moonen [2001] propose that one of the strengths of the traditional university, unlike “traditional” providers of distance education, is that the students meet seasoned teachers and researchers, with enough qualifications for not only teaching the course but also to “author” it, and consequently have the opportunity for “intellectual apprenticeship” [ibid, p. 43]. It is important, they maintain, that this strength is not weakened in an attempt to become more flexible.

In other words, regardless of whether distance education and more traditional academic education converge or distance themselves from another, it is more important to preserve their respective strengths than to just adopt one form or the other.

The rest of this section is derived from a recent study of the process of establishing a more developed form of LC’s, named “högskolecentrum” (university college centres), connected to University West. The process was studied from several angles, including perceptions of higher education and its future organisation and the role of distance education in the higher education in the future [Kjellén 2007a]. In this paper, it is primarily the organising of higher education and the learning environment that are of interest.

**ORGANIZING THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FUTURE**

When Blass [2003] describes the future university she starts with the observation that English universities were not publicly financed until as late as 1919, and that much of what is seen as typical of them – and is recreated through different academic routines and rituals – is a residual from an aristocratic university for the few.

In parallel with this “residual model”, there is the dominant model of higher education for everybody. Notwithstanding that this model dominates the rhetoric, most students today are interested in education, not for its own sake, but as a means to employment and career. It may be noted that both individual governments and the EU talk more and more about “employability”.

Add to this that teaching and research have become more and more separated and financed in different ways and that teaching has become increasingly modularised to accommodate both greater flexibility and economies of scale, and the result is that a new model is emerging. Some of the characteristics of this model are [ibid, p. 4]:

- **Corporate**: the corporate universities of the future will award degrees, in cooperation with traditional universities, and the education will contain elements of practical training.
- **Virtual**: the future university will still have campuses but will be forced to become more and more “virtual” on account of the possible flexibility; the problem is that much will be done just because it is possible, not necessarily because it is better, and that enthusiasts, rather than experts, will take the lead, since faculty normally is not trained to produce good teaching materials.
- **Global**: today’s university competes in the international arena; in the future there will be more of partnerships and cooperation.

Brown & Duguid [1995] propose a similar model but are more far-reaching in the organisational consequences. After discussing what a university does or is for, they arrive at a distributed organisation. The heading is, appropriately enough, Breaking down the monolith [ibid, Section 13]. Their starting point is that the traditional university can be said to consist of four different parts that today are seen as one, but do not need to be: the degree granting function, faculty, physical resources and students. One way of making universities more flexible would be to decouple these parts from one another again.
• **Diplomas**: this function would be performed by DGBs (degree-granting bodies), which would be supervised in the same way that universities are supervised today, and would compete for students and teachers/researchers.

• **Teachers and researchers**: would become independent contract workers, connected to a DGB in much the same way as a consultant is connected to a hospital. They do not need to be in one place.

• **Resource centres**: would compete for servicing different DGBs, personnel and students. It would be a regional interest to have centres of high quality.

• **Students**: would be able to choose DGB, depending on the location of resource centres, or which teachers they preferred to work with.

**THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

There are already signs that what is happening and has happened in distance education will also influence campus education, e.g. the increased use of the web for campus courses. When Mason [1998] defines what he thinks will characterise the new learning environments, it is primarily two trends that he wants to emphasise.

The first trend concerns diminishing differences between teacher and student. He sees computer conferencing as an ideal medium for realising the teaching potential of students, and also deems this to be no new discovery, but rather an adaptation of the seminar to the web.

The second trend is about the collective construction of a course. It might only happen as an exception but could nevertheless serve as an important guide for both those that construct the course and those that participate in it. This does not mean that the teacher abdicates but rather that her role to a larger extent will accentuate the ability (and willingness) to not only prepare but also to catch opportunities when they present themselves. It may be added that it is not only a question of foreseeing student expectations, but also of managing them when the course is underway.

This can be compared to Laurillard [2002], who maintains that technology for learning and teaching should be constructed around what she calls a “conversational paradigm”. Conversations have always been important, the difference is that earlier forms of conversations have been either one-way or one-to-one, while the Internet enables conversations many-to-many. Furthermore, the Internet can give the students access to objects that can be manipulated and discussed.

She also points out, on the other hand, that distance education can give a semblance of access but not real access, and even if the Internet is suited for serving and maintaining learning communities, it is not as well suited for creating them.

When Collis & Moonen [2001, p. 42] talk about the strengths of the traditional university, they use what could be taken as a metaphor: the seasoned academic with both teaching and research experience, a person sufficiently qualified, not only to teach the course but also to "author" it. It is in contact with such a person that the students acquire the experience of what it means to be a "professional academic", an experience that in itself is something more than just having participated in a university course, regardless of level or delivery model.

Given that (formally qualified) university teachers are something of a scarce resource (at least in Sweden), it is interesting to note that it is more the teacher’s attitude that is important, rather than formal scientific and pedagogical credentials. Collis & Moonen [2001, e.g. Table 1.5 on p. 22] discuss two different pedagogical models. “Acquisition” means that the task of the teacher is to transmit (already existing) knowledge, “contribution” that the students participate in and contribute to the creation of knowledge. The conclusion must be that it is teachers who employ the second model that open the doors to academic communities of practice, and they who acquire “intellectual apprentices”.

This can be compared to Rovai [2004], who notes that the existing dissatisfaction with distance courses may depend on the pedagogy used. He advocates a constructivist approach with a focus on learning, and describes it in the following way:

*What the change [in the original title of the article] implies is that the focus of course design and pedagogy is on learning, not teaching, and that from time to time, all members of the learning community are teachers as they bring diverse expertise, experiences, and worldviews to the task of learning. (Ibid, sid. 90)*
The conclusion is, then, that a successful distance education demands a different pedagogical attitude or approach than what dominates the higher education of today.

THE CASE METHOD IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

So far, the discussion in this paper may seem so remote from the practical and technical aspects of distance education as to have no connection at all with the possible use of the case method. However, my view is that we need to put these practical aspects into some context as well. This context can be studied at several different levels: the education system at large, the role of distance education in teaching institutions, the impact of different pedagogical perspectives on teaching practices, or the use of cases in concrete learning situations.

Since, as stated from the outset, the thoughts on this would be highly speculative, there will be no attempt to treat any of these levels extensively or even to provide clear links between them. Also, the pedagogical perspectives have been treated elsewhere [Kjellén 2007].

It is possible to construct a university or an educational system, at least in principle, from some basic tenets about learning [see e.g. Bowden & Marton 1998], in the case of computer mediated learning in combination with the basic characteristics of different channels or media and what they can afford [see e.g. Laurillard 2002]. It should be noted that the view of learning and knowledge adopted here emphasises their collaborative and collective aspects.

As a first order approximation, then, it will be posited that the kind of educational system that will contain an increasing proportion of distance courses and programmes is also a system where the ongoing, lifelong aspect of learning will be in focus, at least for the foreseeable future. So far, distance education technologies have been promoted on the ground of their flexibility and the ensuing possibilities for combining, e.g., studies and work and also to tailor timely competence development efforts in the workplace, two situations where applicability and realism are valued. On this level, there is no doubt that there is a place for cases also in the distant future, even to a larger extent than today.

Bowden & Marton [1998] agree with Blass [2003] and others that the university has the task of preparing its students for their professional and working life but they also emphasise that learning objectives that emanate from what “professionals currently are believed to be capable of doing, is not appropriate. Education is about the future, not the present. --- So, what the students should learn, above all, is to focus on critical aspects of professional situations.” (Ibid, p. 11)

They, therefore, recommend what they call the “variation model” over a competency based approach. “What we need to do is to create a curriculum in which a lot of the problems are about novel situations, that is, situations in which at first it is not obvious what the problem is. Students should frequently be placed in contexts in which their first task is to figure out which aspects of their knowledge are relevant to a particular situation.” [Ibid. p. 127].

This is as good a description of the case method as can be found.

MODES OF DELIVERY

The main difference between the case method in a distance education context and the “usual” way of using cases lies so far in how the case seminar can be conducted. All other aspects, including the students’ preparation and the specific assignments, are roughly the same. The class-room seminar can be thought of as a shared time, which probably is a more important characteristic than the shared space.

If we think of web-based distance education, the synchronous techniques available today are either some sort of chat (ICQ) function, which is built into most learning management systems, or video conferencing (Marratech). Both these possibilities are awkward in several respects; chats can easily get out of hand on account of no threading or time delays, and video conferences seem to presuppose some earlier face-to-face contact to work efficiently for more serious discussion.

That leaves us with the fairly well tested synchronicity of the debate boards. In other settings, they have stood up well, e.g. as vehicles for literature seminars. But does this not mean that we lose out in the case discussion? No fast fencing, no immediate responses to interesting or provocative ideas, no stage for the professor…

In one of the few articles on the effects on particular assignments of using asynchronous systems for solving cases that the author found, Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz [1999] compare the performance of differently
mediated groups and conclude that using an asynchronous learning network (ALN) means that a group will submit longer and better solutions but will also be more dissatisfied with the process, characterised by i.e. delayed interaction and “login-lags”. They consequently have more difficulties with coordination, and since they were not allowed any other means of communication than the ALN, the group had to decide for itself how long they would wait for absentees.

**LEARNING OVER THE NET**

Even if there are few studies of case teaching and learning in a distance context, it is possible to draw some conclusions about what it might be like, and what to expect from more general studies of learning and teaching in a distance context. Over the last years, there has been a growing literature on this subject, often under the heading of “learning communities” or “communities of practice” [see e.g. Rovai 2001].

Hammond [2000] found that adult learners valued on-line discussion, but experienced constraints on participation, such as access to technology and uncertainty as to the role of discussions in the course. The characteristics of the media, such as the permanence of messages and the asynchronous communication, were seen as both advantages and disadvantages.

Meyer [2003] noted that the use of on-line threaded discussions typically increases the time spent on class objectives, and that the students appreciated the extra time for reflection on course issues. She also found evidence that higher-order thinking can and does occur in on-line discussions.

Arbaugh [2000] studied discussion patterns in an asynchronous MBA course where students and teachers had no previous experience of the software used. Although it was easier for participants in a traditional classroom setting to interact, this was offset by the advantages of the opportunities for reflection, the diminished impact of social presence and the possibility of idea refinement that the Internet-based course offered.

Kettner-Polley [1999] makes two interesting observations regarding his experiences of distance and campus teaching. The first is that he was continually disappointed in the quality of on-campus discussions. The reasons were that not everybody came prepared to the discussions and that not everybody was prepared to voice their opinions publicly.

Furthermore, the ones that were prepared to do this were not necessarily those that had something to say: “While the less thoughtful students were talking, the more thoughtful ones were still thinking about the question and formulating interesting and relevant responses. Their responses were ready long after the class discussion had moved on.” (Ibid., Section V) This suggests that the asynchronous type of discussion that takes place on-line has its advantages over the traditional seminar face to face.

His second observation is that in his experience, he gets better feedback from students, not because he acts differently but because the virtual seminar is more suited for the transmission of complicated thoughts.

Based on these and similar studies, it seems safe to assume that it will be possible, not only to transfer, but also to transform the case method to the new distance learning environments.

**CONCLUSIONS**

It might be tempting to conclude that it is possible to foresee a not so distant future, where things are done more or less the way that they have always been done, except that some of it may be asynchronous and text-based, at least until the technology will afford on-line video séances with large groups.

There will also, surely, be case-teaching; whether that means aiming at emulating the class-room seminar as far as possible, or whether taking the opportunity to rethink some of the ways things are done, is another question. Some things can be transferred from the class-room to the net but should it be done just because it is possible? And more, important, what can be done on the net that cannot be done in the class-room?

One possible “vision” is that of extended case seminars, sometimes running in parallel with one another to give the opportunity of “cross-pollination”, not only between different parts of the same course but also between different courses; another is that of “archived” discussions that students could return to and review, in the light of further study and learning. The most important aspect of the web-based
seminar is arguably its durability (as opposed to the quickly forgotten spoken word), the possibility to
return to it, and the ensuing enhanced opportunities and rewards for reflection.
That way might create a true collaborative effort, not only between students, but also between
students and teachers.

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