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CHARLES A. WEDEMEYER

Visionary Pioneer of Distance Education

WILLIAM C. DIEHL

In Chapter 1 of this volume on the history of scholarship, Linda Black introduced Charles A. Wedemeyer and mentioned some of his achievements, noting in particular his pioneering advocacy for empirical research in distance education. Considered by many to be the father of modern distance education, Wedemeyer’s influence is examined in greater detail in this chapter. The chapter is organized by these topics: (1) Wedemeyer as an innovator; (2) his professional journey; (3) his impact on the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK); (4) his influence on Holmberg, Moore, and Peters; and (5) his legacy.

INTRODUCTION—CHARLES A. WEDEMEYER: INNOVATIVE CHANGE AGENT

Charles A. Wedemeyer (1911–1999) devoted his life to the field of education, and in particular, distance education. Recognized as an innovator, leader, and authority by his contemporaries, he was one of the first educators to advocate for scholarship in what had been known as the field of correspondence study.

Wedemeyer’s primary vision was to develop a systems approach in the emerging field of distance education as a way of addressing the opportunity gap that exists for non-traditional adult students, or as he referred to them, “back door learners” (Wedemeyer, 1981, p. 19). He developed a concept for cradle-to-grave “open” education that in contrast to the popular Behaviorism of his day, applied technology to meet the goals espoused in Humanistic psychology.

Following such principles, Wedemeyer believed that the goals of education should include emphasis on student-centered learning. Students should be taught the values and skills required to become independent learners, so that they could pursue lifelong learning at any point in their lives. In 1971 he published his definition of “independent study.” The Wedemeyer (1971a) definition of Independent Study is...
various forms of teaching-learning arrangements in which teachers and learners carry out their essential tasks and responsibilities apart from one another, communicating in a variety of ways, for the purposes of freeing internal learners from inappropriate class pacings or patterns, or providing external learners opportunity to continue learning in their own environments, and developing in all learners the capacity to carry on self-directed learning, the ultimate maturity required of the educated person. Independent Study programs offer learners varying degrees of freedom in the self-determination of goals and activities, and in starting, stopping and pacing individualized learning programs which are carried on to the greatest extent possible at the convenience of the learners. (p. 3)

In addition to placing emphasis on the learner, the definition introduced the idea of a domain of education in which teachers and learners “carry out their essential tasks—apart from one another,” a defining characteristic of distance education. Wedemeyer’s idea of Independent Study referred to both internal study and external study, and that Independent Study could be applied both in campus face-to-face traditional and non-traditional and distance education programs. Lifelong learning could best happen via open and flexible educational systems. Two innovative systems were designed, based on his ideas; these were the Open School system (Wedemeyer, 1971c; Wedemeyer & Ghatala, 1971; WHA, 1970) for the State of Wisconsin (which did not come to fruition) and the Articulated Instructional Media Program (AIM). As will be discussed in the following section, based on the AIM experience, Wedemeyer went on to play a leading role in the development of the Open University in Great Britain, consequently impacting the world of higher education.

**BIOGRAPHICAL: WEDEMEYER’S PROFESSIONAL JOURNEY (1930s THROUGH THE 1980s)**

In the 1930s and early 1940s, Wedemeyer demonstrated his first abilities to adopt and apply new technologies to education. During that period, he wrote scripts and hosted the radio show *Literature Then and Now* for the Wisconsin College of the Air. By the 1950s, he had become the chairman of the National University Extension Association (NUEA) correspondence study division committee on radio and TV.

During World War II, Wedemeyer designed, developed, and edited course books used for teaching armed services’ personnel on ships at sea and in other unconventional learning environments. After the war and through the mid-1950s, he was director of Correspondence Study at the University of Wisconsin, one of the largest correspondence study programs in the world. Over 8,500 students were enrolled in more than 400 courses and over 85,000 men and women in the Air Force, Army and Navy took courses in a program that linked Wedemeyer’s program with the United States Armed Forces Institute (USAFI). The number of USAFI related lessons grew to 300,000 at its peak (UWEX, 1956).

In early 1958, Wedemeyer and the University of Wisconsin announced their plan for combining television with college-level correspondence study, a pioneering experiment in the use of multiple media for teaching-learning activities, requiring teaching by a team of specialists working together to design, develop, deliver, and assess the project.
The course was designed for 2,500 to 10,000 enrollees who would be “given tests and projects by the UW Extension Division” which would also “handle grading of papers and other administrative functions” (Bauder, 1959). In 1959, with Wedemeyer acting as correspondence advisor and teaming with Professor Percy H. Tannenbaum of the Mass Communications Research Center, the first graduate course using television and correspondence education for credit for students across the United States was announced by University of Wisconsin Extension (UWEX, 1959).

In the 1960s, Wedemeyer’s experimentation with multiple types of media and the use of course teams continued in a particularly groundbreaking experimental program, The Articulated Instructional Media Program (AIM). Towards the end of this period, Wedemeyer pioneered another significant development in education—the application of satellite technologies.

When the use of satellites was in its earliest stages of development, Wedemeyer worked with colleagues such as Richard G. Lawson at the University of Wisconsin to develop an experimental program called the Educational Diffusion and Social Application of Satellite Telecommunications (EDSAT). Situated on the Madison, Wisconsin campus, the project was a joint program with the Space Science and Engineering Center, UNESCO, and ICCE.

In 1975 as a consultant for the U.S. State Department, Wedemeyer conducted educational satellite demonstrations during a trip through Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Japan. During his tour, he demonstrated the potential of teaching over vast distances by facilitating his regular seminar at the University of Madison Wisconsin via satellite.

This brief chronological description of Wedemeyer’s professional life illustrates some of the diversity of his activities. Throughout this period he also held leadership positions in several professional associations. For example, he served as president of and a member of the executive boards of the International Council of Correspondence Education (ICCE) and the National University Extension Association (NUEA). He was a director of the Correspondence Study Division for the NUEA, and at USAFI he was Director of Instruction and Evaluation. Later, at Wisconsin, he was Director of AIM and the AIM Board, and he held the William H. Lighty Professor of Education Chair. Wedemeyer was the recipient of numerous awards, including the Gayle Childs Award for Distinguished Service and an honorary doctorate by the OUUK. He was also honored with a variety of public appointments. For example, he became the First Kellogg Fellow at Oxford University and served on the Wisconsin Governor’s Commission on Education and the Governor’s Educational Advisory Committee.

WEDEMEYER’S IMPACT ON THE REVOLUTIONARY OUUK

In 1965, several years before the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) was launched, Wedemeyer, as the first Kellogg Fellow at Oxford University, shared his experience, ideas, and lessons learned from the AIM Project in lectures and informal conversations with several key individuals who would become the OUUK’s planners (Wedemeyer, 1968, 1971b).

A few years later, one of those individuals, Walter James, the new Director of Studies of the OUUK, wrote to Wedemeyer, emphasizing that it had been their conversations in 1965 at Nottingham that had shaped the ideas and plans he was going to implement as
one of the first senior appointees at the new OUUK. James asked Wedemeyer for additional assistance, and Wedemeyer (1969c) told him that he would “help in any possible way.” What was at first known as University of the Air shared several of the characteristics of Wedemeyer’s AIM project. However, it also benefited from what Wedemeyer recognized as weaknesses in AIM. The Wisconsin project had not owned its own production facilities nor, more importantly did it have organizational autonomy in finances and awarding of credits and degrees, and it was these weaknesses, as Wedemeyer perceived them, that he urged should be avoided in the design of the new British institution (Diehl, 2011a). Even the course team (which years later, First Vice-Chancellor of the OUUK Walter Perry (1976) credited the OUUK with innovating) had in fact been developed by Wedemeyer as early as 1959.

In April of 1969, Anastasinos Christodoulou, the Secretary Designate of the Open University Planning Committee contacted Wedemeyer and arranged a meeting for the two of them together with the Vice-Chancellor of the new university, Walter Perry (Wedemeyer, 1969a). After the meeting, Perry invited Wedemeyer to become a consultant and to stay with him at Swan Cottage, his home in Milton Keynes, where the new OUUK campus would be located. In October 1969, the offices of the OUUK moved from London to Milton Keynes, where renovations and the first phases of administrative and course development began in earnest (Perry, 1976; Stabler, 1986; Tunstall, 1974).

For two months, Wedemeyer worked with Perry and with various teams of academic and media specialists in the development of mediated instructional materials, and also shared ideas with administrative and supportive services personnel. This work included weekly lectures on theory and media instructional processes, faculty development seminars, a seminar for London based BBC producers and directors, meetings with various other teams, and consultations with individuals who were associated with the OUUK and BBC (Wedemeyer, 1969a, 1971b).

After returning to the United States, Wedemeyer carried on correspondence with the OUUK planners throughout 1970 until the OUUK opened its doors in 1971. In 1972, Wedemeyer returned to London and interviewed colleagues Walter Perry and Walter James about the early days at the OUUK in a the BBC broadcast titled Conversations. The success of the new institution and its attraction as a model was reflected in comments by the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who was responsible for providing top-level political leadership in pushing through the idea of the nation-wide experimental OUUK program. Wilson wrote that he had been “besieged by University Presidents, Senators, Congressmen, and Presidents of the U.S. to tell them more about the achievements of the Open University” (1976, p. xii).

In 1975, with the OUUK firmly established, Wedemeyer was invited to become the third recipient of an honorary doctorate, putting him in the company of former recipients Paulo Friere and Lady Plowden. During the award ceremony, Professor Walter James (1975) spoke about Wedemeyer’s contributions to the OUUK:

> What’s to come in open independent study for the adult learner is still unsure. What is sure is that Chuck Wedemeyer, who more than any other person secured lift-off for the vehicle, will be developing its guidance and control systems, and sending it further into the unknown, beyond the limit of its present orbit. Those whom such education has reached out to and touched owe more than they know and far more than they can repay to him. The Open University—an inheritor of
his inspiration, a beneficiary of his advice, and a learner from his wisdom—has the privilege of offering a token on their behalf.

In his 1981 book *Learning at the Back Door: Reflections on Non-Traditional Learning in the Lifespan*, Wedemeyer (p. 60) identified “non-traditional, distance, open or independent learning” as “a single great new development in education” that would be a vehicle for a new era in higher education. Nearly three decades later, Moore (2009) emphasized two “watershed events” which were the “beginning of a global, worldwide paradigm shift in higher education.” The two events were AIM and the Open University.

**WEDEMEYER’S INFLUENCE ON THREE PIONEERING THEORISTS: HOLMBERG, MOORE, AND PETERS**

Of the hundreds of distance educators that Wedemeyer corresponded and interacted with during his career, three are especially important—Börje Holmberg, Michael G. Moore, and Otto Peters—each of these practitioner-scholars has become recognized as a major contributor to theory and scholarship in the field of distance and open education. Chapters by Peters and Holmberg appeared in earlier editions of this handbook (Holmberg, 2003, 2007; Peters, 2003, 2007). A look at the evolution of Wedemeyer’s relationships with Holmberg, Moore, and Peters provides us with further insights into the history of the field of distance education as well as explaining how Wedemeyer’s ideas came to live on around the world.

**Wedemeyer and Holmberg**

As a distance education theorist, Börje Holmberg is known for the development of what he described as “a predictive theory” that applies an instructional methodology grounded in using a teaching-learning conversational style and in making use of “empathetic emotions” (Bernath & Vidal, 2007, p. 430). Just how significant was Holmberg’s contribution is indicated by the date (1960) when he first published his ideas in *On the methods of Teaching by Correspondence and referred to his theory as “guided didactic conversation” and, later, as “teaching-learning conversations” (Holmberg, 2003, p. 79). His “approach to distance education … is based on the very general observation that feelings of personal empathy and personal relations between learner and teacher support motivation for learning and tend to improve the results of learning” (Holmberg, 2007, p. 69).

As Wedemeyer prepared for a trip to Europe in the summer of 1961, he wrote to Holmberg for the first time. Wedemeyer had just finished reading Holmberg’s (1961b) article in *Home Study Review*, and wrote,

> I have read with great interest your article … entitled “On the methods of Teaching by Correspondence.” The information is of great help to me as I prepare to visit the major correspondence schools of Europe.… Enclosed for you is a small book describing correspondence instruction in American universities. (Wedemeyer, 1961a, 1961b)

Thanking him for sending this book *New Perspectives in University Correspondence Study* (Wedemeyer & Childs, 1961), Holmberg arranged to meet during Wedemeyer’s visit to Sweden in 1961, and they continued a lifelong correspondence, sharing
publications such as Hermods’ monthly newsletter Korrespondens and myriad course materials (Holmberg, 1961a, 1963). In July, 1963, Holmberg visited Wedemeyer in his Madison, Wisconsin, office and furthered their personal friendship and a professional alliance. In 1964, Holmberg was focused on the upcoming Correspondence Education Conference (CEC) which was to be held in Malmo, Sweden, and Wedemeyer was working on the second volume of the Brandenburg Memorial Essays (Wedemeyer, 1963, 1966b). Wedemeyer invited Holmberg to contribute to the second volume, suggested that topics from the CEC would be valuable, and indicated he wanted to include writings from authors who were from outside the United States. Holmberg agreed to contribute and added that he would look forward to June of 1965 when Wedemeyer was scheduled to give the keynote speech at the ICCE conference in Stockholm. During this time, Wedemeyer had also been invited to be Oxford’s first Kellogg Fellow during April and May, and immediately following, he traveled directly to Stockholm for the June ICCE.

About two years later, Holmberg (1967b) finished his book Correspondence Education and told Wedemeyer that “Lots of things are happening here…. We are giving more and more attention to and spending more money on developing our methods and products and we have certainly learnt a lot from American research and experiences…. All over the world people talk about the multi-media project that you are in charge of in Wisconsin. I wonder if you can let me have some rather detailed information on it?” (Holmberg, 1967a). Holmberg was referring to Wedemeyer’s AIM program, and even though Hermods was experimenting with television, radio, and telephone courses, Holmberg told Wedemeyer that “this is a mere beginning and I understand you have reached much further.”

Wedemeyer and Holmberg continued their correspondence throughout the rest of the next two decades and worked together in ICCE and CEC. When Wedemeyer was President of ICCE, he appointed Holmberg to a key role in negotiations with UNESCO that led to a strengthening of ties and a raise in ICCE’s status, which also raised Holmberg’s status and leadership role within ICCE, and he succeeded Wedemeyer as president of that organization.

Holmberg is well known for his belief that quality student support is a primary basis for successful programs, and as previously noted, his theory of teaching-learning conversations that is based on the importance of “personal relations, study pleasure, and empathy between students and those representing the supporting organization” (Holmberg, 2007, p. 69). Wedemeyer’s analysis of programs such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and AIM show that, like Holmberg, Wedemeyer also believed that student support was a critical aspect for successful programs. Clearly, the two men influenced one another; Holmberg certainly drew upon Wedemeyer in the development of his theoretical and practical work, and Wedemeyer drew upon Holmberg’s ideas and practice.

Recommended publications for further insight into Holmberg’s influence and ideas can be found in Bernath and Vidal (2007), Black (2004, 2007, this volume), Diehl (2011a, 2011b), and Holmberg (Holmberg, 2003, 2007).

**Wedemeyer and Peters**

Otto Peters is known for the theory which describes distance education as an industrialized form of education. In the early 1960s, Peters examined correspondence educational systems and concluded that in a post-industrial society, distance education
incorporated teaching as an “objectified process” which includes “professional planning and preparation, formalization, standardization, mechanization, automation, digitalization, rationalization, division of work, mass production, repeatability, and centralization” (Peters, 2007, p. 58). While many researchers have focused on this organizational dimension, Peters (Bernath & Vidal, 2007; Peters, 2007) has stressed that his theory also addresses the historical, economic, cultural, sociological, anthropological, and most significantly, the important and unique pedagogical dimensions of the phenomenon of distance education. According to Peters (Bernath & Vidal, 2007, p. 435), “The change of the very nature of knowledge is a product and consequence of industrialized learning” and the focus of his theory is “on these radical changes, which had never been experienced before.”

In 1965 Wedemeyer and Peters met for the first time at the ICCE in Stockholm. Wedemeyer gave the keynote address, *Correspondence Education in the World of Today*. The ICCE conference in 1965 was more international than it had ever been, with over 220 participants from about 30 countries. Peters was the Chief Educational Adviser for the Federal Republic of Germany’s Educational Centre in Berlin at this time (ICCE, 1965).

Wedemeyer, like Peters, shared an interest in surveying the world’s correspondence institutions. In 1966, Otto Peters (1966a) wrote to Wedemeyer to tell him that “Der Fernunterricht” had been published and that it contained “a description of correspondence instruction in 11 countries…..” Peters, working on *Correspondence Instruction in Teacher Training*, sent Wedemeyer an institutional survey to complete. Wedemeyer (1966a) responded with congratulations and told Peters that the publication would “most certainly be a substantial contribution to our knowledge of correspondence education.” In the survey that Wedemeyer returned, he provided information about teacher motivations as well as the use of television combined with correspondence study, radio, and small group correspondence methods. Wedemeyer also sent Peters a list of all of the NUEA institutions that offered correspondence to teachers and thus might be helpful to him. Additionally, Wedemeyer enclosed a copy of the *Brandenburg Memorial Essays I* (Wedemeyer, 1963) and a promise for a copy of the upcoming *Brandenburg Memorial Essays II* (Wedemeyer, 1966b). Over the following months, Peters sent requests for additional information and Wedemeyer arranged to have research materials delivered to him.

In the autumn of 1966, Otto Peters and three other German educators visited the United States. In Madison, Peters met with Wedemeyer and arrangements were made so that he could also meet with Dr. Ripley Sims (director, Division of Instruction with USAFI) and with Dr. William Brothers (assistant director for Developing Correspondence Programs—Innovated Processes).

Following his tour, Peters (1966b) penned *Report about the International Teacher Development Program*, in which he recommended that the United States should develop a single national center for correspondence courses, citing USAFI as a possible model. After returning to Germany, Peters (1967) wrote to Wedemeyer, told him about a new book *Texte Zum Fernstudium* that he was going to publish, and asked him to contribute. Requesting that Wedemeyer write about AIM, Peters stated it was “the best and most advanced development of university correspondence study!” As the publication date neared, Peters (1968) wrote to tell Wedemeyer that he believed Wedemeyer’s and collaborator Dr. Bern’s contribution would be “the best chapter of the book.” Additionally,
Peters told Wedemeyer that he had been invited to make a presentation at the upcoming ICCE in Paris, something that Wedemeyer had suggested to then President Renée Erdos earlier in the year.

Peters also invited Wedemeyer to visit Berlin to participate in a West German conference to present on “The Changing Role of Teachers.” Wedemeyer (1967) believed that in the end, “the AIM experiment would shed light on the changes that innovation require” and that these challenges and changes impel a serious educator to undertake innovations, one result of which is a radical shift in the role of the teacher. But this role change is implied in the challenges and changes, and must be confronted there before the implementation through innovation. Indeed I think that if the role change is seen only as a result of innovation, innovation and change will be resisted vigorously. The ‘revolution’ in education is not, then, merely technological, although the technological elements are most visible.

Wedemeyer and Moore

Michael G. Moore is known for his theory of Transactional Distance, which is covered elsewhere in this volume.

After a seven-year career in adult education in Kenya in East Africa, Moore became Wedemeyer’s research assistant and graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison in July 1970. He was immediately immersed in ideas about open and distance education as he provided research data for the Wisconsin Open School Project, an endeavor led by Wedemeyer on behalf of the Wisconsin Governor’s Commission on Education. This project was an innovative program that would have created a cradle-to-grave centralized system of education using communication technologies across the whole State of Wisconsin, systematically similar to the national Open University in the UK. The plan never got off the ground and was abandoned after years of planning under political pressure from within and outside the state university (Diehl, 2009, 2011a; Gibson, Moore, Burton, Hardy, & Bonk, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Moving from Madison in 1973 to become a professor at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Canada, and still building on Wedemeyer’s independent study theory, Moore published his second article, “Towards a Theory of Independent Learning and Teaching” (Moore, 1973b) and together with Wedemeyer expanded some of the ideas about distance education in Speculations on a Definition of Independent Study” (Moore, 1973a) at the Conference on Independent Learning in Vancouver, Canada.

While teaching at St. Francis Xavier University, Moore (1976) completed work on his doctoral dissertation, Investigation of the Interaction Between the Cognitive Style of Field Independence and Attitudes to Independent Study Among Adult Learners Who Use Correspondence Independent Study and Self Directed Independent Study. In this study he measured learning attitudes, field independence, and examined and measured the “psychological characteristics of correspondence students” in two professional adult education programs. The study’s significance, according to Moore (1976, p. 14), was that it represented “the first investigation of the field independence cognitive style of students in an adult education program” but also contained the basic ideas about dialog, structure and learner autonomy that a few years later were reworked into a theory called transactional distance. “A Model of Independent Study” was published in the
European journal *Epistolodidactica* in 1977, and Moore continued to work on building theory pertaining to independent study (Moore, 1980a, 1980b). Wedemeyer had established graduate seminars related to distance education and independent learners, and as Wedemeyer approached his retirement, Moore came to Madison as a visiting professor to teach them. At the time, they were the only courses in the world on this topic (Moore, 1999). After leaving Canada, Moore worked for nine years at the OUUK, and, in 1986, he accepted a professorial position in the Adult Education Program at The Pennsylvania State University. There he founded the American Center for the Study of Distance Education (ACSDE) as well as the Distance Education Online Symposium (DEOS). He also started a national research symposium and designed and taught the first full program of graduate courses in distance education. In 1986 Moore launched what became an important journal for the developing field of distance and open education, *The American Journal of Distance Education (AJDE)*. The first issue included an interview with Wedemeyer, which was appropriate, since the founding of the *AJDE* brought another of Wedemeyer’s dreams to fruition. Decades earlier, Wedemeyer had planted a seed regarding a professional journal. In 1969 he suggested “a need for a correspondence instruction journal to help workers in the field identify with others in the field as well as to develop and maintain a competency in the field,” but he was “pessimistic that a correspondence instruction journal could be supported in the U.S.” (Wedemeyer, 1969b).

Wedemeyer and Moore remained in contact via correspondence through the remaining years of Wedemeyer’s life and in face-to-face meetings when Moore attended the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning in Madison, Wisconsin (which he had been instrumental in establishing in 1986). At that conference, beginning in 1987, an important award in honor of Wedemeyer was initiated—the Mildred B. and Charles A. Wedemeyer Award, and Michael G. Moore presented the first award to Farhad Saba in Wedemeyer’s presence (see Figure 4.1 in the next chapter).

**REFERENCES**


