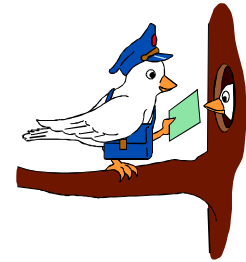




### Before the E-mail there was the P-mail **Distance Learning by Postal Correspondence**

Sonia Jurich



For many of us, the term, "distance learning," calls forth the image of a group of students communicating with an instructor on another point of the planet, or outside it, by means of computers and video devices. However, education at a distance predates computers and has been around for more than a century, spurred by technological advances and social changes of the nineteenth century. With the mechanization of the printing process, information could be reproduced in faster and more economic ways. The information could then spread farther and faster by a well-organized post office system, through the newly built infrastructure of roads and railways. Issues of national security and economic competitiveness brought education to the forefront of national interests and the introduction of public education created a large constituency able and eager to read. The time was ripe for correspondence education.

Correspondence education filled the gaps of an educational system that was either too small to absorb the increasing demand, or too rigid to respond to the needs of a society in transformation. René Erdos divides the history of correspondence education in four stages:

- a period of individual initiative and experiment by the late 1800's;
- a period of incorporation into national systems of education in the 1900's in many countries;
- the expansion period during the Second World War; and
- the post-war period of rapid and widespread development.

We propose a fifth stage that began about 20 years ago, characterized by a renewal of distance learning with the Open Universities and the introduction of computer and video technology into the traditional structure of studies by mail.

#### **Individual Initiative and Experimentation**

In the late 1800's, individual pioneers start to use the technological advances of their time -- the improvements of the printing press and the post office -- to address the needs of a growing literate population in search of general education or more skilled work. Isaac Pitman, in England, used postcards to teach shorthand to far away students. Charles Toussaient and Gustave Langenscheidt opened a school in Germany to teach languages by correspondence. One of the most successful examples of that period is Hans Hermod's in Sweden. When one of his students moved away, Hermod decided to continue instructing the student by mail. From this timid beginning grew Hermods-NKI, a correspondence education institution that is part of the national system of formal education in Sweden, from elementary to university level, and branching to technical and vocational education.

Correspondence studies were then a vehicle to bring education to many social groups who would otherwise be left out from the public system, such as women, older adults, low-income workers and immigrants. In the United States, Anna Ticknor founded, in 1873, the Society to Encourage Studies at Home, in Boston, to stimulate at-home wives and mothers to expand their general education. From 1878 to 1894, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (C.L.S.C.), in New York, enrolled more than 225,000 students and had more than 10,000 circles nationwide, where students met to read and discuss the books borrowed from the circle. Similarly, the correspondence program in sociology at the University of Chicago enrolled more than 30,000 students between 1893 and 1923. Among the students were gardeners, cigar-makers, department store managers, housewives, and many others who would not dare, because of their occupation and up bringing, attend classes at the prestigious university. Indeed, the impersonality of correspondence education was an ad-

vantage for many students, whose race, gender, level of education or English fluency put them at odds with the regular student population of the time.

### **Incorporation into Educational Systems**

The end of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were periods of intense economic transformation and large movement of populations. In the United States, for instance, high school enrollment grew from under 250,000 to over 4 million between 1890 and 1930, mostly due to immigration. This growing and diversified population, faced with a changing job market, required skills that the

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formal school system was unable to provide. The expansion of proprietary correspondence schools addressed this need by introducing innovative educational methods and partnering with major corporations to facilitate jobs and promotions for their students. The most famous of these schools was the International Correspondence School (ICS), in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1880 as a mining school by mail, thirty years later the ICS contained 31 divisions that provided courses in over 500 subjects, and had a budget exceeding \$2 million.

Australia and New Zealand had another type of challenge. Rather than a high demographic concentration in cities, as the United States, these countries had to educate a population dispersed through a large and mostly uninhabited territory. An Australian farmer, who was settling with his family in a far outpost, wrote a letter to the Director of Education in the State of Victoria asking how his sons would continue their education. The Director passed the letter to the Principal of the Teachers' Training College, who requested some volunteers among the teacher trainees to teach the boys by mail. The response was so enthusiastic that Victoria's Department of Education decided to establish a correspondence school to provide education to all those children living too far to attend schools. Soon the idea was adopted throughout Australia. Likewise, New Zealand solved the problem of scattered

population by establishing a system of itinerant teachers who maintained on-going contact with the students by mail.

The former Soviet Union adopted correspondence education in 1920 to attain its goal of full education for all children in the face of a shortage of teachers. Studies by mail became a significant component of the soviet educational system, from elementary to post-secondary education. Soviet students could attend regular schools and take specific courses not offered in their schools by correspondence. Correspondence students had full access to school laboratories, libraries and lecture halls to complement their studies.

### **Globalization of Correspondence**

During the Second World War, correspondence schools became an important tool in providing education to both youth and adults in countries where curfews and black-outs made it impossible to attend evening schools. Also, many countries involved in the war established a complex system of correspondence education across continents to ensure that the education of their service personnel was not interrupted by the war. In Australia, the system was under the Departments of Education of each state, while the United States Armed Forces Institutes (USAFI) were under the Department of Defense.

### **Air-Correspondence**

The post-war was a period of expansion of correspondence education, now enhanced by the use of another somewhat recent technology, the radio. The introduction of radio as an adjunct to correspondence education began in 1937 in New Zealand. Radio programs provided a more dynamic teacher-student relationship, offering explanation, reinforcement, and further elaboration of the topics contained in the student's handbook. Developing countries soon became leaders in the combined use of radio and correspondence for educational purposes. In 1972 the South Korean government developed the Korea Air-Correspondence Junior College (KACAJUC) to address the needs of a large number of youth who were unable to attend college for economic reasons or lack of educational facilities. The Ministry of Education in Kenya established an air-correspondence course unit to provide in-service training for teachers in rural areas. The course was part of the University College of Nairobi, with technical assistance from the University of Wisconsin. In the late 1960's, the Madureza Project in Brazil used this mix of radio and correspondence in an official effort to increase the country's literacy level, providing adults with a second chance to complete their basic schooling and acquire technical skills.

### The Open University

The Open University opened in England in 1971 with two basic proposals: to expand adult education and democratize the country's university system that had become too elitist. Its main interest was to provide a general education at the post-secondary level, with degrees in arts, engineering, science and social science. In addition to correspondence and radio, The Open University incorporated new technologies, particularly television, using prime time broadcast programs. Without formal entrance requirements, the University offers tutorials and remedial courses to students who are having difficulty in their course work. Despite its critics, the Open University has changed the educational landscape in England and became a major intellectual export product. In 1990, the Open University across Great Britain had more than 70,000 undergraduate and 4,000 graduate students, in addition to approximately 30,000 students in independent courses. In Scotland, it is the fifth largest university in number of students.

### An Adjunct and An Innovator

Correspondence studies have served both as an adjunct to the regular educational system and as an innovator.

For over a hundred years, correspondence studies have served both as an adjunct to the regular educational system and as an innovator. As an adjunct, it provided education to those outside the narrow target of the regular schools: the older, the poor, the mediocre student rejected by the universities, the married student whose schedule did not fit that of the schools, those who had just arrived in the country and did not speak the

language, or those who lived too far away to be reached by the regular system. As an innovator, correspondence studies initiated the concept of flexible education, organized in modules and adapted to the individual student. Their expansion responded to the needs of societies in transition, where technological advances and economic changes outpaced the capacity of the regular educational system to adapt; times, indeed, very similar to those in which we are now living. The

challenges are alike, but the technologies are more powerful. But this is the topic for future articles.

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