

BOOK REVIEW

Lucy Green, *Book Review Editor*

Trends and Issues in Distance Education: International Perspectives (2nd ed.), **by Lya Visser, Yusra Visser, Ray Amirault, and Michael Simonson**

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INTRODUCTION

As a university faculty member who teaches educational leaders in P–12 and higher education settings, I recognize the growing importance of distance education in both contexts. Given the increased globalization and utilization of technology in our society I anticipate distance education will continue to expand. Therefore, I reviewed *Trends and Issues in Distance Education: International Perspectives* (2nd ed.), by Visser, Visser, Amirault, and Simonson while considering its use in my teaching of educational leaders. This text certainly resonated with me based on my experience as an academic and as a distance

educator. Briefly, it exceeded my expectations. I begin this review with a summary of the book and will conclude with some quotes and ideas that I found most useful, along with some minor criticisms.

SUMMARY

This book is the collaborative effort of four editors and over 30 authors. It explores issues and conceptualizations of practice and research in an increasingly globalized and technological world. Although I do not know any of the authors, their talent and knowledge shines through in this book. The chapters were well organized and the inclusion of reflective

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questions, resources for further exploration and references are very useful and informative. I find this to be one of the strengths of the book.

The chapters of the book have been written to help learners look beyond the boundaries of their own environment and to increase understanding and appreciation for different cultures, circumstances, learners, and leaders in a variety of contexts. This book truly covers the broad spectrum of distance education, as stated by the authors. The coverage of the distance education history and challenges in Brazil, Portugal, Mozambique, Malaysia, and in settings such as refugee camps and prisons gives important insight into the breadth of distance education across the globe.

CRITIQUE

The book is divided into four separate sections. Section I explores some of the key trends and issues related to the distance education field globally. This section is comprised of six chapters and covers international research, a vision for a new learning landscape, trends and issues facing distance education, and obstacles and opportunities in distance education in higher education international settings.

The opening section on perspectives on global trends and issues in distance education begins strongly: "Effective learning environments, including those in distance paradigm, acknowledge individual differences in contexts, motivate the student by mindfully engaging learners through complex yet authentic tasks, and what information overload through chunking, provide hands-on activities, and encourage student reflection" (p. 6). Despite the potential and opportunities provided by distance learning, the authors accurately note that quality has taken a backseat to quantity in distance education. This is supported by research that discusses how online learning environments frequently mimic the conventional classroom. This is certainly a concern and challenge as we move forward.

There were a number of other points that I found to be relevant and important to readers considering this text.

First, one recurring theme within various chapters is that courses are overwhelmingly created by and for the dominant English-speaking cultures of the world and embody elements of the dominant culture. This is an important consideration as educational opportunities expand through distance education for all policy makers, practitioners, and researchers. For practicing and emerging researchers, the suggested research and discussion of current questions for the field that are found in the first chapter are extremely useful. Another thought-provoking position was the consideration for how international distance learning contributes to improving our world and increasing meaningful learning networks around the globe. Although introduced in Section I, this is a recurring theme throughout the text. Chapters 3, 7, 14, and 15 are essential reading this area.

Section II is divided into four chapters that focus on applied distance education initiatives in diverse settings. It covers the American experience with virtual schools, interactive radio instruction in developing countries, e-learning in Portugal, and distance education in Mozambique. Chapter 7 provides fundamental information for policy makers and educational leaders considering virtual offerings. It also outlines information on standards for quality programs, definitions related to online learning, and background. This information is of use to beginners, but needs to be supplemented with more current literature. For example, the most recent research that is used is from 2008. This is evident in the discussion of standards established by the North American Council for Online Learning, which changed its name to reflect an international focus in late 2008 (International Association for K–12 Online Learning (iNACOL). Chapter 8 on interactive radio was fascinating. It is important to consider that some places do not have the infrastructure for digital learning. Interactive radio instruction (IRI) is one method that has served

as an effective, low-cost, and large-scale distance education mechanism for 35 years. Although not directly aligned, I felt the chapter on Mozambique gave relevance to this method of instruction. Another highlight from this chapter, which is undoubtedly relevant worldwide, was pointed out in the following quote: “What appears to be lacking for now is coherence between the vision of learning, the strategy for achieving it, and the practice in the field” (p. 152).

Section III is divided into six chapters that discuss distance education in universities and other formalized higher education settings. These chapters cover the impact of e-learning on universities, the relationship between practice and research in distance education, globalization of higher education, challenges and opportunities in distance education support systems, personal learning environments in distance education, and metacognition in distance learning: the Nelson-Narens framework. Of the four sections, Section III resonated with me as a faculty member the most, although readers will undoubtedly make different connections based on their own experiences.

Chapter 11 is a must-read for anyone working in higher education. Although littered with strong arguments and deep thoughts, two quotations stand out; “As any historical account of the institution across eight centuries will attest, the university has been an entity both changing, and changed by, seismic world changes.” (p.166) and “in that sense, the question can be answered, not by questioning whether or not the institution’s educational model will be permanently changed by e-learning, but rather by recognizing that the institution will once again be required to adapt and change in order to ensure its continued success within a new historical reality” (p. 166). Amirault goes on to question whether universities wish to lead and control this change process or passively wait while change is thrust upon them.

Section IV is divided into five chapters that look at distance education in the workplace and nonformal settings. E-learning at the workplace in Malaysia, distance learning in

aviation, the use of wikis, formalized learning spaces for refugee youth, and European perspectives on distance learning in prisons are all covered here. This is a strong section that expands our thinking about education in contexts outside of traditional structures. When we consider lifelong learning, we are coming to a greater understanding that it exists beyond traditional classroom instruction. This is evident in the selected examples from manufacturing and aviation. While I found information on the use of wikis important, this particular chapter felt out of place. It seems that it would have been better served as a transition from the first four sections into the section on distance education in the workplace and in nonformal settings. The book then concludes with chapters on learning spaces in refugee camps and prisons. These chapters broadened my understanding of learning environments where distance education is useful.

CONCLUSION

This is an eye-opening and essential read for anyone interested in global distance education. This book gives a general overview of distance education covering concepts, trends, strategies, and obstacles. Part of the draw of this text is that it discusses distance education beyond the geographical, cultural, and social American context. Given an increasingly globalized society, this international perspective is incredibly important and undervalued. While this book could be read cover to cover, as I did, I envision using this text as a resource to engage in targeted conversations with my students, expanding their understanding of distance education. While it is not possible to provide an exhaustive review of all international perspectives in one book, this book successfully opens the mind to the experiences and possibilities of distance education around the globe.

From my perspective, this book has a number of excellent quotes, citing important research and case studies in distance education. I also appreciated the implication that we

must move beyond technology tools when examining distance education and focus on bigger questions. The stated purpose of this book is to educate students studying about distance education as well as for practitioners and researchers. Based on my experience in each of these roles, I believe they have successfully achieved this purpose.

REFERENCE

- Visser, L. (2012). *Trends and issues in distance education: International perspectives*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.