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ABSTRACT

A discussion of distance learning looks at the ways in which it does or does not address issues of cultural pluralism and the needs implied by this. Introductory sections look at the way in which current telecommunications socialize individuals of all ages and at the difficulty of research into this process. Media technology applicable in the classroom are then examined, and currently common uses of those media for distance learning are outlined, including the burgeoning information and media networks, both private and publicly supported. The rapid expansion of distance learning in the United States is chronicled briefly, and the Star Schools Program, an ambitious project to bring distance instruction to students through telecommunications partnerships, is described. Problems are seen in the limited extent to which the Star Schools Program, intended to enhance the education of economically disadvantaged students, addresses specifically the needs of culturally or linguistically diverse populations. Some programs that do target these populations are noted. It is concluded that there are inadequate large-scale educational telecommunications efforts focusing on linguistic and cultural issues, and that this need must be addressed. A brief bibliography and list of resources are appended. (MSE)

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# **DISTANCE LEARNING: THE CHALLENGE FOR A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY**

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## Distance Learning: The Challenge for a Multicultural Society

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**C**ommunity college students in Australia, Arizona, and Texas compare notes about similar subjects and in so doing, contrast their different cultural styles and educational systems. Professors at the University of New Mexico provide staff development and training to teachers at six isolated Bureau of Indian Affairs schools scattered throughout the Navajo reservations. Spanish as a first language students in California are inspired to have careers in science and engineering after taking bilingual mathematics and computer science classes taught by faculty at Mexican universities. Migrant students from Texas to Montana and California to Florida never miss an English as a second language class even though family work keeps them traveling most of the year.

The students and teachers in these various projects are using telecommunications as the basic teaching tool of their classes. They are transforming the way classroom instruction is done and participating in one of the most explosive movements in American education. And they are not alone. Their collaborative learning experiences are being replicated for other subjects and in other settings in businesses, hospitals, government offices—wherever information is needed and wherever that information

has been difficult to access in the past. Some people call it the 1990s version of the correspondence courses originally designed in the late 1800s. Others simply say, “distance learning.”

Distance learning can be any form of instruction or educational message. It can occur at great geographical distances or it can happen from one room to the next. The lesson can be part of a formal class intended to teach a sequential set of facts or it can be loosely constructed and designed to merely hint at the content that is being transmitted. The proliferation of communications technologies has made all of us distance learners. In a more global sense, all media messages are educational. Good or bad, they teach us something. But the “instruction” we receive does not have to be in the form of an entire course of study. It can be a brief message intended to sell us a product, convince us of a point of view, or tell us how we should behave. If we watch television, see a movie, read a newspaper, listen to the radio, or glance at a billboard, we are the recipients of “mini-lessons” in the form of images that reinforce stereotypes, show us concepts of beauty, model racial values, or give us gender cues.

The preschooler who watches *Barney* on PBS and then nags his mother to buy him a Barney toy is not only learning “I love you/You love me/We’re a happy family.” He or she is also learning lessons in consumerism and the translation that buying that toy will have toward status with the larger group of American children who share in the same cultural value. Willingly or not, he becomes a participant and a contributor to the more than \$200 million that parents will spend on Barney-related merchandise in 1993. Some media messages can be quite beneficial and enhance group solidarity and a positive set of cultural values.

Mexican American radio is exploding with the *Tejano* (Texan) sound in what is perhaps the first authentically indigenous communications

vehicle for and by U.S. Hispanics. "*La onda Chicana*" ("the Chicano wave") has abandoned the old-style, all-Spanish format and has replaced it with bilingual deliveries maintaining the easy flow of Spanish and English that reflects the speaking styles of many Mexican Americans. Language weaving, or code switching, in such phrases as "*Bueno, bye*" ("Well, bye") or "Thanks for making us *número uno*" ("Thanks for making us number one"), takes the listener from Spanish to English but follows the strict rules of any spoken language. The format, designed in the image and the language of Mexican Americans, provides cultural validity and gives the listening audience a defined place in the American media landscape.

### SYMBOLIC MODELING

The icons we see reflected on video or television monitors are not created in a vacuum. Rather, they form a part of an ever-changing process that relates to and encompasses the viewer's total environment. That environment includes the content of the program, the people or performers who are prominent in it—either by their presence or their absence, and the mind set and background of the viewer. An important aspect of this totality is television's multiple synesthetic dimensionality which produces an interplay of psychological effects of forms, colors, and textures, having the capacity to create both an aesthetic and a mythology. When we watch television, we are not only seeing the world that the producer or the others in the program assembled, we are also viewing the program that we ourselves are creating. Rather than being passive recipients, we are active participants in the viewing process. The viewing experience unifies our senses. It alters our perceptions and forms a separate culture from the culture we knew before we saw the program, and this in turn affects our imagination and the way we think about ourselves and about others.

As early as the 1950s, social scientists interested in the analysis of human thought and behavior

examined the influences of the medium and, as the volume of television sets increased, so did the attention given its effects. In 1958, the first full-length study on television and children was done in England, and this work influenced the scholarship on the subject subsequently done in this country. The Himmelweit report touched on the effects of the values presented in programs and on whether or not viewing aggressive behavior made children respond in kind, thus focusing attention on the central issues that would occupy American social science television specialists for the next two decades. During the 1960s and the 1970s, academicians, government officials, citizen advocates, parents, and teachers participated in the voluble television debate. Hundreds of studies centered attention on the direct or indirect effects of the medium upon children, with the apex of commentary occurring in the early 1970s in the series of reports on violence issued by the Television and Social Behavior program of the National Institute of Mental Health and the Surgeon General's Scientific Committee of the United States Public Health Service (Liebert et al., 1973).

The concerns of behavioral psychologists centered on the nature of social learning theory, or observational learning. At issue was the way in which the behavior of children and adults changed "as a function of exposure to the behavior of others" (Murray et al., 1972). When the behavior occurs through the medium of film or television, the process is called *symbolic modeling*. First introduced as a concept by Bandura in the 1960s, this theory of learning dominated studies that were done on the effects of television during the 1970s showing how the child learned from the content of television and how he or she emulated the behavior modeled by people on the programs.

Bandura (1963; 1977) signaled the important role which vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes played in psychological functioning. Citing the capacity of humans to use sym-

bols, Bandura linked this with people's ability "to represent events, to analyze their conscious experience, to communicate with others at any distance in time and space, to plan, to create, to imagine, and to engage in foresightful action." Television, with its instantaneous capacity for the multiplication of symbolic models, became especially important and, although the body of social science scholarship at the time failed to clarify the specific consequences of television viewing, critics became more vocal about the adverse effects that the medium could have on young children.

Although the 1980s saw a receding of public attention on the issue of violence, in the 1990s we have seen renewed efforts to call attention to the subject. Because television viewing is so pervasive in our lives, with the consequent implications for affective concepts, concrete conclusions about cause and effect are difficult to quantify. Yet some scholars do believe in the detrimental effect of television violence (Murray, 1980; Palmer and Dorr, 1980; Murray, 1988).

Research in this period has also concentrated on the effects of television on cognitive development, with studies focusing on the negative perceptions the public has about television viewing and the relationship viewing has to school achievement. But, as in the previous body of work on violence, hard and fast conclusions are elusive, and oftentimes analysts point to more problems than solutions. A central dilemma is the ideal nature of scientific neutrality itself, "especially for issues associated with strongly and widely held opinions formed in part by political and social philosophies." Little support exists for most of the common beliefs about the influence of television, although this does not necessarily mean that "television has no major effects." The dearth of research on major questions, the funds to make this available, as well as the fact that much of the existing research can be challenged on methodological grounds further

complicate the problem (Anderson and Collins, 1988).

## **MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES**

While social scientists may still be debating the validity of their conclusions, the advances in media technologies not only continually change the playing field, but have made the field accessible to more and more players. A quick scan of any daily newspaper or popular magazine and its corresponding advertisements is enough to tell us that what is today's technological innovation may be tomorrow's obsolete white elephant. While some of us are still asking the neighborhood teenager to help us figure out how to record on our VCRs or how to change the time on our digital watches, the techno-whizzes of the industry are concocting yet another generation of gadgets with which to inundate the market. And the possibilities seem endless.

Nowhere is this truer than in the academic setting. While the teacher is still the master in this realm, the technology-based classroom itself no longer has to be contained within the perimeters of four walls. The teacher's abilities are limited only by the capacity of a computer, the extension of a telephone line, the reach of a satellite out in space, or a host of other technological tools that are becoming more accessible. If learning in the past was largely based on what we could see and hear, today's technology has increased that potential tenfold.

The distance learning classroom can use technology as simple as a television set and a video cassette recorder (VCR), and the course that is brought to the class can be prerecorded videos that arrive through the mail or are broadcast on a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station, a citywide or locally-based access channel, or cable. Ancillary print materials such as course outlines, suggested activities, review questions, and tests can form a part of the total package. The teacher or facilitator in an organized class-

room can use the telecourse as an adjunct or have the video class be the complete source of instruction. Courses of study designed for videodisc (an optical disc resembling a phonograph record) have an additional level of complexity and use a combination of computer software, graphics, audio, motion, and text. Videodisc classes individualize instruction by focusing on the learning styles and pacing of each student. The student can initially watch a short video then, by activating software pathways, can answer questions or review materials through text, graphics, or a photographic reproduction of the original video before proceeding to the next level of instruction.

The courses commanding the largest share of attention are those using telecommunications equipment such as television, the telephone, cable, microwave, fiber-optics, and satellites to send their messages from one place to another. These telecourses make it possible to have live instruction that can be interactive. The teacher can be in a studio in one location and the students (who can be in remote settings having only two or three to a class) can be in any geographical location. Communication can be sent from a satellite dish at the originating site (an uplink) and received at another satellite dish (a downlink). The students can be connected to the source of instruction as well as to each other. Using a wireless telephone, they can automatically dial the studio teacher, or they can use electronic mail or faxes to ask questions or receive additional information. The students can also talk to each other through a conference call, through a computer network, or through a teleconference.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the impact that any one technological innovation will have in the future of distance learning, fiber-optic cable offers one of the greatest possibilities for the enhancement of interactivity as well as the capacity to access large amounts of information in the least amount of time. Unlike the larger-

in-diameter copper wires found in many existing networks (cable or cable/microwave combinations), fiber-optic cable consists of hair-thin lines which can transmit hundreds of times more data, audio, and video images. In spite of the added costs and the fact that fiber is not everywhere the way telephone lines are, analysts indicate that fiber-optics will transform the current "highways" of information from the "two-lane roads" we have today to "superhighways" that will be able to accommodate the heavy flow of information "traffic" anticipated in the future (Ullrich, 1993; Totty, 1993; Satterlund, 1993).

### **INFORMATION HIGHWAYS**

In the offing is the creation of a national system of information superhighways that high-tech visionaries say will transform the country in the same manner the railroad, the telephone, or the interstate highway system did. Partnerships between computer, telephone, and television companies spurred by public policy initiatives and private investment presage an unprecedented availability of consumer and educational services. The technological possibilities currently on the drawing boards or already available in laboratories or as part of larger model demonstrations include video on demand, video malls, telecommuting, distance medicine, and a new-generation telephone with visual display and touch-screen input capabilities. Ongoing developments promise an acceleration in technological innovations and a corresponding transformation to the area of distance businesses, homes, or the local telephone, telecommunications, or cable company (Totty, 1993).

In 1994, Time Warner Inc.'s cable television division will furnish 4,000 residents of an Orlando, Florida, suburb with their own vision of a technological superworld. The media giant will install a two-way electronic network that allows subscribers to make phone calls, ask for movies on demand, play video games with neighbors, or "finger the merchandise" at a mall of

electronic shops. Orlando itself may sound like it has become an extension of Tomorrow Land at Disney World, but almost within our reach is a "smart" telephone that can be used to book an appointment at a local health clinic; request school district information such as vacation schedules, announcements, sports events, and dates and agendas of board meetings; or let us know if our youngster has attended classes with regularity (Totty, 1993; Williams, 1991).

The telecommunications policy debate, at both the national and state levels, revolves around the different types of services, the degree of government support, and the regulations that could either help or hinder private endeavors. At the center of the discussions are the telephone and cable television companies, each seeking to win the competitive race in high performance fiber-optic technologies. Some legislative proposals favor the telephone systems, while others protect the cable industry. In the lead is President Clinton's initiative, *Technology for America's Economic Growth, A New Direction to Build Economic Strength*, which calls for funding from federal sources that places administrative jurisdiction with and increases the authority of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in the U.S. Department of Commerce (NTIA/DOC) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Among other programs, funds would be available for pilot networks of schools, libraries, and health-care facilities. The regional Bell telephone companies have offered to spend \$100 billion on state-of-the-art lines and digital switches (five times the sum cable companies can spend), provided that the government allows them to offer direct information and video services, a move that opponents say would place a great deal of power in the hands of the telephone systems. The various debates remain unresolved, but the changes that will result from the new, advanced systems are clear-cut. We do know that our telecommunications future, and distance learning along with it, will transform society as we currently know it.

## THE FIELD OF EDUCATION

A field that, in 1987, showed fewer than 10 states knowing about it, distance learning is now crowded with an increasing number of originators and recipients of instruction (Bruder, 1991). Providers can range from broadcast networks like the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which reaches 21,116 schools throughout the country, to smaller satellite operations like the Central Education Telecommunications Consortium (CETC) of the Black College Satellite Network, going to 12 states, the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands, or the Institute for the Advancement of Urban Education at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, New Jersey, which provides instruction to 12 schools in Hudson County. The Instructional Television Fixed Service (ITFS), a closed system that uses microwave transmitters, broadcasts educational programming from one distribution point to several receiving locations and goes to 1,129 schools. The Mind Extension University uses cable, satellite, and videotape to reach 350 cable affiliates that carry programming to an estimated 15 million homes and some schools (Bruder, 1991).

Operators may provide courses for credit, training for facilitators who act as classroom managers during transmissions, staff development for the faculty at a client school, or toll-free lines for students. In 1989, the federal government's Office of Technology Assessment reported 350 different distance learning course offerings. Foreign languages led the group with 119 courses (38 in Spanish), followed by 110 listings for mathematics and science. Social studies had eight, the fewest number of courses reported in any one category. Although not as numerous as other offerings, the distance learning curriculum can include remedial reading, economics, non-credit continuing education, professional development, classroom enrichment, special events, electronics training, computer engineering, computer science, art history, sociology, psychology, literature, and marine sciences (Hudspeth, 1993; Bruder, 1991).

On a local level, schools are seeing the flexibility that their own "home grown" distance delivery vehicles can furnish (e.g., from one master teacher at a magnet school to others within the same district) without going to state or national providers for their services. Although these citywide efforts lack the financial support that larger programs have, they have overcome their deficiencies by having a more intimate knowledge of their students and other logistics such as schedules, exam periods, and systemwide curriculum requirements. I-NET, in the Austin Independent School District in Texas, reports on the success of the probability and statistics course originating at the Science Academy at the Lyndon Baines Johnson High School, taught by a studio teacher whose resources exceed those found in most of the other schools in the system. Before the advent of the I-NET course, most schools in the Austin district did not have sufficient individual campus enrollment to warrant hiring an extra teacher (Ullrich, 1993).

The new vision of the telecommunications infrastructure is not without a number of caveats. Although some proponents indicate that emerging technologies will stimulate economic development; reduce costs on the delivery of health-care, education, and social services; and extend the interactive capability of consumers at home, others caution that what may be a panacea for some may instead broaden the existing discrepancies between the information "rich" and the information "poor."

Communications scholars and policymakers stress the importance of balance, especially given the nature of the diversity of the American population. Critics fear that advancements have often been more about "stock quotes, video games, and electronic mail than about providing vital information in a technologically complex, multicultural society" (Williams, 1991). Some policymakers stress the need for "bringing the benefits of the Information Age to traditionally unserved and underserved groups, includ-

ing the poor, minorities, women, rural Americans and disabled individuals" (Irving, 1993), while others worry that, instead of bringing solutions to strained educational agendas, the joystick boom will produce additional competition for parents, teachers, and caregivers who are charged with influencing and educating the young (Sheekey, 1993).

### **STAR SCHOOLS**

The national policy that has established most of the existing infrastructure for distance learning began in 1988 as the Star Schools Program, the most ambitious plan to date to bring distance instruction to American students. In a period of a few years, Star Schools allocated \$102 million to establish telecommunications partnerships that brought technology learning services to over 200,000 students and 30,000 teachers in more than 5,000 schools in every state, the District of Columbia, and several territories. The chief goal of the Star Schools Program was to bolster the academic standing of underserved metropolitan and isolated rural communities by concentrating instruction on mathematics, science, and foreign languages. To a lesser degree, some projects also addressed literacy, vocational education, and English as a second language, or adjusted an individual course or two for linguistically diverse students.

Star School projects include traditional courses, set up interconnections for special events and narrow-focus teleconferences, or unite students in efforts to address problems affecting the entire country. In 1993, over 4,000 students participated in a teleconference on the gun control issues of the Brady Bill. The debate, over the Massachusetts Corporation for Educational Telecommunications (MCET) network, included congressmen and senators. Students connected with the Technology Education Research Centers project conducted research on radon in their own communities and set a record for any previous work in this area. Senior scientists at the Environmental Protection Agen-

cy interacted with these students in ways that would have been prohibitive without the availability of distance learning technologies.

Although the Star Schools legislation specifically provides for distance learning services for schools classified under Chapter 1 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, focusing on low-achieving poor students, the projects themselves only incidentally deal with the full complexity of the linguistically and culturally diverse students in these schools. While Star Schools make it possible to bring students together from disparate geographical locations to exchange knowledge and work on common problems, the telecommunications forums and classes concentrate on offering content area instruction and do not deal with issues directly related to the students' cultural and linguistic diversity. As a result, language, ethnicity, and race are peripheral to project goals. Foreign language courses are indirectly related to these issues, and were included in the designated Star Schools curriculum more as a response to the global economic concerns of the time when the legislation was initiated (e.g., policy responses to the Japanese and Russian threats) rather than in order to address considerations for any specific language or ethnic group (Withrow, 1993b). A telecommunications course to teach Spanish to non-Spanish speaking students was within the central purview of the Star Schools curriculum, but was not offered because a class in Spanish for Spanish speakers might be considered outside of the program's main focus.

Some individual Star School projects, however, do address cultural minority concerns; these include English as a second language courses from groups such as the Pacific Northwest Star Schools Partnership and the Central Educational Telecommunications Network (CETN) and provisions for staff development for teachers who work with Native American students from the Satellite Educational Resources Consortium (SERC). The Telecommunications

Education for Advances in Mathematics and Science (TEAMS) project in Los Angeles offers "multicultural" mathematics, a course that provides opportunities for special language assistance. As part of the TEAMS-aided instruction, Hispanic limited English proficient (LEP) students in Boston (assisted by a bilingual teacher) completed all distance learning requirements in a class setting they shared with native English-speaking students. TEAMS also presented parenting and teacher-training programs in Spanish. In the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots in 1992, the Massachusetts Corporation for Educational Telecommunications (MCET) network assembled a special forum of teenagers from different urban centers such as Detroit and Newark to discuss the issue with students from Los Angeles.

If the Star Schools Program has deficiencies in course offerings, it also shows limitations connected with the technology required for transmissions. Poor schools sometimes have poor telecommunications infrastructures. And ludicrous though it may sound, the technology sometimes fails in a technologically-rich society. Rural schools tend to have inadequate telephone systems, while inner-city schools can find it problematic to have a telephone in the classroom (Withrow, 1992b).

Given the limitations of its mandate, the Star Schools Program is fulfilling its purpose, but it evades the issue to say that the complexities central to the students in Chapter 1 schools have been fully addressed. Rather than providing solutions, the Star Schools Program instead has made an initial and significant move in the direction of providing access and equity for American students in particular content areas. It remains for future projects to address the holistic needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students. The more fundamental questions related to this issue and a national policy agenda addressing the potential use of distance learning for this population remain unresolved.

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY

A series of critical issues defines the educational dilemma of the ethnic, linguistic, and racial minority student. Heading this list are the growth projections in minority populations for the coming decades, the minority-majority shifts which now exist in most of the largest city school systems, the paucity of well designed and appropriate educational materials, and the scarcity of qualified minority teachers relative to minority students (Choy et al., 1993).

The capacity for symbolic modeling and the implications of this for influencing the perceptions of viewers make media technologies especially useful as teaching devices. Telecommunications can be an invaluable tool in the teaching of language and cultural content; yet, although distance learning as formal instruction has grown at an explosive pace since 1987, few applications have been designed focusing on specific ethnic or cultural goals. In spite of the fact that we know a great deal more today about the "social and emotional needs of the learner" (Tift, 1989), telecommunications initiatives generally fail to utilize this concept as a central focus of program design. This is not to say that meritorious programs do not exist. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of giving this issue greater consideration.

Projects such as *De Orilla a Orilla (From Shore to Shore)* establish classroom links in the United States and other countries for bilingual, English as a second language, and foreign language students. *The Computer Writing Network* at the National Heritage Language Resource Unit (NHLRU) in Canada, *CompuServe* (multinational), *Minitel* (France), *The Global TELEclass Project (Telecommunication Enriches Language Experiences)* (Hawaii), and *The Satellite Communications for Learning (SCOLA)* (Nebraska) also provide a variety of international, technology-driven language and cross-cultural opportunities. Project Teletech in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, specializes in offerings for LEP students

and parents. Although Project Teletech has offerings for teacher training in a variety of subject areas, the emphasis of the project is on the specific requirements of multicultural education with a special focus on bilingual and English as a second language programs. The University of Maine is not only exploring distance methodologies in English as a second language but is also looking into ways of "becoming multicultural, pluralistic, and international" (Bérubé, 1991).

In 1992, the TI-IN Network in San Antonio, Texas, following the planning and conceptualization of the National Distance Learning Committee for Migrant Education and the Texas Education Agency, set up a culturally-based distance learning program for migrant students and "followed" the students from Texas to Montana with bilingual classes in language arts and English as a second language. The program was so successful that, in 1993, the courses were offered to students in California, Oregon, Washington, Florida, Michigan, and Wisconsin (Jennings, 1993; Nichols, 1993). Hawaii and the islands in the Hawaiian chain, American Samoa, Guam, Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia also provide models for innovative practices with educational technology and bilingual education. The region experiments with multicultural education, bilingual education, and English as a second language instruction for a population that speaks more than 90 languages. Language and cultural programs in Ilocano, Tagalog, Samoan, Korean, Vietnamese, Lao, Chinese, Japanese, Visayan, Thai, Tongan, and Marshallese create bridges that go beyond the satellite systems, computers, VCRs, fax machines, television monitors, and telephones.

More than projects that have been done in the past, the potential for multicultural telecommunications remains an area that is yet to be fully explored, with the most significant developments being made by educators and community leaders who represent grassroots, indepen-

dent efforts. Two significant initiatives show the extent to which ethnically diverse groups are going to create culturally-rich environments for increasing numbers of Americans. The Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium (NAPBC) has joined hands with the Indigenous Communications Association (ICA), a national association of Native American community radio stations, in the proposal of a project that would be known as the American Indian Radio on Satellite (AIROS) system. Attempting to reduce the isolation of rural Native American populations with radio stations that will have 24-hour access, AIROS hopes to transmit culturally and linguistically relevant programming to its diverse communities. The Hispanic Educational Satellite System (HESS), a group of ten universities located in such diverse areas as Puerto Rico, Texas, Arizona, and Washington, have launched a joint telecommunications initiative that projects the pooling of educational resources for the purpose of providing distance learning courses to U.S. Hispanics, and eventually setting up instructional telecommunications connections with educational institutions in Mexico, other Latin American countries, and Spain.

### THE CHALLENGE

A retrospective view of the last two decades of multicultural telecommunications innovations shows a number of initiatives that we can look to with pride, but it is glossing over the subject to say that there have not been an even greater number of disappointments at the steps backward we have taken. Although multiculturalism has become almost a cliché in the 1990s, and legislative education mandates are careful to emphasize goals related to culturally diverse populations of students, the reality frequently falls far short of the ideal aspirations of the writers of those proposals. This becomes especially true as we view the programming, both educational and commercial, that is being done today. Too often, "multiculturalism" translates into having an actor of every color appear in a

program, with little or no attention to the fundamental issues implied by the term, "cultural diversity."

Although multicultural initiatives are plentiful, there are no large-scale educational telecommunications efforts that address cultural and linguistic issues, at least not on the scale done in the past. In contrast, the 1970s appears to have been a golden age of ethnic television. Responding to the media stereotypes of shadowy underclass figures and the stylized caricatures of the previous decades, producers and scholars focused attention on culturally and linguistically diverse children. Prosocial, multicultural, bilingual education television programs such as *Carrascalendas*, *Villa Alegre*, *¿Qué Pasa?*, *USA*, *Mundo Real*, and others displayed a greater consciousness of the multicultural heritage of the country.

If, in the 1990s, we are still struggling with English-only movements, politically correct debates, and other ethnically related struggles, we do witness efforts that, although almost incidental to the educational process, give us cause for optimism. *Dances with Wolves* was the Hollywood hit of the 1990-91 season. The movie brought over \$200 million to the box office, granting it blockbuster stature. Given its length of over three hours and some critics' conclusions that the movie Western had passed from the scene (Sennett, 1986), the Kevin Costner movie unexpectedly won the accolades of film critics and received seven Academy Awards. A major advertising focus for the movie was that it was bilingual, with some 50 percent of its dialogue in the Lakota language. According to some scholars, the Indian language used was not the correct Lakota language (Goetzmann, 1992), but rather than fault Hollywood for that, the important thing was that *Dances with Wolves* was a mainstream feature film that had half of its dialogue in a language other than English.

For a nation that largely has participated in vigorous emotional debate over its official lan-

guage and its corresponding mythology, the success of *Dances with Wolves* marked a significant milestone at the same time that it contributed to the continuing American multicultural and multilingual paradox. The movie came as the national debate on two related issues of the previous decades was growing more acrimonious. During the 1970s, bilingual education, the school program that had touted the virtues of teaching young children in their native language, had come under increasing attack. And, as the decade of the 1980s progressed, so did the Official English movement, an especially divisive initiative that, more than being "for English," was "against bilingualism" (Crawford, 1992). *Dances with Wolves* exploded conceptions about the models of Americanism, revitalized the Western (but with an emphasis on diversity) as a symbolic vehicle of American ideals, tested the tolerance of American audiences for people who speak other languages, and verified the validity of the use of a mass medium such as film to present what essentially are complex racial, linguistic, and mythological themes to a lay public. And presumably, the motive was to make a profit.

We in the educational community who aspire to loftier goals should do no less for our culturally and linguistically diverse students. This is the challenge to multicultural distance learning in the 1990s.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Aida Barrera* is a multicultural communications specialist and a producer/director of Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) programs featuring culturally diverse populations. She received a Ph.D. in American civilization from the University of Texas at Austin, with a concentration in communications, public policy, and Mexican American history. She is a Visiting Scholar in American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and a former fellow of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. She is the creator of *Carrascolendas*, the first national bilingual television program to address the needs of Hispanic children.

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