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#### EDITORIAL

This issue of DEOSNEWS presents an interview with Dr. Teresa Miaja de la Pena who is the Director of Open Systems at the Mexican Ministry of Education. The interview was conducted by Patricia Gonzalez Flores, Center for Academic Computing at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, and it was published in Vol. 6 No. 2 of the American Journal of Distance Education.

#### INTERVIEW

Speaking Personally--with Teresa Miaja de la Pena.

The history of Mexican education is one of great challenges and achievements. During the first decades of this century, population increased at a rate of more than 3% a year. This demographic explosion meant increasing pressure for all social services, including education. The number of schools had to multiply in order to keep up with population growth. As a result of many efforts, today all the demand for elementary education can be satisfied. The illiteracy rate has dropped to 5% nationwide. Still, the challenge continues as the country struggles to reduce the drop-out rate and to raise the average educational level of the population to at least ten years of schooling.

Dr. Teresa Miaja de la Pena is the Director of Open Systems at the Ministry of Education. For more than six years, she has been an important promoter of distance education in Mexico. She coordinates the Mexican Inter-institutional and Interdisciplinary Commission for Distance and Open Education.

Patricia Gonzalez: How long have you been involved in distance education--or would you rather that I refer to it as open education--in Mexico?

Teresa Miaja: I personally have been involved in distance education in Mexico since 1985, when I took the position of Director of Open Systems for the Ministry of Education. I do talk about both open and distance education in Mexico because we have both kinds of educational systems working in the country. Some institutions have adopted the model of distance education: the Universidad Pedagogica Nacional (National Pedagogic University), the Tecnologico de Monterrey (Higher Education Technology Institute of Monterrey), and the ILCE, Instituto Latinoamericano de Comunicacion Educativa (Latin American Institute for Educational Communication), for example. Yet open education is, I would say, the most common system in this country.

PG: Your academic background is mainly in Spanish Literature. How did you become involved in distance education?

TM: Well, it became part of my job. Several years ago, when I was working at the Instituto Tecnologico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (Higher

Education Technological Institute of Monterrey), I became familiar with this type of educational program. CEMPAE, Centro para el Estudio de Medios y Procedimientos Avanzados para la Educacion (Center for the Study of Advanced Media and Procedures for Education) had initiated its first distance education programs in the 1970s. I knew about their experiences, and I became acquainted with the textbooks and the television programs that they were preparing for distance education. As a matter of fact, CEMPAE was the first center that produced distance education programs in Mexico on the model of the British Open University. They were trying to provide basic elementary and secondary education, as well as what would be equivalent to a senior high school preparatory program. It is important to mention that CAMPAE was not the first distance program in Mexico; the first program was Capacitacion para el Magisterio (Teacher Training) in the 1940s. This program was presented nationwide and was designed to give working elementary school teachers adequate on-site training. TeleSecundarias (TV Junior High Schools) was a similar early program for secondary education. CEMPAE, established in the 1970s on the British Open University model, was followed by many similar institutions, including Colegio de Bachilleres (Preparatory College), UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico), and Universidad Pedagogica Nacional, among others.

PG: You are now the Director of Open Systems for the Ministry of Education. Could you describe your activities?

TM: I am the head of the Direccion de Sistemas Abiertos (Open Systems Direction), an office that depends on the Ministry of Education in Mexico. It has two responsibilities. One is to maintain and operate the Preparatoria Abierta--which would correspond more or less to senior high school--in the whole country; the other responsibility, which is a very substantial one, is to coordinate the works of the institutions that offer distance education in the country. We don't supervise the programs because the universities are autonomous and each institution has its own legal dispositions, but we do coordinate common work in research and publications.

PG: Since 1986 you have been promoting national cooperation among distance education institutions. The Comision Interinstitucional e Interdisciplinaria de Educacion Abierta y a Distancia (Inter-institutional and Interdisciplinary Commission for Open and Distance Education) is a result of those efforts. What are the aims of this Commission?

TM: In 1985 we reviewed and diagnosed what was happening in distance education in Mexico, because there had been no analysis of development during the previous ten years. When I started working at my present position, the first thing we thought important to do was to find out who was working with distance education in Mexico: who were the institutions, what kind of service were they giving, what kind of research was being done. About a year later, we had a first national meeting and published a report with the results of our research. Over sixty people attended that meeting. It was a very good and interesting reunion. It was the first forum for discussion in many, many years and, it was like an initial turn of the screw at that time.

PG: That was in 1986. And after that?

TM: A year or a year and a half after that we had another meeting in Monterrey. This second reunion was very profitable. From then on we have worked very well and very closely with all the institutions. We had a third meeting last year in Oaxtepec. In that meeting we decided that we had to get organized in a different way, especially because we had been in Venezuela at the ICDE (International Council for Distance Education)

Conference, and we had noticed that many of the Mexican institutions were represented. So, in Venezuela we decided to plan the next reunion on a different basis, one that meant more cooperation, more exchange of what we were working on.

PG: What are the present activities of this Commission?

TM: After the third meeting, we organized the Comision Interinstitucional e Interdisciplinaria de Educacion Abierta y a Distancia, and we started meeting once a month. Next Monday will be our first anniversary. We are working on specific things. One is to meet each month in order to exchange experiences. In each meeting, one institution presents a paper related to its own project or experiences or research. So there's been a forum for research and discussion. We have published a newsletter, we started another research project--this time through a questionnaire--and we organized four workshops. If we try to evaluate what was done in a year, I think it has been a lot of work and a very positive experience. The good thing about all this is that there are no negative attitudes among the members of the Commission. The people that come to the Commission are very glad to cooperate, to participate. The response has been excellent from all institutions. Communication among most Mexican distance education institutions is at this moment very positive.

PG: So, until 1985, there had not been a comprehensive analysis of all distance education institutions in Mexico. Therefore, both the 1986 and 1991 research projects represent very important efforts to gather information with a national perspective. I would like you to discuss with us the results of this research. How many institutions offer distance education in Mexico?

TM: We have identified forty-two institutions and, curiously, there are some new ones that come out after each meeting. These new providers either want to start a program through distance education or they have a small program which needs support.

PG: Are these programs private or public?

TM: Private and public; federal and state funded; all sorts. They range from pre-school programs, e.g., a program sponsored by the Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo (National Council for the Promotion of Education), to graduate school programs in veterinary medicine at the National University.

PG: Distance education institutions have been classified by Keegan as autonomous and mixed institutions. What is the dominating model in Mexico?

TM: They are mostly mixed institutions since they also offer face-to-face instruction. There are some very strong autonomous programs, like the Preparatoria Abierta (Open Senior High School) and the INEA, Instituto Nacional para la Educacion de Adultos (National Institute for Adult Education), which offers literacy and elementary education for adults. They both serve the whole country and are dedicated only to distance education. TeleSecundaria (TV Junior High School) is also an autonomous model. The rest of the programs are part of institutions that offer other educational programs. This situation is somewhat dangerous; some of the programs are really only partially open, since they have to keep some of the characteristics of traditional programs at their institutions.

PG: How many students are enrolled in the country in distance and open education?

TM: If we consider the literacy and elementary education programs for adults offered by INEA, about four million students are enrolled. This number includes literacy, elementary, secondary, undergraduate, and graduate students.

PG: And if we do not include literacy and elementary education?

TM: Close to two million students are served at the other levels. There are really few institutions that handle large numbers. As we have seen, the INEA is one of them. The Universidad Pedagogica Nacional, with its teacher training programs, is another. Our program, Preparatoria Abierta, is another; we have one hundred and fifty thousand active students. The remaining institutions have very small numbers of students being served.

PG: What are the specific traits of students enrolled in distance education in Mexico? What have you discovered about them?

TM: They are mainly working adults. They choose this type of education because it is easier for them to continue with their studies.

PG: What are the common problems faced by Mexican distance education institutions?

TM: I would say financial and administrative problems. Distance education institutions have not achieved yet enough credibility to be considered valid educational options, so obtaining resources is difficult. Nevertheless, distance education is a very promising type of education for Mexico, a country with many remote areas that are difficult to reach. The flexibility of distance education would help some of the isolated population. The case of the National University provides an example of administrative difficulties. Their open system cannot cover the whole country for organizational reasons.

PG: Could you describe some of the administrative problems?

TM: The problems result from the fact that distance programs are usually closely related to traditional education systems. Administration depends directly on this traditional system, so it is bound by the conditions, schedules, requirements, and procedures which are typical of face-to-face education, but very limiting for distance education. In this sense, the publication of the results of our questionnaire will be very useful, since it will show this situation very clearly. It will provide evidence of how this specific characteristic of Mexican distance education has been inhibiting its development, instead of letting it grow and become the more flexible option which it can become.

There are also technical problems. In distance education, the need for excellent communications media implies very strong technological support. Technology and the precise organization which it requires--including the organization of human resources--are not always available or affordable. Of course, we know that even developed countries face similar problems.

PG: For a long time, distance education endeavors were isolated efforts of individuals and institutions. Is there a national policy?

TM: Yes, there is a national policy. For the first time in the history of distance education in the country, it has become a very important chapter in the Programa de Modernizacion Educativa (national educational program for 1989-1994). It is now a priority to show that we can provide a good, alternative way to teach and to serve those populations that can't be educated in another way.

PG: What are the principal issues in this policy?

TM: One important issue is that of target populations. One goal is to give additional opportunities to those who have dropped out of the educational system. The emphasis is on providing elementary and secondary education for those adults who did not have the chance to complete it through traditional instruction. Another goal is to provide training for work. This is an area of major concern, so special support is given to technological education. A final important goal is the training of the teachers. There is a very strong interest in the government in offering education to teachers who are already working, but who need to receive new tools for teaching.

PG: How does the government support distance education?

TM: Well, as I have told you, the programs exist and for the first time distance education is considered as a full chapter in the national education program for this period. But also, as I said before, distance education has not yet been valued as highly as traditional education.

PG: Does Mexico have a higher education institution similar to the British Open University?

TM: In higher education, several universities are offering programs, but most of them coexist with face-to-face education. The most important one is the Open System of the National University. It is a well designed program which has achieved very good results within the National University. Its limitations are that it is only offered at the central campus in Mexico City and that it was designed with a very close relation to the traditional system. Therefore, it is impossible to enroll in it if you don't live in the city; you would have to come every week to tutoring sessions. In Mexico, we don't always adequately value this open system because we are used to thinking of the National University as a macro institution with its almost three hundred thousand students. We tend to expect the open system to keep this same proportion. Although the open system serves only a small part of the student population, the overall numbers are still large compared to other universities in other countries. Other higher education institutions include: the Escuela Superior de Comercio y Administracion (Higher School of Trade and Management) of the Instituto Politecnico Nacional (National Polytechnical Institute) with its degree in International Trade; the Universidad Pedagogica with its teacher-training degree; and several state universities, such as the Universidad de Guadalajara, Universidad del Valle de Atemajac, Tecnologico de Monterrey, and Universidad Veracruzana. As you can see, there are many higher education institutions. Only the Universidad Pedagogica, however, provides national educational service. Not all degrees are offered by distance education in all the Mexican states. For example, it is impossible for someone in the southeast to obtain a Master's degree because that degree is not offered in the state.

PG: What about consortia of distance education institutions?

TM: The only cooperative organization among distance education institutions at present is the Commission. A good expansion of its role would be to start promoting associations between institutions. Curiously, the Commission has already had some effect in this area. For example, currently some joint projects are being developed. The Universidad de Guadalajara and the Universidad del Valle de Atemajac are collaborating in their region and organizing a Sub-commission. So the tendency is towards more cooperation among institutions.

PG: Technological development in telecommunications has produced a great impact in distance education, because of the new options for teacher-student, tutor-learner, or learner- learner interaction that they offer. What effects has technology had in Mexican distance education?

TM: This institution is not the best one to answer that question. Tecnológico de Monterrey is the institution that is leading the way in technological advances in education. They have developed a program through satellite broadcasts. They are doing a very good job, but the system gives services only to the campuses that are part of their institution; they are not open to other institutions. One program, Educom, from the Ministry of Education, was designed to apply technology to teacher training, but it no longer exists.

PG: Are many institutions using telecommunications technology?

TM: Institutions using telecommunications technology are primarily those that have gotten in touch with Canadian or American programs. Most of these institutions are private ones, except the National University and the Instituto Politecnico, which are very strong federally funded institutions.

PG: How can telecommunications technology benefit Mexican distance education institutions?

TM: This technology can have an enormous benefit if you consider that it would be the answer to many of the educational problems. TeleSecundaria, at its beginning, was designed as a distance education program. It was copied by many Latin American countries. I do believe in its possibilities. Since it covers only junior high school, I have suggested many times that it be expanded to cover senior high school also.

PG: How would you describe the assets of Mexican distance education institutions?

TM: All the programs are very good and very serious. Each one of them answers very specific needs. It is especially amazing to see the faith in distance education that all the educators participating in it have. People are really convinced and even use their personal resources to offer the services. I don't think that you could find as many "missionaries" in another educational sector. Students are also very committed to this kind of education. When they enroll they have their doubts about it, but afterwards they become convinced, and they tend to seek the distance format to continue their studies.

PG: What is your opinion about the future possibilities of distance education?

TM: I think they are excellent. I think that all the efforts of the past thirty years have shown the capacity of distance education, have demonstrated that it can provide educational services for a very large population in the country. All we need is more credibility, because there is both a will from the institutions to develop and grow and a population demanding this educational service all over the country.

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