

DEOSNEWS

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13.1 Interview with Dr. Melody Thompson, Director of ACSDE

Editorial

The publication of DEOSNEWS was suspended in April, 2002 when Michael G. Moore, founding director of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE), left the ACSDE (but not Penn State. Dr. Moore continues to serve as a professor in the Adult Education Program and as editor of The American Journal of Distance Education, now published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates).

In July, 2003 I began my tenure as Director of the ACSDE. Although many of the past activities of the Center—including publication of DEOSNEWS—will continue, a changing educational environment and changing resources have combined to suggest new directions, as well. Interested readers are invited to check out our developing Web site at <http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deos.html> . DEOSNEWS readers are particularly encouraged to submit manuscripts for consideration; information and directions for submission are provided at <http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deos.html> .

In September, Farhad Saba, a long-time colleague and leader in the field, asked me to give an interview for publication in Distance-Educator.com (<http://distance-educator.com/>). It seemed to me that this interview would serve as an appropriate way to re-introduce DEOSNEWS and the American Center for the Study of Distance Education. I am grateful to Dr. Saba for granting permission for me to use the interview in this way.

Melody Thompson
Director, American Center for the Study of Distance Education

Exclusive Interview With Dr. Melody Thompson, Director Of The American Center For The Study Of Distance Education

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For nearly two decades the American Center for the Study of Distance Education at Pennsylvania State University has played a crucial role in defining the research agenda for the field, and publishing the American Journal of Distance Education as well as a number of monographs and other research publications. This past Summer, Michael G. Moore founder of the Center and its Director since its

inception in 1986 passed the baton to Melody Thompson as the new Center Director. I conducted an online interview with Dr. Thompson about the past, present and future of the Center.

Farhad Saba, Ph. D.
CEO, Distance-Educator.com

Dr. Saba:

Congratulations on your appointment as the Director of the American Center for the Study of Distance Education. Please, tell us more about your interest in the field. How did you become interested in distance education, and why?

Dr. Thompson:

My interest developed VERY gradually as a graduate student in the Adult Education Program at Penn State. Although my graduate work was focused on other topics, Michael Moore--the founding director of ACSDE--would periodically recruit me to help with special projects related to distance education. Initially, my response (at least mentally) was along the lines of, "Well, okay, but just remember, I'm an adult educator, NOT a distance educator." After each project I would go back to my own concerns, mentally shaking the distance education dust off my feet. As you can see, I was somewhat less than totally engaged in distance education.

Over time, though, my attitude changed. I realized that anyone who claimed, as I did, to be passionately concerned with the values and quality of higher education as they related to adults should include an interest in distance education in his or her thinking and practice. Initially, my reasoning was that a type of education that afforded educational opportunities to adults who would otherwise be unable to take advantage of them needed to be studied and understood. Subsequently, it became clear that distance education was going to have an impact on all levels of education well beyond that envisioned by pioneers in the field prior to the advent of the Internet and the Web. At that point, I began to feel a responsibility to contribute to making this form of education become the best it could be, not just a "perfectly adequate" substitute for the "real thing," which is how I had thought about it before.

This sense of responsibility began to play itself out first in my role of Publications Editor for ACSDE. After five years in that role, I joined the Penn State World Campus where, as director of Quality and Planning, I help facilitate the "win-win" integration of online teaching and learning into a traditional university. In the current educational context, heavily influenced by new technologies and approaches, "win-win" integration means melding an innovative, rapidly changing area of practice with complex, long-standing structures built on traditional institutional standards of practice and quality, and doing so in a way that benefits both areas in their service to students and society. Combining my World Campus role (an Outreach position) with the ACSDE directorship (a College of Education position) will allow the productive integration of the practice and academic research pieces of distance education. From this foundation I and others at the Center will be able to assist educational leaders and practitioners in the educational community by providing the actionable information they need to influence or shape these ongoing social and educational changes, as opposed to merely being shaped by them.

Dr. Saba:

Looking at the history of the Center, what are some of the highlights of its activities in the past?

Dr. Thompson:

ACSDE was founded by internationally recognized distance education expert Michael Grahame Moore in 1986 as the first center of its kind in the United States. Distance education as an area of study and practice was at this point in American education of interest to only a small group of educators who wanted to extend educational access to un-served or under-served populations of students. These pioneers received little institutional recognition and support and had few opportunities and channels for sharing their experiences as they worked to build theory and improve practice related to distance education.

The ACSDE was established to fill this gap. It quickly became a hub of activities for supporting the professional development and networking of distance education scholars and practitioners. Through publication of *The American Journal of Distance Education* and related books of readings, and with the development of DEOS (the Distance Education Online Symposium), ACSDE provided channels for research dissemination and communication among practitioners and scholars. Research symposia around particular topics such as course design, learning effectiveness, and international issues provided further credibility for this developing field, while the offering of several leadership institutes gave support and direction to institutional leaders charged with developing and managing distance education initiatives.

Dr. Saba:

How do you see the Center developing and evolving in the future?

Dr. Thompson:

In the past, the Center focused on publication and dissemination, rather than primary research related to distance education. Because of the limited interest in distance education generally and institutionally, there was little support for research from funding entities. The research that was conducted was often done on an ad hoc basis by individual distance educators who “fit it in” among their other professional responsibilities because they would not have been rewarded institutionally for such a focus. Today, of course, things have changed dramatically, at least in terms of the interest afforded distance education, especially in its most recent form, online education. Whether viewed as a promise or a threat, it is accepted by most educators as a potentially transformative phenomenon.

I believe society and the educational community has reached “critical mass” in terms of the level of interest in distance education, including interest in conducting research on various aspects of this phenomenon. In response to this changing context, ACSDE is expanding its focus to include a “research-to-practice” and “practice-to-research” mission. We hope to link researchers and practitioners in a coordinated effort to identify and investigate concerns about and possibilities attendant upon the integration of distance education, particularly online education, into the various educational contexts. ACSDE will contribute to this effort by developing and implementing a research strategy and agenda that involves faculty at Penn State and other institutions across disciplines to examine some of the important distance education issues and emerging effective practices related to, among other things, the student experience, faculty participation and support, and institutional change.

Other initiatives will include 1) evaluation services to provide guidance and support to groups or organizations needing to assess the impact of distance education initiatives; 2) an expanded resource site to inform interested parties about specific aspects of distance education practice and the field generally; and 3) publication of new materials submitted to the Center or based on the Center's own funded research projects.

The American Journal of Distance Education is no longer being published by ACSDE. (That function is now being performed by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.). However, the Center continues to sponsor the DEOS-L listserv, moderated by Mauri Collins, which facilitates discussion of current issues in distance education among over 3,000 subscribers in 74 countries.

Dr. Saba:

Looking at the field of distance education, in general, how do you see the field evolving in the next ten years or so?

Dr. Thompson:

Given the speed with which things have happened and continue to happen in the field, this almost seems like a trick question, certainly one that's impossible to answer with any degree of specificity or certainty. For this reason, I'm going to keep my answer at a relatively high level of abstraction, and respond in terms of general trends rather than guessing at paradigm shifts or technology breakthroughs.

One thing I think we'll see, that I think we must see, is an increased emphasis on policy, both at the institutional and national levels. Right now practice is well in advance of policy on a number of fronts. This situation can benefit the field by allowing good practices to quickly become established and to serve as models. On the other hand, it also means that poor practices can be adopted without regulation or oversight, to the detriment of students, institutions, and the field as a whole. Both policy gaps and current policies that don't adequately cover new forms of teaching and learning will need to be addressed so that institutional transformation is thoughtful, intentional, and planned, rather than merely reactive.

Another development I foresee is that the field will be instrumental in helping higher education as a whole better define what it means by "quality." Concerns about the efficacy of distance education, particularly the rapidly expanding online variety, have resulted in calls for assessments and proofs of effectiveness. Initially, such proofs have been expected to show parity with traditional face-to-face instruction. However, it is quickly becoming apparent that such a comparison does not really offer adequate information: the sometimes-vague and variable standards of traditional higher education programs do not always provide an adequate basis for assessments of a form of education that offers new ways of teaching and learning. The dialogue about the quality of online learning will ultimately, I believe, contribute to the development of quality standards for teaching and learning that are based not on the particular delivery method, or on what has been done in the past, but rather on what can and should be done to reach desired and specific educational and institutional goals.

A third major trend will be the convergence of distance and resident education. Already, resident programs are incorporating technology-enhanced or technology-based courses into their curricula, and institutions are mixing resident and distant students in the same classes. Blended programs will offer

students the benefits of both forms of teaching and learning. What we will need to watch in this process is the manner in which and level at which student support services are provided when systems converge; I think this is likely to be an area in which what has been learned in serving distance students can inform and strengthen more traditional approaches.

Dr. Saba:

How can our readers keep in touch with the Center, and stay informed about its future programs and activities?

Dr. Thompson:

The URL for the Center is <http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde>. We're still working on enhancing our Web site both as a resource site and as a channel for communicating about current and upcoming initiatives. I would also welcome personal contacts from your readers; my e-mail address is mmt2@psu.edu.