

# Knowledge management as professional development: The case of the MDE

by  
Thomas Hülsmann & Ulrich Bernath

In J. Liebowitz & M.S. Frank (Eds.) Knowledge Management and E-Learning. Boca Raton, FL:  
Auerbach Publications Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 253 – 271

## **Knowledge management and professional development**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss knowledge management (KM) with respect to the *Master of Distance Education* (MDE) degree, a postgraduate program jointly offered by the *University of Maryland University College* (UMUC) and the *Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg*<sup>1</sup>.

A discussion of the nature of *knowledge* or, in particular, the difference between *knowledge* and *information* is beyond the scope of this chapter<sup>2</sup>. We tend to use the words *information* (or *data*) when we talk about encoded messages flowing in digital networks, and *knowledge* when people are concerned with interpreting these data. *Information*, says Peters, can be disseminated today with the speed of light, while the spreading of *knowledge* is still slow and cumbersome (Peters, 2003). While information management is a necessary ingredient of knowledge management, it is by no means exhaustive. Knowledge management (KM) is about managing people as well as information.

In this chapter, we will largely ignore the aspect of information management. Not because we underrate the importance of digital technologies (as this chapter will amply demonstrate), but because, as far as our case study is concerned, the technical aspects of information management are of secondary importance. We want to focus on KM as far as people are concerned, this is, on KM as professional development. Hence, we define KM in an organization as 'capturing the knowledge distributed within the organization, eliciting /generating new knowledge, and leveraging it for improving the organization's performance'.

Applying this definition to education, one cannot help noticing that the MDE program was launched at a specific historic juncture in the development of distance education as a discipline, that is, at a time when the information and communication technologies (ICT) led to deep transformational changes thoroughly effecting the practice and theory of distance education and training. As a consequence, the MDE was faced with a major *aporia*: It embarked on teaching distance education as a subject of a graduate degree program at a time when the subject itself was in flux. Moreover, the *aporia* was hard to ignore since the innovative delivery format of *online* teaching and learning sat uncomfortably with the classical body of *theories* informing the program's curricular content.

## **The tectonic shift: From distance education to online learning**

As a consequence of the ICT revolution in the late 1990s and in the first years of the new millennium, distance education as a discipline was undergoing a *tectonic shift*. For better understanding of what happened, one needs to revisit traditional distance education and mark precisely the point of impact of the digital technologies leading to new teaching and learning formats – for example, online learning - in order to be able to appreciate the tensions induced.

Traditional (pre-Internet/web-based) distance education practice was built around one major deficit: *Responsive interaction* at a distance was technically not feasible at the time. By “*responsive*,” we mean a turn-around time of messages short enough to justify speaking about dialog or discussion, rather than of receiving feedback to an assignment<sup>3</sup>.

How much the whole structure of distance education was developed around this deficit can be seen by analyzing three critical aspects: (i) instructional design, (ii) systems, and (iii) cost:

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. UMUC MDE website: <http://www.umuc.edu/programs/grad/mde/>; or the respective Oldenburg website: <http://www.mde.uni-oldenburg.de/>

<sup>2</sup> However, the issue is thoroughly treated in Volume 5 of the ASF Series under the title "'Information" and "Knowledge" - On the semantic transformation of two central terms' by Otto Peters (Peters, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The only technology supporting responsive interaction at the time was the telephone which was not useful as main platform or teaching because it was essentially a one-to-one technology and because it could not transport written messages.

- (i) *Instructional design*: Distance education had to disentangle presentation and interaction and, indeed, shift the *onus* of teaching towards presentation. In turn, it developed a specific instructional design approach aiming at embedding dialog into the course material itself. The respective theoretical underpinnings can be found in Holmberg's concept of 'guided didactic conversation' and 'tutorial in print', both elements of his "theory of the empathetic teaching-learning conversation" (Holmberg, 1960; 2007) or, though from a slightly different point of view, in Moore's "theory of transactional distance" (Moore, 1973; 2007).
- (ii) *Systems*: The inherent shift towards the presentational aspect of teaching allowed an 'industrialized' approach to distance education leading to a specific configuration of distance education as a system (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). At the heart, there was a course development unit (including the academic specialists) and a course production unit (including mass media production specialists), and at the periphery<sup>4</sup> tutors, with the very restricted teaching remit to help students to understand the course material. The most prominent theoretical underpinning of this is certainly Peters' "theory of distance education as most industrialized form of education" (Peters, 1973; 2010).
- (iii) *Cost*: Systems approaches in distance education allowed a specific cost structure characterized by possibly high but fixed (!) development and production costs and comparatively low variable cost per student (due to limited interaction and use of comparatively low cost personnel). It is on this potential for *economies of scale* and the acknowledged high quality course material that the claim of distance education as being more cost-effective does rest. (Hülsmann, 2008)

The ICT revolution in the digital era did change all this because, for the first time in history, Web-base teaching and learning arrangements allowed responsive interaction at a distance. While this spurred much enthusiasm since it seemed to address the Achilles' heel of distance education, it soon became clear that it did challenge traditional distance education arrangements. There was no *rationale* anymore for shifting the focus of teaching to course development. In the new virtual seminar mode of online learning the question came up: Why design interaction into the course material when one could take off-the-shelf material and wrap dialogue around it? Once you take away one of the dominos, the rest of the configuration falls. In online distance education there is no longer a need for costly pre-fabricated course development, which in-turn pushes over the scale-economies argument and with it the claim for cost-efficiency. (Hülsmann, 2009)

This reading of the impact of the ICT revolution admittedly focuses on the *communicative* capabilities of ICT rather the *information* processing capabilities. It is true that the digital technologies also afford opportunities more in line with the traditional distance education systems configuration than is suggested by the above usage of digital technologies focusing on the communicative capabilities. In fact, the information processing capabilities allow all sorts of new and interesting options, ranging from simple automated multiple choice questions to interactive spreadsheets, simulations, or all sorts of software agents. Exploiting ICT along these lines would be more in line with the traditional distance education arrangements<sup>5</sup>.

However, this second way of using the affordances of the new technologies would not address the Achilles' heel of distance education, that is, its lack of *responsive interaction at a distance*. But fully exploiting the capabilities of digital technologies for interaction turns them into disruptive technologies. Online learning, especially in its format as 'virtual seminar', is a disruptive technology as far as traditional distance education is concerned.

## ***The MDE: Managing a community of reflective practitioners***

This above described context, especially the fascination with the new interactive responsiveness of distance education, allows us to fully appreciate the particular situation of the program at the time it was launched: The MDE is about DE and DE was 'in flux' as visibly epitomized by its own online delivery format.

In terms of professional development this meant professional development as development of the profession. It could not just be read as implementing a set of professional standards; these had, at least to some extent, to be *invented*.

---

<sup>4</sup> This refers both to geographical distance to the center as to employment status.

<sup>5</sup> Hülsmann (following Rumble, 2004, p. 165) distinguished the two modes of ICT usage as type-i (exploiting the information processing capabilities the ICT revolution affords) and type-c (where ICT is used to sustain a communicative bridge between real people). (Hülsmann, 2004, p. 244) Type-i is in terms of cost-structure and instructional approach much in line with traditional distance education, while type-c comes with an unavoidable trade-off in terms of scale economies.

In this situation, where even experienced distance educators had to explore new modes of practice two concepts are helpful for framing our analysis of: (i) the *reflective practitioner*, and (ii) the *community of practice*. Given that the MDE was embarking on uncharted waters and the theoretical maps available were incomplete or even misleading, the special abilities of the reflective practitioner were called for. Following Dewey, the concept of the reflective practitioner embraces the dynamic relation of reflective thinking to the educative process that continuously generates new experiences and leads its reorganize and reconstruction (Dewey, 1910, 1933).

At the same time, launching a fully fledged Master's program is not an individual endeavor for each faculty involved. It requires a group effort. Managing a group of internationally distributed faculty in this context of a tectonic shift required developing the group into a 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998) sharing new insights and experiences in a common enterprise and transforming them into a collective knowledge base that is continually negotiated and applied to teaching, as well as administering the MDE program as a whole.

Two things were necessary for this to happen: providing a forum for articulating (making explicit) reflections on the experience of the innovative learning format (induced by the described tectonic shift) and bundling them into self-energizing feedback through the participation of a community of practice. The forum was provided by the various platforms for publication, most importantly the ASF-Series. The community of of practice was first and foremost the MDE-faculty and, more widely, the community of practice of online teachers, especially those convened at the EDEN Research Workshops.

Elaborating on this background, the following three sections will describe (i) MDE faculty development, (ii) EDEN Research Workshops, and (iii) the ASF-Series as means for knowledge management and professional development. These three ongoing threads are intertwined and their description makes some redundancies unavoidable: Some faculty development meetings happened in conjunction with the EDEN Research Workshops, and some articles published in the ASF-Series are based on papers presented at these workshops. The EDEN Research Workshops served as a hub, allowing the MDE faculty to present their practitioner-research findings to a wider community as well as capturing some relevant ideas from the wider community of practice and feeding it back to the MDE.

## MDE Faculty Development

Following the above assessment of the historical juncture at which the program was launched there was an urgent need to involve faculty, not only in course but also in curriculum development, and in various other aspects of program quality management. There was no off-the-shelf standard curriculum for a Master's program in distance education and even less so for delivering it fully online. In fact, one of the affordances of the new communicative capabilities was blurring the roles of course development and academic tutoring. All these decisions, formative for the curriculum and shaping the process could - and better should not - be decided 'par ordre de mufti'. It can be argued that ownership and motivation is considerably enhanced when faculty are involved in these program management decisions<sup>6</sup>.

Meeting face-to-face played an important role in this process. Face-to-face meetings may not be a necessary ingredient to forge a community of practice of geographically dispersed faculty but during the initial development of the MDE program extraordinary efforts have been taken to allow a few of such most helpful opportunities. Face-to-face meetings for program planning, curriculum design, collaboration, and professional development took place in 2000, 2001 (this time in conjunction with the 20<sup>th</sup> ICDE World Conference in Germany), and two more meetings in 2002 (one of those in conjunction with the 8<sup>th</sup> Sloan-C Conference in Orlando). Since 2004, the faculty meetings regularly are taking place on occasion and in connection with the bi-annual EDEN Research Workshops.

To support faculty development with respect to teaching has to be read against the described background of deep transformation in distance education. Many faculty members, while being old hands in distance education, were new to online learning. In fact, given the thin layer of experience to draw from (due to the very novelty of the technology), all of us entered waters largely uncharted by the classical theories. This applied to handling the technical features of the learning management system (which was learned fairly quickly<sup>7</sup>) and to exploiting the additional affordances of *responsive interaction* pedagogically. For lead faculty, a mandatory five-week WebTycho course provided the required navigational skills, together with the first very useful pedagogical

---

<sup>6</sup> There is, however, another side of the coin. Ownership contradicts depersonalization policies. Emphaizing ownership produces an uncomfortable dependency on key personnel. Preferring depersonalization may mean having to run the program with only superficially interested 'mercenaries'.

<sup>7</sup> It has to be said that at the beginning the LMS used (WebTycho) was not as convenient than what was available later. At the time to present messages using styles (e.g., italics, colors, numbering) or include pictures one had to edit html code and handle FT Protocol. All not difficult if appropriate faculty support is available.

advice. Beyond that and especially for visiting experts and guest lecturers, additional help and/or peer teaching opportunities were offered. (Brindley, Zawacki & Roberts 2003)

While the focus of faculty development has initially been to capture / elicit knowledge from within the MDE, there were increasingly good reasons to open up to a wider community of practice in order that personal experiences could be shared and one could draw on the experience of others. In this context conferences played a major role: Here the focus shifted from the 'world conferences' of the *International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)* (1997, 1999, and 2001), to the bi-annual research workshops of the *European Distance and E-learning Network (EDEN)*, beginning in 2002.

## **The European Distance Education and E-Learning Network (EDEN)**

The *Second EDEN Research Workshop* on 'Research and Policy in Open and Distance Learning' in 2002 was a starting point for paying particular attention to this forum. The authors of this paper presented at this workshop on "Asynchronous learning networks – may this work?" (Bernath & Hülsmann, 2002).

The *Third EDEN Research Workshop* in Oldenburg in 2004 led to a flurry of preparatory activities. Incentives were given to MDE faculty, alumni and students for submitting papers to the conference. The turn out was impressive: 17 papers of a total of 84 accepted conference papers have been originated by MDE faculty and students (11 from faculty members and six from students). One of the 18 workshop sessions was sponsored by the Volkswagen AutoUni exclusively for MDE students<sup>8</sup>. It is worth noting that all six students became distance education professionals: Two joined the MDE faculty, three became administrators at institutions in higher education, and one made a career as a manager and trainer in the private sector.

Of the 17 papers seven reflected on the MDE, nine were related to the MDE in various contexts, and only one was not related to the MDE at all. The impressive presence of the MDE at the conference even served as a 'recruitment drive': In the wake of the conference five presenters became members of the MDE faculty team<sup>9</sup>.

The *Fourth EDEN Research Workshop* on 'Research into online distance education and e-learning: Making the Difference' was organized by EDEN in co-operation with the Open University of Catalonia (UOC). This workshop took place 25-28 October, 2006 in Barcelona/Castelldefels, Spain.

At this conference event, MDE faculty contributed to one of the highlights of the conference: The panel discussion between Peters, Holmberg and Moore, three of the major theoretical contributors to the field. The panel discussion has been summarized by Bernath & Vidal and published in *Distance & Savoirs*, the leading French journal on distance education (Bernath & Vidal, 2007). Together with a comment on the session by Hülsmann, was also published in *Distance & Savoir* (Hülsmann, 2008), these papers feed back into the Foundation of Distance Education course (OMDE 601) of the MDE as recommended readings.

The *Fifth EDEN Research Workshop* on 'Researching and promoting access to education and training: the role of distance education and e-learning in technology-enhanced environments' was organized by EDEN in co-operation with Cned, the Centre National de l'Enseignement à Distance (CNED) in France. This workshop took place October 25-28, 2008 in Paris.

Again there were significant contributions from the MDE community of practice. If one includes all those involved for some time in the MDE, such MDE associates contributed two keynotes and four presentations. Altogether, close to 15 MDE team members were present and contributed in different ways: ranging from key note speeches, session chairs, as presenters of major papers or posters up to the MDE students presenting their experiences in so called 'cracker-barrel' sessions.

Some of the research directly originated from within the MDE discussed the issue, in which extent one should enforce active participation in collaborative learning groups. The faculty presenting this research (Brindley, Walti & Blaschke, 2009)<sup>10</sup> had the experience of coteaching, which led to the trust and common interest to become to a community of inquiry, able to conduct a common research, albeit all three contributors are located in different countries (Canada, Germany, and the United States). The same applied for another team from the United States and Israel (Kurtz, Beaudoin & Sagee, 2004) who developed a joint research agenda as part of their shared MDE experience, albeit their research aimed at surveying a wider international audience of online learners.

---

<sup>8</sup> Workshop 15: Creating global proximity in a corporate University: Collaborative Learning at Volkswagen AutoUni.

<sup>9</sup> Re-calculating MDE presence with hindsight (i.e. including these members as part of the MDE) the percentage of papers contributed by MDE associates even would rise up to 26%.

<sup>10</sup> Brindley, Blaschke & Walti: Creating Effective Collaborative Learning Groups in an Online Environment ; the session wachared by another MDE faculty Gila Kurtz from Israel.

To give MDE students the opportunity to present at and be actively involved in an international conference remained part of the MDE knowledge management strategies: On occasion of this workshop two MDE students presented their experiences with the program in cracker-barrell sessions<sup>11</sup>.

The *Sixth EDEN Research Workshop* will be held in Budapest in October 2010. It is planned to mobilize the MDE community of practice to participate in full force again. The time allocated will permit forming research teams and beyond, serendipitously reflecting on practice, asking specific questions, and reporting some evidence-based findings at the conference. We hope to draw from these research initiatives to publish a volume in the ASF-Series to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the MDE in 2010<sup>12</sup>.

The lesson learned from conferencing is twofold: Preparing for a conference can trigger substantial additional efforts, thus advancing extraordinary opportunities for eliciting / generating new knowledge. Getting to know each other better by participating as a group contributes considerably to the constitution of a community of practice. In fact, the occasion of the conference also was used for convening a small MDE faculty meeting which set precedence for the EDEN Research Workshop to come<sup>13</sup>. - In addition the substantial presence of the MDE at a single conference arguably contributes optimally to project the program image internationally.

It can again be fairly argued that especially in three respects participating in the EDEN Research Workshop has proved its value: evaluating the role of the EDEN Research Workshop against the previous definition of knowledge management as capturing existing knowledge distributed within the organization; eliciting new knowledge from its members; and leveraging all this to improve the organization's performance. In terms of capturing knowledge and eliciting / generating new knowledge much of the same arguments apply for the EDEN Workshops as for the ASF-Series (see text to come). In fact, the EDEN Workshops defined a sort of rallying point which repeatedly triggered substantial academic efforts, which fed into the ASF-Series and consequently into the MDE, be it as contributing to content or influencing procedures.

In terms of contributing to the formation of a *community of practice*, the whole package, working together to submit papers and participating as a group in a conference (which involves presenting together, or presenting to each other and listening to each other) allows forming a mutual understanding as persons, intellectual and researchers, from which, hopefully, the trust emerges, that moulds faculty, engaged in a common endeavor, to form a community in a less superficial meaning of the word.

## The ASF book series on distance education

Possibly the most effective medium for *professional development* (as contributing to the *development of the profession*) was and still is the ASF Series. When applying our working definition of KM as capturing existing knowledge, eliciting new knowledge and leveraging it for improved performance, there is ample evidence that the ASF Series did all that.

A forerunner of the ASF Series, also closely associated with the MDE, merits attention: *The [Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education \(Bernath & Rubin \(Eds.\), 1999\)](#)*. This publication is remarkable because it presents the complete transcript of the asynchronous communication between all 48 participants of the Virtual Seminar. It also succeeded in convening major experts in the field of distance education from various continents to test the waters of online teaching and learning and eventually influenced the syllabus for the MDE's portal course, the Foundations of Distance Education (OMDE 601).

Two concepts emerged in the context of the Virtual Seminar, which may be used here to illustrate reflective practice: Bernath's 'ripple effect' and Fritsch's concept of the 'witness learner' which eventually inspired Beaudoin's discussion of the 'invisible learner' (Beaudoin, 2003, 2009). Bernath argued that the pace in asynchronous text-based conferencing is optimal for reflective dialogue. While turn-around times in traditional distance education were too long to be engaging, the pace of asynchronous discussion, with a response time close of around 24 hours, was short enough to keep up the motivational tension while allowing more time for reflection than the turn-taking of a face-to-face discussion: Posting a message seemed much like "throwing a stone into the water (the incoming messages) and creating ripples that expand outward in each recipients head (pondering on the content of the message)." (Bernath & Rubin, 1999) Asynchronous conferencing therefore

---

<sup>11</sup> *Cracker-barrell sessions* are short presentations where a person delivers repeatedly a short presentation (including discussion about 15 minutes) to a changing conference audience moving from one table ('cracker barrel') to the other. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary the term refers the cracker barrel in country stores around which customers lounged for informal conversation. It underlines the 'friendly homespun character' of the communication.

<sup>12</sup> It is by accident that 'slot 10' in the ASF-Series is still free. A volume was planned aimed at supporting a course (OMDE 626) within the program which later was merged (OMDE 625 and OMDE 626 were merged into DEMP 625) which rendered the original concept of the book obsolete.

<sup>13</sup> More on this under 'faculty development'

strikes the optimal balance between the spontaneity of a face-to-face discussion and the long return-times, which prevented in traditional distance education any exchange which convincingly could pass as dialog or discussion.

Fritsch coined the concept of the 'learning witness' in an evaluation of the Virtual Seminar when many participants in the Virtual Seminar reported that they profited a lot from the online seminar *in spite not having actively posted messages*. The term identifies an important potential of online learning (different from the usual situation of traditional distance education): that the learner can learn (as in a conventional face-to-face classroom) from observing other participants interaction with the teacher and among peers. Beaudoin, reviewing the Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar... (which comprises Frisch's evaluation), was intrigued by this observation and later on published (in vol. 6 of the ASF Series) his own research findings on the '*invisible learner*'.

Shifting the focus now to the ASF Series we do so from the vantage point of our definition of KM, professional development and reflective practice<sup>14</sup>. The treatment will not be strictly chronological but will begin with the volumes which best could illustrate the idea of 'capturing the existing expertise' of the faculty involved, then focus on those volumes which best epitomize the concerted effort of the MDE as community of practice to generate new knowledge, and eventually comments on the later volumes which open up to the wider community of practice as represented, for instance, at the EDEN Research Workshops.

Arguably no other Master of Distance Education is so well grounded in the theoretical canon of distance education as the MDE. One of the reason is that a number of seminal contributors to this canon were involved in the MDE right from the beginning. Holmberg is one of these formative figures of the discipline. Both volumes, 4 and 11, which he contributed, were aimed at updating his *opus magnum* (Theory and practice of distance education, 1995). Holmberg's conceptualization of distance education by its two *constituent elements* (content presentation and interaction) tallies nicely to the two aspects afforded by the *information* and *communication* technologies (ICT), one enhancing the sophistication of content presentation, one facilitating *responsive interaction at a distance*. This convinces Holmberg that while acknowledging the enormous potential afforded by the new technologies his old conceptualization of the nature of distance education remains still valid.

Vol. 5 edited by Otto Peters on *Distance Education in Transition. New Trends and Challenges* is the 'best-seller' of the ASF Series and the internationally most widely consulted book of the ASF Series. The author addresses what was previously labeled as the 'tectonic shift' in distance education. The volume includes detailed reflections of the opportunities afforded by the new technologies ('new digital spaces'), an elaborate reflection on the concepts of information and knowledge, as well as a reflection on the experience as visiting expert in the MDE. The volume was expanded in several editions. In the most recent forthcoming 5<sup>th</sup> edition Peters will revisit his 'industrialization theory' and comment on its lasting relevance.

Both volumes from Holmberg and Peters are 'required readings' in the *Foundations of Distance Education* course (OMDE 601), and both authors are regularly participating as visiting expert in this course.

Vol. 6 edited by Ulrich Bernath & Eugen Rubin on *Reflections on Teaching and Learning in an Online Master Program - A Case Study* is possibly the best illustration of the MDE as *community of practice*. It brings together MDE faculty, visiting experts (and indeed students) showing them as reflective practitioners in their field. In fact, producing the volume helped to turn this group of internationally distributed faculty into a community with a common purpose with respect to the MDE. The introductory Bernath & Rubin chapter gave the endeavor a history which became a reference source when the program applied for (and received) awards and accreditations. Beaudoin contributed a paper on the 'invisible learner', which, as explained above, was sparked by Fritsch's concept of witness learning. Hülsmann, contributed two chapters, one on costs, which pointed out the different cost-structure of online learning and traditional distance education, and another one, which reflected on his experience in teaching online courses ('Texts that talk back'). A chapter on faculty support addressed the challenges experienced at this time of transformational change by distance educators testing the waters of online learning. Brindley, Zawacki & Roberts addressed this issue of high practical importance. (The chapter is seminal in the sense that its ideas are expanded in vol. 9.)

It is worth mentioning that the last section of the volume is dedicated to 'voices of students' (Christine Walti, Brian F. Fox, Linda J. Smith, Susanne Offenbartl) who describe and reflect upon their experiences in the program. All of the students contributing to this volume completed their degree and meanwhile hold important positions in the field of distance education. Encouraging them and giving them a platform for publication certainly helped them to make first important steps in their careers.

The volume nicely illustrates that professional development has to be read in two ways: as supporting the implementation of professional standards as well as 'professional development as development of the profession'. The program, hence, had to be both innovative and experimental. This meant that faculty and program managers

---

<sup>14</sup> For more detail on the ASF Series cf. the Annex.

had to reflect on what they were doing and, at the same time, develop standards for a graduate program in distance education. While much of the curriculum is open to inspection (since it is accessible online) the volume was also meant to offer insights about the process, including critical reflections and, indeed, the emotional impact of developing and participating in such a project. The volume is also 'recommended reading' in the *Foundations of Distance Education* (OMDE 601).

Greville Rumble, editor of Vol. 7 on *Papers and Debates on the Economics and Costs of Distance and Online Learning*, more than most other distance educators, has theoretically appreciated the consequences of the impact of new technologies. His distinction of type A and type B technologies marked this impact<sup>15</sup>. Rumble has profoundly realized that any form of distance education fully exploiting the communicative capabilities facilitated by the new technologies (e.g. the 'virtual seminar' approach afforded by online learning) comes with a different cost-structure and suggests a different instructional approach ('why design interactivity into the course material when you can wrap off-the shelf material - say text books - in the real dialog (in the form of online conferencing)? Rumble clearly appreciates that fully exploiting the communication capabilities will 'drive horses and carriages' through traditional distance teaching arrangements. More than others Rumble identifies the trade-offs this has especially in terms of costs. Major parts of the volume are 'required reading' in the *The Costs and Economics of Distance Education* (OMDE 606), and the editor contributes regularly to this course as visiting expert.

Vol. 2 by Thomas Hülsmann on *The costs of open learning: a handbook* dates from research conducted at a time (second half of the 90s) when the online teaching format was still in an early and experimental stage. Though most of the cost figures are meanwhile dated 'The handbook' is still interesting from a methodological point of view. It finds that different technologies (print, radio, TV etc.) differ significantly, albeit with large variations, in terms of cost of production per hour of students learning (cost/SLH). While most of the case studies look at traditional distance education formats, comparing the case studies on the OU and on the 'Virtual Seminar' the shift in terms of cost-structures induced by exploiting the affordances of online communication are all too visible. The volume is made available as 'recommended reading' in the *The Costs and Economics of Distance Education* (OMDE 606, a course developed and regularly taught by TH as lead faculty).

Michael Beaudoin had been involved in DE for more than 20 years when he wrote Vol. 8 on *Reflections on Research, Faculty and Leadership in Distance Education*. The volume is constructed to confront his two decades of experiences in traditional distance education with the more recent experiences of online teaching as MDE faculty member. Hence, the volume is constructed as publishing a distance educator's insights from the pre-Internet times and post-fixing to each chapter an epilogue written from the vantage point of his new experience as online professor. This way Beaudoin addresses the changing research agenda, the new role of the professoriate, as well as emerging leadership issues in distance education. The volume is also 'recommended reading' in the *The Management of Distance Education 2: Leadership in Distance Education* (OMDE 604; the course was developed and is regularly taught by MB as lead faculty).

Jane Brindley, Christine Walti & Olaf Zawacki-Richter edited *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments* (Vol 9), which is in the context of this article of particular interest because of the role of the volume within the MDE program development, and the contributions to the volume coming from the MDE faculty (including those contributors joining the MDE faculty only after the date of its publication).

The first item is dealt with quickly. Many of the papers for this volume had been initially prepared for the 4<sup>th</sup> EDEN Research Workshop. The workshop itself and the faculty meeting in its wake allowed extensive personal encounters and thus had a formative role in constituting the MDE faculty as a *community of practice*. The massive presence of the MDE at the Oldenburg EDEN Research Workshop even attracted new members to the MDE community. More importantly, the very fact of producing this volume gives credence to the importance the issue of learner and faculty support should receive within the program.

The volume also includes reprints of the key-note presentations to the EDEN Research Workshop in Oldenburg by Terry Anderson (Research Chair at Athabasca University and editor of IRRODL, and Nick Allen (former Provost and Chief Academic Officer at UMUC). These are available on DVD, attached to the book.

Vol. 9 serves as required reading in Student Support in Distance Education and Training (OMDE 608), developed by Brindley and regularly taught by Brindley and Walti.

Vol. 12 edited by Hilary Perraton, Bernadette Robinson & Charlotte Creed on *International Case Studies of Teacher Education at a Distance* can be read to some extent as a reality check for those who view distance learning from the narrow vantage point of ICT-supported distance education. Though focussing on teacher

---

<sup>15</sup> His distinction of type A and type B technologies (Rumble, 2001/2004) were merely renamed by Hülsmann (2004) as type-i and type-c applications, in order to semantically link the two different sets of capabilities afforded by the new digital technologies with the respective letters in the ICT acronym.

education the book provides a wide range of case studies from around the world. All chapters are similarly structured (Country Background, Purpose, Costs, and Outcomes) which facilitates comparisons across quite different contexts. Vol. 12 serves as recommended reading in Distance Education, Globalization & Development (DEMP 625) where Perraton has regularly served as visiting expert.

To sum up it is worth emphasizing that all books of the ASF Series are now freely available as e-book under <http://www.mde.uni-oldenburg.de/40574.html>. This way the series will be more widely (albeit selectively) used within the MDE program.

Evaluating the ASF Series against the previous definition of knowledge management as (i) capturing existing knowledge distributed within the organization; (ii) eliciting new knowledge from its members; and (iii) leveraging all this to improve the organization's performance, it can be fairly argued that in all three respects the ASF-Series has proved its value.

- (i) *Capturing existing knowledge*: Many renowned experts have volunteered to use the platform offered by the ASF Series to report on their wide range of experiences (e.g. Holmberg, Peters, Rumble).
- (ii) *Eliciting new knowledge / generating new knowledge*: The tension produced by the tectonic shift between new online delivery format and a curriculum grounded in a canon of classical theory led to a number of major new contributions (e.g. Peters' discussion of the 'new digital learning spaces', or Hülsmann's discussion of threaded discussions in 'texts that talk back') or 'nuggets' such as the 'ripple effect', the 'witness learner', the 'invisible learner', type-i/type-c classification of digital technologies, the portfolio as tool for reflective learning, to name but a few. That many of the volumes were reviewed in major distance education journals and at least one volume has been translated in other languages amply demonstrate that the series has contributed to 'professional development as development of the profession'.
- (iii) *Leveraging all this to improve the organization's performance*: The primary goal of the MDE as a program is to form future managers in distance education. The ASF Series contributed in two ways to achieve its goals: by adding to content and by informing the process. Along these lines, most of the volumes serve as mandatory or recommended readings in at least one of the courses. Beyond adding to the corpus of readings and course material some ideas also informed the process. Making 'visible participation' contributing to the grade emerged partially as a response to the discussion about lurkers (invisible learners) or witness learners and the role of articulating one's thoughts as essential for learning. The reflection on the portfolio both emerged from practice as it increasingly informed practice.  
There are secondary aims such as enhancing the visibility and the prestige of the program. That this objective was achieved can be gleaned from the various reviews of most of the volumes in many leading journals as well as from the fact that some of the volumes has been translated. The role of the series also helped the program to win a number of prestigious awards and accreditations (Sloan, 2003; UCEA, 2003, 2009; EFMD-CEL accreditation 2007).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, unlike in many other discussions on knowledge management, we did not foreground technologies in this discussion as management tools. However, technology development plays an pivotal role since it is exactly the affordances induced by the new digital technologies (especially by their capability for responsive interaction at a distance) that produced the transformational situation, in which knowledge management as managing a community of reflective practitioners was possibly the best, possibly the only, management option. The MDE has distance education as the object of study while this object of study is undergoing transformation. Practice and theory had to co-evolve and feed into each other into a re-enforcing loop.

We hope to have demonstrated that (i) the described faculty development measures, including face-to-face faculty meetings to strengthen the MDE as community of practice; (ii) the use of the EDEN Research Workshops as forum to open to a wider community of practice; and (iii) the ASF Series, served its purpose for knowledge management as defined for this paper.

Given that we have linked the above described approach to the tectonic shift towards ICT-supported distance education and e-learning one may ask if the tectonic movement not has come to rest and is now well reflected in research and theory. To an increasing extent, we can now inform our practice by off-the-shelf theory rather than having to rely on our own reflective practice.

However, distance education is tied to technology. Paraphrasing Peters, one could say that 'distance education is the most technology-supported mode of education'. And the relentless pace of technological development makes sure that the 'gales of creative distractions'<sup>16</sup> are not abating.

## References

- Beaudoin, M. (1999). Book Review: U. Bernath & E. Rubin (Eds.) (1999). Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. In *Continuing Higher Education Review*, Vol 63, 1999, pp. 158 -162.
- Beaudoin, M. (2003). Learning or Lurking? Tracking the 'Invisible' Online Student. In U. Bernath & E. Rubin (Eds.) (2003), [Reflections on Teaching and Learning in an Online Master Program. A Case Study](#). Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. pp. 121-129.
- Beaudoin, M. (2009). Reflections on Seeking the 'Invisible' Online Learner (and Instructor). In U. Bernath, A. Szücs, A.TAIT, & M. VIDAL (Eds.) (2009). *Distance and E-Learning in Transition: Learning Innovation, Technology and Social Challenges*. London/Hoboken N.J.: ISTE Ltd and John Wiley & Sons. pp. 529-542
- Bernath, U. & Hülsmann, T. (2002). Asynchronous discussions in virtual seminars: might they work? In: *Research and Policy in Open and Distance Learning*. Research Workshop Book. The Second Research Workshop of EDEN, University of Hildesheim, Germany, March 21 – 23, 2002, p. 202–204. Budapest: EDEN Secretariat. [<http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/literat/eden0203.pdf>]
- Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (1998). A Virtual Seminar for International Professional Development in Distance Education, Universities in a Digital Era. Transformation, Innovation and Tradition. Roles and Perspectives of Open and Distance Learning. Proceedings of the 7th European Distance Education Network (EDEN) Conference, held at the University of Bologna, Italy, June 24 - 26, 1998 (Vol. 1, pp. 141-144). Budapest: EDEN.
- Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (Eds.) (1999). [Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education](#). Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/publikationen/docum.htm>
- Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (Eds.) (1999). Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education - A Project within the AT&T Global Distance Learning Initiative sponsored by the AT&T Foundation and The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/literat/docum.htm>
- Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (1999). An International Virtual Seminar for University Faculty and Administrators: "Professional Development in Distance Education" – A Successful Experiment and Future Directions. Paper presented to the 19th ICDE World Conference in Vienna, June 23, 1999. <http://nova.umuc.edu/~erubin/icde99.html>
- Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (2001). "Professional development in distance education" – A successful experiment and future directions. In F. Lockwood & A. Gooley (Eds.), *Innovations in open & distance learning, successful development of online and web-based learning*, (p. 213 – 223). London: Kogan Page. Retrieved January 5, 2010 from <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/literat/uligene.htm>
- Bernath, U. & Vidal, M. (2007). The theories and the theorists: Why theory is important for research. *Distances et Savoirs*,
- Bernath, U. & Szücs, A. (Eds.) (2004). Supporting the Learner in Distance Education and E-Learning. Proceedings of the Third EDEN Research Workshop, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, March 4 - 6, 2004. <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/publikationen/eden.pdf>
- Brindley, J.E., Zawacki, O. & Roberts, J. (2003). Support Services for Online Faculty: The Provider and the User Perspectives. In U. Bernath & E. Rubin (eds.), *Reflections on Teaching and Learning in an Online Master Program. A Case Study*. Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag; (6), pp. 137–165 [<http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/literat/bzr.pdf>]
- Brindley, J. E., Walti, C. & Blaschke, L. M. (June 2009). Creating Effective Collaborative Learning Groups in an Online Environment. In *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*

---

<sup>16</sup> Schumpeter (1942)

(*IRRODL*), Vol 10(3).

[<http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/675/1271>]

Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think. A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process.* Lexington.

Fritsch, H. (1999). Host contacted, waiting for reply. In U. Bernath & E. Rubin (Eds.) [Final Report and Documentation of the Virtual Seminar for Professional Development in Distance Education](#), Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. pp. 355 – 378

Holmberg, B. (1960). On the methods of teaching by correspondence. *Lunds universitetsaarskrift N.F.Avd.* 1, Vol 54 (2).

Holmberg, B. (2005). *The Evolution, Principles and Practices of Distance Education*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag.

Holmberg, B. (2007). Börje Holmberg on his theory of the empathetic teaching-learning conversation. In U. Bernath & M. Vidal, M., *The theories and the theorists: Why theory is important for research. Distances et Savoirs*, Vol 5, No 3, pp 431-433

Hülsmann, T. (2008). Peters, Holmberg, Moore - a personal configuration. *Distances et Savoirs*, 6(3), 455-479.

Hülsmann, T. (2004). The two-pronged attack on learner support: costs and the centrifugal forces of convergence. In U. Bernath & A. Szücs (Eds.), *Supporting the Learner in Distance Education and E-Learning. Proceedings of the Third EDEN Research Workshop, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, March 4 - 6, 2004*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag.

Hülsmann, T. (2009). Access and Efficiency in the Development of Distance Education and E-Learning. In U. Bernath, A. Szücs, A. Tait, & M. Vidal (Eds.) *Distance and E-Learning in Transition: Learning Innovation, Technology and Social Challenge*. London/Hoboken NJ.: ISTE Ltd and John Wiley & Sons, Inc., pp. 119-140.

Kurtz, G., Beaudoin, M. & Sagee, R. (July 2004). From Campus to Web: The Changing Roles of Faculty from Classroom to Online Teaching, 28 p. In *Journal of Educators Online*, Vol 1(1)  
[<http://www.thejeo.com/Archives/Volume1Number1/Kurtz%20Final.pdf>]

MDE Program Self-Assessment Report for the EFMD CEL Accreditation (June 2006) <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/literat/EFMDfinalrevised.pdf>

Moore, M.G. (1973). Towards a theory of independent learning and teaching. In *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol 44, pp. 661-679.

Moore, M.G. (2007). The Theory of Transactional Distance (Chapter 8), In *Handbook of Distance Education*, 2nd Ed. Mahwah NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Moore, M.G. & Kearsley, G. (2005). *Distance education. A systems view*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Peters, O. (2003). "Information" and "Knowledge" - On the semantic transformation of two central terms. In O. Peters, *Distance education in transition - New trends and challenges*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag, pp. 129-156.

Peters, O. (2010, 5<sup>th</sup> ed.). *Distance Education in Transition - Developments and Issues*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag

Rumble, G. (2004). The costs of providing student support services (2001). In G. Rumble, *Papers and debates on the costs and economics of distance education and online learning* (Vol. 7, pp. 163-174). Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag.

Schumpeter, J. A. (1942). *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Wenger, E. 1998. *Communities of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

## Annex

**The ASF book series on distance education under review (as far as we know) and in use as MDE textbooks**

**Vol. 2:** Hülsmann, T. (2000). *The costs of open learning: a handbook*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 165 pp.

Reviewed in *Open Learning*, Vol 16(3), 2001; *Open Praxis*, Vol 1, 2002; *IRRODL*, Vol 4(1), 2003; *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005.

Recommended reading in OMDE606 *Costs and Economics of Distance Education* (<http://www.mde.uni-oldenburg.de/download/course606.pdf>); the former course title was: *The Management of Distance Education I: Cost Analysis*

**Vol. 4:** Holmberg, B. (2001; 2003 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). *Distance Education in Essence. An Overview of Theory and Practice in the Early Twenty-first Century*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 113 pp.

Reviewed in *Open Learning*, Vol 17(3), 2002; *DETC Memo* Sep/Oct 2002 (reprinted in *EADL Newsletter* 2002); *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005.

Was required reading in OMDE601 *Foundations of Distance Education* Spring 2002 through Spring 2005; then replaced by **Vol 11**.

**Vol. 5: Peters, O. (2002; 2003 2<sup>nd</sup>; 2003 3<sup>rd</sup>; 2004 4<sup>th</sup>; 2010 5<sup>th</sup> ed.).** *Distance Education in Transition - Developments and Issues* (up to 4<sup>th</sup> ed.: “New Trends and Challenges”), Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 181 pp.; 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 273 pp.

Translated into: Spanish by Universidad de Guadalajara in 2002, Portuguese by Editora Unisinos in 2003; the Chinese edition appeared as part of the *Series of Classic Works and Papers in Open and Distance Learning* edited by Prof. Zhang Demin, President of the Shanghai TV University and UNESCO Chair in Distance Education for East Asia

Reviewed in *Open Learning*, Vol 17(3), 2002; *IRRODL*, Vol. 4(2), 2003; *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005.

Required reading in OMDE601 *Foundations of Distance Education* and at UBC/Monterrey's Master of Educational Technology (MET).

**Vol. 6:** Bernath, U. & Rubin, E. (Eds.) (2003). *Reflections on Teaching and Learning in an Online Master Program - A Case Study*. Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 295 pp.

Reviewed in *Open Learning*, Vol 19(1), 2004; *IRRODL* Vol 5(1), 2004; *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005; *Distances et Savoirs*, Vol 4(1), 2006.

Recommended reading in OMDE601 *Foundations of Distance Education* and at University of New Brunswick in Spring 2004.

**Vol. 7:** Rumble, G. (Ed.) (2004). *Papers and Debates on the Economics and Costs of Distance and Online Learning*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 192 pp.

Reviewed in *IRRODL* Vol 5(3), 2004; *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, Vol 14(2), 2005; *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005; *Distances et Savoirs*, Vol 4(1), 2006.

Required reading in OMDE606 *Costs and Economics of Distance Education* (<http://www.mde.uni-oldenburg.de/download/course606.pdf>); the former course title was: *The Management of Distance Education I: Cost Analysis*

**Vol. 8:** Beaudoin, M. (2004). *Reflections on Research, Faculty and Leadership in Distance Education*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 141 pp.

Won the Charles A. Wedemeyer Award in 2005 of UCEA's Distance Learning Community of Practice.

Reviewed in *IRRODL*, Vol 6(2), 2005.

Required reading in DEMP604 *Leadership in Distance Education*

**Vol. 9:** Brindley, J. E., Walti, C. & Zawacki-Richter, O. (Eds.)(2004). *Learner Support in Open, Distance and Online Learning Environments (+ DVD-Video)*. 327 pp.

Reviewed in *Indian Journal of Open Learning*, Vol 14(1), 2005; *IRRODL*, Vol 6(2), 2005; *The American Journal of Distance Education*, Vol 19(3), 2005.

Required reading in OMDE608 *Student Support in Distance Education and Training*.

The DVD has been used in the “Web Course Design Community” at Stephen F. Austin State University (USA) in Fall 2005

**Vol. 11:** Holmberg, B. (2005). *The Evolution, Principles and Practices of Distance Education*, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 171 pp.

Won the price for the “Publication of the Year 2005” awarded by Forum DistancE-Learning (FDL).

Required reading in OMDE601 *Foundations of Distance Education* since Summer 2005 to date.

**Vol. 12:** Perraton, H., Robinson, B. & Creed, C. (Eds.) (2007). International Case Studies of Teacher Education at a Distance, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 311 pp.

**Vol. 13:** Bernath, U. & Sangrà, A. (Eds.) (2007). Research on Competence Development in Online Distance Education and E-Learning: Selected Papers from the 4th EDEN Research Workshop in Castelldefels / Spain 25-28, 2006, Oldenburg: BIS-Verlag. 262 pp.

**The URL of the ASF Series:** <http://www.mde.uni-oldenburg.de/40574.html>