

# **Spatial Metaphors and Distance Learning Library Services: Why “Where” Makes a Difference**

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**ABSTRACT.** *A close analysis of spatial metaphors used in distance education, such as “distant” education and “extended” courses, shows how these metaphors affect the design and goals of distance education library services. While some metaphors emphasize the possibilities of growth and communication, other metaphors continue to emphasize the isolation of distance learners. Distance librarians can reduce students’ confusion and forge new concepts about distance library services with thoughtful choices of metaphors.*

**KEYWORDS** *distance education, distance learning, distance library services, metaphor, outreach, spatiality*

## INTRODUCTION

Several recent articles about distance library services have asked the question “where is the library” in various forms. Far from being the traditional building full of books, academic libraries are increasingly meeting spaces, socializing spaces, and thinking spaces, as much as they are storage and study space. This change has come as a relief to those of us who worried that the physical library may become nothing more than a storage facility as most library resources went online. In fact, that movement of information online is one of the founding notions of many distance education programs: if everything is on the Internet, let’s (a) save money on classrooms and books by delivering education online and (b) assume online education is always equal to an on-campus, face-to-face education.

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These misconceptions about the locations of knowledge and learning are problematic for distance library services. Indeed, the library seems misplaced, ignored, or forgotten in many distance education programs, and librarians have had to work hard to establish a presence for the library in the minds of distance education administrators, faculty, and students. At the same time, in the face of reduced budgets and increasing enrollments on many university campuses, where to focus money and energy in the library is no small question. However, the absence of the distance library probably is not necessarily just the result of an oversight or a lower priority for library skills, but rather a limited vision of distance education in general. One way to see how distance learning programs may be defining themselves away from the kind of education that requires or is enhanced by traditional or virtual library resources is to look at the metaphors of those distance learning programs. Most distance education programs use some kind of metaphor to describe their work. For instance, some programs are “extension” programs while others are “outreach” divisions. Looking at the language, the root metaphors, and the ethics of space and location, in the context of distance education, reveals the tacit meanings behind such terms as the “delivery” of library services, “off-campus” students, “distance” library services, “extended” coursework, and so on. Analyzing these spatial metaphors of distance learning can help librarians analyze past practices and evaluate the best directions for the future.

### THE POWER OF METAPHORS: HOW THEY WORK

On the surface, many of the metaphors we notice seem like colorful ways to assist our understanding. In the library, we tend to use a lot of water metaphors: a “wave” of patrons might come in on Sunday night, we get a “flood” of phone calls about a particular resource, or we might feel hit by a “tsunami” of assessment requirements at the end of the semester. However, the metaphors that are less noticed and more ingrained in our thinking deserve a second look. Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) groundbreaking study of metaphors describes how we map a source domain such as oceans to the target domain of patrons or activities. Most metaphors are not unilateral or universal, but mixed and contingent, as with several common metaphors for the Internet: an information superhighway, a web, and a net. Lakoff and Johnson argue that the systematicity of metaphorical language helps us understand one thing in terms of another, but also hides some aspects of that thing (p. 10). So we must be careful to examine metaphors for what they illuminate as well as for what they hide. One of Lakoff and Johnson’s examples is the pervasiveness of the metaphor of war for the act of arguing ideas: we “attack” positions and “win” debates. We also use metaphors of structures: we “construct” arguments that may be “strong” or “weak.” Seeing arguments as wars, however, limits our ability to see arguments in other

ways, such as dialogues or journeys toward understandings, to use two other metaphors. Our penchant for associating positive activities with “up” and negativity with “down” also creates a limiting situation where we may find it difficult to imagine an activity as neither up nor down.

Another orientational metaphor, relevant to this study, which Lakoff and Johnson (1980) describe, is the metaphor of closeness, which we associate with the strength of the effect of something or the primariness of the nearest thing to our own bodies. A strong effect is associated with a physical closeness. For instance, if I am “close” to you, then I have emotional ties which make it possible to affect your behavior, regardless of the physical distance between us. In the same way, being farther away is a weaker effect, as in the idiom “you are far from correct.” Other matters that we associate metaphorically with closeness are careful and in-depth analysis, as in a “close reading” of a text, and accuracy as in “sticking close to the script.” Ideas can be “close” and “far” depending on how radically they “stray” from traditional notions. We can be “far from satisfied,” and an experience can be a “far cry” from another experience that turned out to be very different from what we expected. We often describe relationships in terms of physical distance, as in my “distant relatives” and “keeping my distance” from people I don’t like. Not all of our spatial metaphors for closeness are positive nor are those for distance negative, however, even though the bulk of them seem to fall into that dichotomy. One may be too “close for comfort” and one may be helpfully “far-seeing” when planning for the future.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) feel that these types of orientational metaphors are closely tied to our physical relationships in the world which is important in an analysis of distance library services. If our primary understanding of physical closeness is also associated with the depth and care of ideas and a clearer understanding of problems, then we will have a natural tendency to associate distance education with something less rigorous than “close” or on-campus education. Our experiences with the world can also alter our use of metaphors. For instance, Palmquist’s (2001) study of metaphors for the Internet preferred by undergraduates revealed that the frontier and a highway were predominant metaphors for the Internet, but that the preferences depended at least in part on the amount of experience the undergraduates had with using the Internet. Many librarians have commented on the problems of the metaphor of “surfing” for information on the Internet, because while on one hand it emphasizes a robust and risk-taking attitude, it also emphasizes a superficial search for transitory information (Meyer, 2005, p. 1611).

## STUDYING A GROUP OF DISTANCE EDUCATION METAPHORS

Distance education Web sites reveal the most common metaphors used for university distance education. Each one embodies a physical–spatial

metaphor and a convergence of physical and virtual locations. In my brief, informal study, I searched the Web sites of 22 flagship or major land-grant universities in the Midwest. A few universities have no specific distance education programs or at least no Web pages for those academic divisions, so this group of 22 was selected on the basis of Web page availability. I looked for how they described their academic, credit-granting programs (not the life-long learning programs or international studies). These descriptions were generally giving an overview and general mission for the program or division. Many of them reflect the older version of distance learning that was intended solely for post-baccalaureate education: “continuing” education after college, for professional or personal development. Others reflect the land-grant historical mission to “extend” knowledge and services outside the academic world (not just physically off-campus) to agricultural and manufacturing sectors. County extension services, for instance, are a staple of rural life and an important source of specific types of information for local needs. However, all 22 included for-credit and degree programs. Several specifically included courses for on-campus students wanting online education.

Looking at the most visible and generic statements of the missions of those 22 university programs, it appeared that many had settled on a specific kind of language for describing what they do and others used a variety of metaphors. Those 22 universities used 39 different metaphors for distance learning. By my count, four of those universities (18%) used the language of “extend” or “extension”; 10 (45%) used the terms “outreach” or “reach out”; two (9%) used “arm”; 13 (59%) used “continuing”; and 12 (54%) used “distance” somewhere in their statements. Most of the universities also used the language of “providing” or “offering” which aligns them more closely with traditional academic departments that offer degrees and provide “learning opportunities.” This would indicate to me that these divisions and departments are purposely avoiding the connotations that come with extension and distance education. The percentages also speak to the problem of the lack of consensus in the terms being used. The question that follows is whether the fragmentation of terms also means incongruous educational philosophies and thus a great number of different versions of what distance education means (and thus lack of guidance for distance librarians seeking to support those various versions).

The four most-often used metaphorical terms, though, tend to be *extension*, *outreach*, *continuing*, and *distance*. The first two, extension and outreach, are much more oriented toward what the university does for students, as actions taken by the university. Extension and outreach are in direct opposition to that other metaphor of the university, the ivory tower, where scholars remain isolated and separate from the real world. Extension as a metaphor is closely connected to the term “arm” that two universities specifically used. If the university is an entity with arms or some other kind

of appendage that can extend the body of the university outward, then the distance education program as an extension sees the university as an octopus with tentacles, which allows the distance education program to still be part of the main body of the university. There is also a limit to how far an arm can reach, however, before becoming a different kind of program, such as an international program. Interestingly, none of the universities I studied used the term “satellite” or “branch,” even when other campus locations were listed.

Equally active is the metaphor of outreach, which also brings the organic source domain of arms and hands. Reaching, however, includes a sense of goal for that reach: I may extend my arm, but when I reach, I reach for something. The common phrase “reaching one’s goals” is a good example of the source domain of physical reach mapped onto the target domain of mental goals. Outreach has a long history of being associated with church and health care programs, assistance programs for the needy, and apprenticeships and internships. Companies and service providers conduct “outreach” programs to increase their impact on new or larger patron groups. In my library, the outreach librarian has the job of developing lecture series and other activities that attract people who would not otherwise come to the library. This, of course, is one of the terminology problems with distance library services: the university’s sense of outreach is different from the library’s sense of outreach, so that the university Division of Outreach includes distance learning while the library’s outreach programs may not. In general, then the metaphor of “outreach,” particularly because of its nominalization, doesn’t indicate much about the objects of the reaching.

“Continuing” as a descriptive term for distance education has a long history as well. Many, if not most, extension programs at American universities in the early part of this century were conceived of as programs for those who were not going to college (Berg, 2002). Continuing education meant what we call “lifelong learning” today, the kind of learning that improves and enriches one’s life, makes one a better worker or parent or citizen, but doesn’t lead to a degree. Other important continuing education programs are conceived of as professional education or post-baccalaureate programs leading to certificates or masters degrees or PhDs. Many current distance education programs are too diverse to be called continuing education programs alone. However, the positive connotation with the metaphor of continuing is that learning is a more of a journey, something that doesn’t have a stopping point, such as the “continuing saga” of a soap opera.

Distance education and distance learning emphasize the spatial issues. Indeed, many students in these programs do live at a distance from campus, making it difficult or impossible to use campus services face-to-face. The metaphor of distance in distance education, thus, is easily overlooked since it has a direct physical basis. However, there are specific connotations with the word that cause problems of “there-ness” for distance learning. For instance,

we talk about things “in the distance,” assigning a far away space, instead of implying a flexible measurement. A person who is labeled “distant” is aloof or day-dreaming. My “distant relatives” are ones I do not know well, but my “extended family” is simply large and connected. Geographer and philosopher of space Tuan (1977, p. 46) points out that distance “connotes degrees of accessibility and also of concern.” We keep track of who is important to us and register their closeness or distance from us. People and things farther away from us are less important. In fact, humans define space in terms of the self, according to Tuan, as evidenced by the importance of distance from self in other languages. In English we carry this over to personal pronouns. Tuan writes, “We are *here*. . . . They are *there*; they are not fully human and they live in *that* place” (p. 50). Tuan also points out that distance has a timeless quality, such as when we set legends and science fiction in locations “a long time ago in a place far, far away.” But this timeless quality allows distance to create a sense of a historicity as well. Maps, Tuan says, are objective and timeless, generating the feeling that those places remain untouched by history. For a distance education program, these are not positive connections. The less we see and encounter those students up close and personal, the more we tend to assume they haven’t changed, have the same needs from year to year, and that the landscape of their education hasn’t changed. Sometimes it’s as if they live on a frontier, a wild and free space but perilous and risky. In the metaphor of the Wild West, if a student falls down a ravine, there’s no one within miles to help and plenty of rattlesnakes in that ravine. Isolated distance students don’t have the safety net of a face-to-face reference desk, a quiet study space, or 24-hour chat service when they run into problems.

The other problem with the term “distance” is that it falls into the root metaphor of machine-based educational philosophy. Álvarez and Kilbourn (2002) use Stephen Pepper’s theory of cognitive models or root metaphors to describe basic categories of thinking that influence our models for education. Pepper posits four main root metaphors: form, machine, organ, and context. The root metaphor of form uses similarities and differences and emphasizes essential models and types of things. The machine metaphor emphasizes cause and effect as well as the reality of time and location. Metaphors of organ or organisms stress connections and integration, while metaphors of context stress the here and now and therefore emphasize change and the relativity of experience. When distance education programs talk about delivery of learning modules and describe “access” as a thing that can be given and received, we can clearly see the root metaphor of machine. The delivery metaphor implies, at best, a neutral tool, generally Internet technology, which makes education possible but doesn’t influence education itself. On distance education Web sites, it’s rare to see the more organic language of connections and community or the formist category of models or comparative pedagogies. Álvarez and Kilbourn apply these root metaphors to

the language of “information society” literature but they arrive at a similar conclusion as I did above when looking at the disparate terms used for distance education among the 22 university Web sites in my study. Álvarez and Kilbourn point out that this fragmentation makes it easy for a learner, particularly a new student, to “lose the way” through the material.

Critiquing educational endeavors because of their machine-like tendencies is hardly a new activity. Garrison and Anderson (1999) cite the pressures to increase access but decrease costs as a heavy influence on a mechanized, industrial model of education where students are passive recipients of what instructors give them. However, they believe that, particularly for research institutions, the drive to create knowledge requires collaboration and communication in a community of scholars and students. The emphasis of many distance education programs to increase the independence of students is a convenience that “comes at the cost of severely reducing interaction and increasing learner isolation” (p. 52).

One of the things that made my informal study even less clear, however, was that at least one-fourth of the Web sites about distance learning were directed specifically at students and were a form of persuasion as much as information. So some Websites say things such as “Welcome, Future Aggies!” and “Find out if distance education is right for you!” If we look at the language used to describe the recipients of distance learning, there are three main trends:

- Most distance learners are hyphenated (“off-campus,” “non-traditional,” main campus–branch as in the University of Mississippi–Tupelo);
- they are disabled in some way and described with some kind of deficit (cannot come to campus, do not learn well in traditional classrooms); or
- assumed students want or require convenience and flexibility more than anything else.

Of the 22 Web sites I studied, four (18%) used the term nontraditional; four (18%) described students as unable to do something; only one used the term “off-campus”; four (18%) used the word “outside” to describe students wanting or needing to learn outside of traditional classrooms, and four (18%) described their programs as available to students either on their own time or “anywhere, anytime.” The language of off, outside, and cannot are not positive matters for distance learning, because they reinforce the already strong “outsider” language in so many programs. The attempt to market programs by playing up the “anytime, anywhere” aspect of distance education is either a step in the right direction by emphasizing the abilities rather than the disabilities of students, or an irresponsible move to encourage students to see distance education as something as accessible and easy-answer as surfing the Internet.

These are metaphors of difference, and Meyer (2005, p. 1620) says they encourage us to avoid certain questions about distance education, namely whether the technology is the only important difference or whether students are truly becoming educated. Meyer feels that using the metaphor of distance creates a separation of the program from disciplinary bases and a separation of faculty from students, making it very easy to equate the technology (such as course management systems) with learning, rather than the teaching method with evidence of student learning (p. 1619). For distance library services, the resulting tendency is to put a new technology into place (a chat room, for instance) and then imagine we have done our work with reaching out to distance learners.

### SPATIAL METAPHORS AND REDEFINING LIBRARY SERVICES

By examining these distance education metaphors, a matrix of meanings and possibilities emerges with which to examine the focuses and goals of distance education programs and how libraries work within them. Meyer (2005) describes why metaphors are worth studying:

With an appreciation for metaphors, we can be less controlled by language that dictates our understandings and molds our perceptions and choose to use other metaphors (or at minimum, we will not be captive to our metaphorical language). We can command our metaphors and not let this tool of perception and understandings dictate the views of its user. We can be more aware of the source of others' misperceptions, the metaphors that control their beliefs, and be better able to understand their unquestioned attitudes (and appreciate how difficult it may be to change those beliefs) (p. 1623).

Meyer advocates dropping "distance" and simply calling it "education," which is worth considering, even if it simply prompts us to use the term less often and only when necessary to avoid confusion.

The problem of distance also goes beyond the metaphorical. While librarians are not moral philosophers, there is a moral dilemma involved in distance education. Because distance learners are not nearby, are less likely to call us, and won't show up at the reference desk, we intuitively have looser ties to them. Moral philosophers remind us that distance matters to our sense of whom we are morally required to help, to point of being relative, even though we know it should not (Kamm, 2004). We are more likely to help a family member than a stranger, and we are more likely to help a nearby stranger than a far-away one. Consider that it feels much better to contribute to our local literacy program than one in Africa or India; or at least one doesn't feel right contributing to a literacy program overseas but



not one's hometown's literacy program which also may be struggling. It is simply harder to care as much about distant students as those who come through our doors, because the distance learners don't have the "presence" and the resulting force of need as other students. Being fully committed to contributing equal resources to distance learners, as well as on-campus learners, means conceiving of what would constitute equal treatment for both distance and on-campus patrons. Equal resources for distance learners may mean more of some services in addition to special services. For instance, a library may clearly see the need to mail books to distance learners as a special service, but not so clearly see the need for longer chat room hours or weekend email answering.

Some of the questions raised by both the moral dilemma and the metaphorical dilemmas are these: (a) should the distance learning library simply become the online library?; (b) are distance learning library services mechanical and administrative matters rather than organic, instructional matters?; (c) how necessary is it that libraries follow the language, and thus the distance education model, of the university?; (d) if the university doesn't call it "distance education," then should the library?; (e) are we letting disciplinary differences get in the way or are we just demanding the more accurate term be used?; (f) are libraries causing confusion for distance learning students or creating true library instruction?; and (g) are we still following the industrialized model of education from earlier in this century or creating new dialogue-based interactions with students through library instruction? Libraries need to avoid the fragmentation caused by multiple metaphors, and yet use the power of hybrid terms and fluid definitions to strengthen services to students. We aren't going to change the term "distance learning," but we can realize that that's not the only way to talk about our students and what we do as distance librarians.

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