

BOOK REVIEW

Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda

O. ZAWACKI-RICHTER and T. ANDERSON (EDS.)

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As seen by Otto Peters in his foreword to this substantial volume, the early days of correspondence-based distance education garnered little attention from researchers. As distance education became more widely adopted and researched, a prevalent theme involved comparisons of distance education with traditional face-to-face methods, mostly in attempts to prove the equivalence of the two. While such studies were fraught with methodological challenges, they arose in response to the perceived need for this new kid on the block to prove its legitimacy to an often skeptical academic constituency.

Distance education evolved from print-based correspondence to incorporate mass media such as television and radio, followed by such developments as computer-mediated instruction and interactive video. Distance education courses became increasingly media rich. Telephone- and video-conferencing created new channels of communication that enabled interactions at a distance among distance tutors and learners. Researchers' attention increasingly turned to the use of technology in distance education.

Distance educators turned to online delivery as a primary mode of teaching at a distance. Online collaboration tools and emerging theories of social constructivist and connected learning introduced new areas of practice and research. All these developments have culminated in today's state of affairs, described by Peters as complex and multifarious.

The editors of this volume saw the need for a systematic approach to organize this incredibly complex and diverse field of research into categories. To address this need, they used the results of Zawacki's earlier Delphi study into research themes in online distance education, along with other large-scale literature reviews and studies of research patterns in online distance education. These categories, which form the framework for this collection, are divided into macro-, meso- and micro-levels. These levels comprise, respectively, distance education systems and theories; management, organization and technology; and teaching and learning in distance education.

These categories are intended to help wrestle the diverse field of online distance learning into an organized set of problems and to identify research patterns, clusters and gaps. It will probably not surprise anyone in the field to learn that the editors found that a large majority of research in online distance education focuses on the micro-level, while the other two levels remain under-researched. The category titles macro, meso, micro aren't fully self-explanatory, and examples are helpful in seeing how they play out. Fortunately the editors addressed this problem by structuring sub-topics within these three categories to form the chapters of this book.



Within the macro-level, sub-topics range across access, equity and ethics; globalization and cross-cultural aspects; distance teaching systems and institutions; theories and models for distance education; and research methods and knowledge transfer. Even within each of these individual topics, the research opportunities that become evident are immense. For example, Tait and O'Rourke identify the need for research programmes related to multiple dimensions of distance education and social justice, particularly in the face of "increasing pressures to operate in a competitive business model rather than a public service model." This type of research of course will also involve many disciplines outside education itself. Examples of other discussions at the macro-level include global open educational practices in the face of Western hegemonies and essentialist understandings of other cultures; the importance of socio-technical analyses to expose system dynamics and counter technological determinism; and the need for varied research methods including mixed methods and design-based approaches.

The meso-level category includes management and organization; costs and funding; educational technology; innovation and change management; and areas related to faculty and students. In her chapter on educational technology, Conole notes shifts among researchers beyond the traditional publication route toward open research practices, in the direction of the open web. Rumble encourages renewed attention to the costs and funding of distance education. Growth in blended learning also opens up new areas for research, among others.

Against this background, the bulk of current research, as noted earlier, is focused on such micro-level areas as online learning communities, instructional design for online learning, student characteristics and learner retention. The prolific amount of research in these and similar areas should be familiar to those working in the online distance field and, academic journals are well populated with articles of this nature. Perhaps those of us who work in this field need to ask ourselves why this imbalance exists? The answer isn't apparent, but it's a question worth thinking about. In many parts of the world, macro-level research is critical to help build and improve online distance education systems for economic and social development. Many other examples are given as to where new research is imperative.

It is impossible in this short review to represent the breadth and depth of the chapters in this volume. Suffice it to say at this point that there is a cornucopia of recommendations for research agendas or projects throughout the chapters. Journal editors as well as faculty, who research and teach in online distance education, may find that this book increases their awareness of the research gaps. Further, combining topics or questions from the different areas has the potential to inspire entirely new lines of research.

This volume is an eye-opener, and it should be on the desk or device of every distance education researcher and student, particularly since the online PDF version is free for download. I think it's safe to say that it will serve the field of online distance education studies well for many years to come.

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