

# Global Perspectives in Open and Distance Learning and Open Learning Resources

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It is widely recognized today that technology is playing a critical role in preparation of students in higher education, with significant moves towards globalization (Mason, 1998). And although availability of the technical means for distance education course delivery such as computers for web-based courses, video, and interactive television varies from one region to another in the world, it is com-

monly accepted that distance education is becoming a reality of the educational environment not only in the US but also worldwide

The higher education community is experiencing a change in the way they conduct business. Primarily, the globalization of the world marketplace, the growth of technology, the rapid way in which new information is flooding our minds, and changing the way we work, has increasingly caused higher education to offer a more convenient method of learning to its students. Increasingly, distance education seems to be apropos for the new change occurring in higher education throughout the world. More and more distance education classes are being offered worldwide to meet the needs of students globally, whose needs require flexibility in learning.

Some factors that have contributed to the success and expansion of distance education are technological advances (particularly the Internet and the Web); that have made it possible to teach more subjects at a distance the provision of increased opportunities for updating, retraining and personal enrichment; improving the cost-effectiveness of educational resources; improving the quality of existing educational services; harmonizing inequalities between age groups; offering access to education globally; and the provision of



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fast and efficient education and training for different target groups.

Global open learning is sustained by the sharing of courseware, theories, media, equipment, materials, and human capital not solely across borders, but across continents, with different cultures, languages and modes of interaction. The influx and union of new communications systems, different media formats, methods of publications, along with the flexible learning of distance education have made open learning a global reality.

There is a distinction between distance education and open learning. The development of e-education has enabled distance education to overcome the lack of interactivity inherent in earlier forms of distance education based on correspondence and mass media. Open learning places greater emphasis on the requirements of diverse learners in diverse settings—to which providers of learning opportunities need to respond. Distance education is mutating “into a complex open education organism” (Evans, Murphy, & Haughey, 1995 p. 256), and “the ‘instructional industrialism’ of distance education ... is evolving into the global instructional corporatism of open education” (Evans et al.). Global organizations such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) have directed their attention to the cultural differences and a better understanding of the relationships between different identities by the promotion of cross-border collaboration in distance education. It is the goal of these global organizations to use effective pedagogies in distance education that acknowledge these differences. Establishment of genuine democratic forms of social and educational programs serves the interests of developing countries. Organizations now collaborate internationally in order to enrich academic environments and pro-

grams for students. According to UNESCO (2009b),

Governments worldwide are promoting more and more the use of open and distance learning as a complementary approach to traditional educational structures in order to meet the new and changing demands for education and training in the 21st century and to limit as much as possible long-term effects caused by lack of resources, demographic trends, the HIV and AIDS pandemic and military conflicts. (para. 4)

## UNESCO

UNESCO’s programs for open and distance learning are varied and include:

ICT-supported learning by co-operating with international and regional development banks, private and public sector partners and intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations such as the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), and the International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP). (UNESCO, 2009a, para. 14)

Services include teacher training, the use of new technologies, television and radio broadcasting, the expansion of geographical areas in distance learning, addressing the needs of those with disabilities, supporting minority groups, and narrowing the knowledge gap to include those students in special circumstances who are impeded to learn by distance, poverty, and the lack of organized and available education (UNESCO, 2009a).

## INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) “serves as the Global Umbrella Membership Organization in Online, Flexible and Blended Learning, including e-learning and dis-

tance education" (Re.ViCa European Virtual Campuses, ¶1, 2009). ICDE is an international organization that represents distance-learning membership throughout the world. It is associated with UNESCO, the Organization of American States, (OAS), the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and has affiliated itself with the European Commission (EC) in various projects, and is also a World Bank partner (Re.ViCa, European Virtual Campuses 2009). The goal of the ICDE is to promote education through distance education around the world, wherever it is needed. The knowledge and experience of its members assures the continuity of multicultural learning and flexible distance education by working with institutions, governments, and professionals worldwide to ensure quality in distance learning initiatives and equity in learning for all who have the need for virtual learning. The ICDE since 1938 has hosted international conferences and has disseminated information through its journal *Open Praxis*. "ICDE only accepts as institutional members educational institutions that are recognized and in good standing in their own country or region, and that conduct their educational operations in accordance with codes of ethics in distance learning" (Re.ViCa, European Virtual Campuses, 2009, para. 5).

### **COMMONWEALTH OF LEARNING AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

World leaders, meeting at the United Nations in 2000, set eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that aimed to transform the condition of humankind in the twenty-first century. "These goals break down into 21 quantifiable targets that are measured by sixty indicators and were adopted by 189 nations and signed

by 147 heads of state and governments during the UN millennium Summit in Sept 2000 and are as follows:

- Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education
- Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women
- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality
- Goal 5: Improve maternal health
- Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
- Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability
- Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development (United Nations Development Program, 2005, para. 2)

Goal 8 addressed a global partnership for development, and this includes education inclusive of the use of technology. These goals now guide the policies of governments and the priorities of development agencies. As its president, John Daniel, has noted (in Khan, 2005), "The Commonwealth of Learning is the only international intergovernmental agency that focuses exclusively on using technology to expand the scope and scale of human learning. It operates on the premise that knowledge is the key to individual freedom and to cultural, social and economic development" (para. 2).

The COL helps governments develop policies that make education sustainable and that expand learning and works in partnership with other international organizations working on the MDGs. The COL's achievements focus on technology and places special emphasis on open and distance learning (ODL) because of its demonstrated effectiveness in providing sustainable education to those at a distance and those that are at a disadvantage to an education and learning.

## **COL AND THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY FOR SMALL STATES OF THE COMMONWEALTH**

"The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) is an initiative of the education ministers of the 32 small countries that account for two thirds of Commonwealth member states. They are coordinating the development of a Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC)" (COL, 2009). This initiative spans the world in providing for education in the following countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Belize, Botswana, Cyprus, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Kiribati, Lesotho, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Namibia, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Swaziland, The Bahamas, The Gambia, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Tuvalu, Vanuatu (COL, 2009).

## **OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES**

The key to teaching more for less is the sharing of knowledge and resources. The following are open source initiatives that are making global open learning a success, paving the way for paradigm changes in how we learn and teach. Educational institutions in developing countries generally do not have the finances for large scale development of course materials, but if all the institutions contribute and share in the development of materials, then great strides can be made. This is the philosophy of open educational resources.

Open educational resources (OER) are digitized materials that are offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning, and research. OER are extremely important for assisting developing nations to get online programs up and running easily and quickly—and within the small budget that they are often working with. (Online and Distance Learning, 2009, para. 1)

The use of ICT in online learning, the use of learning systems such as Moodle, and the socially interactive tools available by Web 2.0, aids the mission of distance learning.

## **COL INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN TEMPLATE**

COL has developed a template for instructional design that helps content developers convert their subject matter expertise into learning materials. It helps authors incorporate ODL instructional design techniques into their learning texts. Created in just over a year and tested in many countries and institutions with feedback from many instructional designers, this template is truly a collaborative effort. The techniques of open and distance learning give farmers the know-how to improve their livelihoods and rural women the knowledge to raise a healthy family. School nets create communities of practice among teachers and give students access to the best materials. E-learning and the knowledge media are gradually enriching the curriculum for all universities.

## **COL AND WIKI EDUCATOR**

The COL launched Wiki Educator in 2006 to aid in the task of creating instructional materials that are free and could help in the development of online classes at no cost to the students and the organization that would utilize them. Wiki educator is a community of learning, supported by members in remote locations offering free content and free working space to educators and students worldwide. Wiki Educators' growth has been very rapid, with 8,400 members (Wiki educator, 2009). "All materials submitted to Wiki Educator are licensed under the Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 2.5 copyright license, which permits copying, editing and free reuse of the materials, with attribution" (Wiki Educator and Floss4edu, para. 3, 2009).

## WIKI EDUCATOR'S LEARNING4CONTENT

This program is focusing on the development of free content instructional materials for learning and training and is a growing initiative among educators and instructors of distance education. Participants are asked to provide a lesson of free content, which is building a library of open source learning materials (Wikipedia, 2009).

## OPEN COURSEWARE CONSORTIUM

The Open Courseware Consortium is a collaboration of more than 200 higher education institutions and associated organizations from around the world creating a broad and deep body of open educational content using a shared model. (Open Courseware Consortium, ¶ 1, 2009)

The Open Courseware Consortium is an organization that aims to share resources in learning among instructors and teachers to promote the availability of resources and the collaboration of learning. This consortium focuses on the growth of the individual instructor and the learner by expanding educational information through new and knowledge-infused materials that can be shared by many institutions and allow people worldwide a greater opportunity for learning at a reduced cost to all.

## CREATIVE COMMONS

Creative Commons (CC) is a nonprofit organization. Everything created, including the software, is free. CC allows the creation and use of materials to be remixed and reused freely and legally. "Creative Commons provides free tools that let authors, scientists, artists, and educators easily mark their creative work with the freedoms they want it to carry" (Kaufman Foundation, 2009, para. 8). CC can be used

to change copyright terms from "All Rights Reserved" to Some Rights Reserved."

## GLOBAL LEARNING OBJECTS BROKER EXCHANGE (GLOBE)

GLOBE is a project of the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching, (Merlot). Its focus is to advance and sustain educational initiatives by developing a model of technology services and tools that will enhance learning by providing instructors, institutions, and students quality online services, resources, and materials that enhance learning through technology. GLOBE was created to provide a shared network of these quality resources that could be shared by all participants who are a member of the GLOBE alliance. Partnership benefits can reduce the cost of searching for online materials and resources through the pooling of this knowledge into a shared distributed network and federated searches. The founding members of the GLOBE alliance were: the ARIADNE Foundation in Europe, Education Network Australia, EduSource Canada, MERLOT (United States), and National Institute of Multimedia Education (Japan). These organizations have agreed to work collaboratively to improve education in K-12, vocational and higher learning throughout the world (Merlot, 2009).

## GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT LEARNING NETWORK

The Global Development Learning network (GDLN) was created by the World Bank. "It is a partnership of over 120 recognized global institutions (Affiliates) in over 80 countries that collaborates in the design of customized learning solutions for individuals and organizations working in development" (GDLN, 2009). Some affiliates are the Asian Institute of Management, the Ethiopian Civil Service College,

the Islamic Development Bank, and Pontificia Universidad Católica of Peru.

GDLN specializes in the design of instruction and materials that are specific to the needs of each group regardless of their worldwide location. The pooling of expertise and knowledge as well as the sharing of these ideas through affiliate meetings and brainstorming sessions allows for more than 1,000 learning sessions a year. This educational endeavor, linking resources, knowledge, and materials, is what the future of distance education looks like. In many parts of the world this is the only way to achieve an equitable and sustainable education.

The Open Educational Resources movement has become a vital new area for individual and institutional collaboration. The availability and sharing of knowledge and materials among different nations, as well as the open transfer of educational technology, learning theories, and instructional design utilizing ICTs and ODLs, is transcending learning across borders. The collaborating efforts of international organizations, open access platforms, availability of open source materials, and programs to eradicate poverty are developing very rapidly and are paving the way for global education. Barriers to global education, such as disparity in economic and political development, different languages of instruction, time differences, credit transferability, mutual recognition of diplomas and degrees, differences in quality and level of computer equipment, access, connectivity; and the increasing cost of education with the downturn in the economy, are all great challenges that world organizations are addressing to make schooling available for all.

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