

BOOK REVIEW

Lucy Green, *Book Review Editor*

Distance Education: Statewide, Institutional, and International Applications: Readings From the Pages of Distance Learning Journal, **Compiled by Michael Simonson**

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Distance Education: Statewide, Institutional, and International Applications: Readings From the Pages of Distance Learning Journal, compiled by Michael Simonson (Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2013, 210 pages, \$45.99)

INTRODUCTION

Although we do not suffer from lack of information in today's professional world, thanks to an increasing number of research and practice journals it has become harder to find relevant information that will fit our needs. This equally applies to educators, researchers, and practitioners, who are particularly interested in distance learning/education applications both

nationally and internationally. With *Distance Education: Statewide, Institutional, and International Applications*, Michael Simonson has curated a worthy resource addressing these focus areas by compiling a selection of articles from the *Distance Learning* journal.

Distance Learning has contributed four issues a year to the field of distance education since 2004. Articles are written by practitioners for the practitioners. As the editor of the journal, Michael Simonson, an internationally known scholar in the area of instructional technology and distance education and author of several books on distance education, contributes to the body of work on distance education literature by compiling what he claims are the best and most important 24 articles from the journal into three sections: state-based, institu-

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tion-based, and international applications of distance education. He aligns the purpose of the book with that of the journal, which is to provide leaders, practitioners, and decision makers with applicable information in distance learning and teaching.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

In Simonson's own words, distance education is defined as "institutionally-based formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive communications technologies are used to connect students, teachers, and resources for learning" (Simonson, p. vii), which is embraced by the article authors in this book and by many others in the field. However, this definition takes on distinctive layers for statewide, institution-based, and international applications. For example, at the state level, virtual schools and state networks become the means of distance education for both student learning and teacher preparation for K-12 education. Virtual schools are presented as a solution for addressing equity in access and unequal quality of education.

When the focus moves from state-level applications to institutions, intent for distance education changes slightly (though the premise stays the same): accessibility, convenience, and availability. Community colleges and universities desire to go beyond their physical boundaries, reach more students, and provide 21st century education to their students. Likewise, military institutions aim to keep their personnel up-to-date with current knowledge and skills, regardless of where personnel are located. Finally, at the international level, conversation about distance education becomes more diverse, ranging anywhere from radio broadcasting in developing countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, to online education as a change agent for higher education, and still further on to collaboration between countries in a region/continent as in the example of Cyprus or Turks and Caicos Islands.

PART I: STATE-BASED AND STATEWIDE APPROACHES TO DISTANCE EDUCATION

Six of the seven articles in this section highlight two major themes for state-based and statewide approaches to distance education: statewide communication networks (Iowa, Nebraska, Alabama, and California) and virtual schools (Florida, Alabama, and Georgia). Fiber-optic communication networks as in Iowa (Article 1) enable secondary and postsecondary schools to use video streaming to make quality courses and qualified teachers more accessible for students across the state. Alabama's ACCESS network (Article 6) is another success story for the use of distance learning applications in response to failing school systems.

Virtual schools are synonymous with distance learning at secondary level education in the United States because these offer more courses and flexibility to the disadvantaged such as at-risk, homebound students, or students in small or rural schools. As successful examples, Florida (Article 2) and Georgia (Article 5) are examined. Florida is now home to one of the largest virtual schools in the United States. There is much to learn from Florida in terms of how it serves the needs of students in middle and high schools and how it manages its virtual school system. The Georgia case also demonstrates how state-funded Georgia Virtual School makes college board-approved advanced placement courses, language courses, and other subjects more accessible to public school students, as well as private and home-schooled students. This case highlights how access to these courses translates to access to highly qualified teachers, who are specifically trained for online teaching. Western Governors University (Article 3) is the only higher education case in this section due to the support it received from the governors of 19 western states during its establishment. As a completely online university, it uniquely offers competency-based degree programs for professional students, in which pass-

ing a course means “the student has demonstrated competency at a grade equivalent of B or better” for cross-comparison with other higher education institutions (Eastmond, p. 30).

PART II: INSTITUTION-BASED APPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The 10 articles in this section provide examples of the applications of distance learning and teaching at varying levels of schooling such as elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions as well as government and military institutions. Distance education at the elementary and secondary level is demonstrated in the cases of Florida’s Nassau County (Article 9) and Missouri School District in Kansas City (Article 14). The purpose of the Nassau Virtual School was to extend educational opportunities to all students whereas motivation for adopting districtwide distance education in Missouri School District came from the need to transform a school system with a failing district profile. NASA’s Digital Learning Network (Article 15) is presented as a supplemental distance learning resource to conventional K-16 classrooms, a model for integrating NASA’s educational resources into inquiry-based science teaching.

In the opening article of this section, Johnson (Article 8) explains the failure story of University of Illinois’ (UI) Global Campus, a completely online branch of UI, from the perspective of diffusion theory. This article is important for the book and for distance education literature in that we also need to hear about what does not work in distance education efforts. In contrast to this article, Virtual Campus at the International Academy of Design and Technology-Online (Article 16) was highlighted as a working example of a virtual campus added to a university system. Similarly, collaboration between a state’s community colleges flourished with the Virtual College of Texas (Article 13) in Texas. College of Central Florida (CCF) case (Article

10) offers a hybrid case of community college and university. Starting as a junior college in 1957, CCF evolved into a sustaining and growing online education provider with online enrollment increasing from 712 to 6,886 in ten years.

Finally, distance education efforts of the United States military are addressed with two articles (Articles 11 and 17). Both articles emphasize how distance education programs are critical in maintaining U.S. Army and U.S. Navy personnel development—especially at a time when military personnel are dispersed around the world. These two articles join other school-based cases in this book to state that successful development and continuation of distance education programs rely on the support and leadership of administration.

PART III: INTERNATIONAL APPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

This section presents a variety of distance education applications around the world spanning three continents: Africa, Europe, and South and Central America. Three featured articles by Banza Nsomwe-a-nfunkwa describes challenges in and barriers to distance learning in Africa’s Republic of Congo (Article 18); and presents how distance education through radio broadcasting and supplemental resources can offer education and improve quality of life to the rural people of Congo (Articles 19 and 20). On another continent, Turks and Caicos Islands (Article 23) and Belize (Article 24), as developing countries, suffer from similar issues: access to basic education, lack of technology and financial resources, and a lack of vision or strategy. Despite these challenges, these countries still perceive distance education as an economical solution for improving education systems and giving equal access to the same quality of education to all. These articles remind those of us who are fortunate to have access to abundant resources, that conversation around distance education is not

always about using the latest technology but sometimes using whatever is available to advance education one step further. The section concludes with cases from Italy (Article 21) and Cyprus (article 22) that describe institution-based and countrywide applications of distance education in Europe.

CONCLUSION

As with any book, *Distance Education: State-wide, Institutional, and International Applications* has some shortcomings. For example, both the table of contents and the page footers indicate the volume and issue number of each article. However, the book could have benefited from including the publication year of the articles in footers, which would have given an easy time reference to the reader. In addition, looking at the entire index of *Distance Learn-*

ing journal since 2004, there are other articles such as “Delivering Blended Learning into Europe’s Largest Organization” (DL, 4-2),” which could have enhanced the breadth of coverage in this book.

There are many books that discuss tools, technology, and methods for distance education—and they all have merit. However, practitioners and researchers need access to first-hand accounts of how distance education is applied at different levels of formal education and training; what challenges are encountered, what works and what does not. As a compilation of cases written by practitioners for practitioners, this book offers state-based, institution-based, and international applications of distance education in one place. Finally, readers have access to the contact information of all the authors for future inquiries and collaboration.