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# And finally... A new era...

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# A New Era …

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"… a new era" learned about "… from reading a book."

—Thoreau

Some have written that the modern era of distance education began with the widespread availability of the internet. Others move the date back to when it was possible to communicate quickly, such as with the telephone.

For the sake of argument, it could be said that the "new era" of distance education began when the first issue of *Distance*

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*Learning* journal was published. Editor arrogance? Maybe, so let's say the modern era of distance learning started about 2 decades ago.

Less than 20 years is not a very long time as eras go, but in the rapid pace of technological change, 2 decades is significant.

One way to examine the evolution of events is to look at what topics of importance happened during the new era.

*Distance Learning* journal has published 300–400 professional articles during this new era, and a brief review of published articles reveals three distinct periods:

The *early years* of the new era were characterized by an emphasis on large systems such satellite technology and use of microwave networks—the emphasis was on hardware systems.

The *middle years* of the new era were dominated by articles about the expansion of the field and virtual schools, e-Portfolios, and MOOCs were often written about. Educational Colonialism was identified as a disruptive force. The emphasis was on the expansion of distance learning.

More *recently*, authors have written about topics such as social media, community building, intellectual property, flipping and blending, best practices, and learner retention. This time frame was dominated by articles about the impact of learning at a distance.

It seems clear that the evolution of the field has progressed from "nifty hardware" to innovative approaches, and ultimately to topics dealing with infusing the field with modern approaches. It could be said the field was growing up.

One issue not yet mentioned is design. Instructional design, sometimes called the *critical element*, was regularly written about during all phases of the new era of distance learning. Design has been constant as an issue, an idea, and a necessity. But, as what often happens with really important ideas, design has had the tendency to be so obvious and necessary that its importance is overlooked.

The journal, *Distance Learning*, is one source of information about the changes occurring in the field. Certainly, there are others. One conclusion is clear. The field has matured.

*And finally* … the new era of distance education was not learned from the reading of a *book*, but from the reading of a *journal*—*Distance Learning* journal.

EARLY YEARS = HARDWARE

MIDDLE YEARS = EXPANSION

RECENTLY = IMPACT

CRITICAL ELEMENT = DESIGN!