Reflections on Simonson's Equivalency Theory

Simonson's emerging theory of distance education and equivalence of learning experiences presents some interesting approaches for distance education. In order to see the real value of his theory, one must first establish a working definition of what the word *"theory"* actually means for distance education. From my personal perspective, a theory should provide a framework for making predictions about the field of practice. Simonson's theory of equivalency provides this framework. Notably, Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek (2011) also concur that "theory is important to the study of distance education because it directly impacts the practice of the field" (p. 41).

The equivalency theory states that distance education is not identical to traditional education, but it is equivalent. The basis for Simonson's equivalency theory is that learning experiences should be equivalent, rather than identical regardless of whether the learner is in a traditional or distant setting (Simonson et al, 2011). My personal view is that even for the traditional learner, it is still impossible for learning experiences to be identical, and it is in this regard that I agree with Simonson's equivalency theory. The key to understanding the theory is that one should not expect each learner to learn in the same way. Therefore, it makes sense that the more equivalent the experiences of distant learners are to those of traditional learners, the more similar will be the learning outcomes. I believe that if equivalent learning experiences are to take place, instructional designers need to provide a "variety of equivalent instructional approaches" for students (i.e. both traditional and distant) to learn from (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 53). Furthermore, I support the notion that:

> *"Instructional design procedures should attempt to anticipate and provide the collection of experiences that will be most suitable for each student or group of students" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009)*

In other words, instructional designers should adopt appropriate procedures to support instructional methods for different types of learners, in order to enhance their learning experience and performance, regardless of their learning style.

The field of distance education is still emerging and this is evident in the numerous theories that have been presented in this area. Keegan (1996) classified theories of distance education into three groups:
- Theories of independence and autonomy
- Theories of industrialization of teaching
- Theories of interaction and communication

Borje Holmberg's Theory of Interaction and Communication provides a direct link of distance education with traditional learning theories. Holmberg's comprehensive theory of distance education postulates that "distance education is open to behaviorist, cognitive, constructionivist, and other modes of learning" (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 49). I believe that we have made great strides in the field of distance education. This body of knowledge is still in transition and therefore keeping up with technological advancements is no small feat.   As we come to understand more about the nature of distance education, we will realize that its premise is not so different from the basic principles that govern instructional design.

References

Schlosser, L., & Simonson, M. (2009). Distance Education: Definition and glossary of terms (3rd ed.). Charlotte, NC. Information Age Publishing.

Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., Albright, M., & Zvacek, S. (2011) Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education (5th ed.). Boston, MA. Pearson Education, Inc.