

BOOK REVIEW

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Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World, by Hilary Perraton

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Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World, by Hilary Perraton. (228 pp., Routledge, London, 2000)

A critical analysis of the mode, rate, and scale at which distance education efforts have been implemented in countries of the south, Perraton's *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World* is an important part of the Routledge Series in Distance Education. The book follows works in the series that explore similar questions: *Opening Education* (Evans & Nation, 1996) and *Globalising Education: Trends and Applications* (Mason, 1998). The focus in *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World*, however, is less philosophical; rather, it concentrates squarely on the pragmatic realities that either spur or inhibit distance education efforts in the third world.

Far from being hopelessly optimistic, lauding the benefits of open and distance learning (ODL) on their theoretical merits alone, the

book presents a realistic description of ODL efforts. Perraton's examples illustrate what has and, seemingly more often, what has not worked. Although the author offers a number of cases of ODL efforts as they exist in various developing nations, the book is neither merely a series of case studies nor a nation-by-nation summary. Instead, its thematic approach allows readers to keep in mind the broader aspects of ODL, letting the national host or the particular project serve as the backdrop rather than the focus.

In his introductory chapter, subtitled, "Golden goose or ugly duckling," Perraton highlights the need for and the contradictory views of ODL. Perraton also provides a summary and table of world education statistics, which show that in developing nations the demand for education far exceeds the ability to meet it. The author's opening chapter wisely cautions against comparisons of quality and efficacy of traditional versus distance learning,

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a warning he returns to a number of times. The introduction closes with common sense definitions of open learning and distance education, as well as what is meant by the terms “south,” “third world,” and “developing nation.” Perraton does not belabor any point and uses concise language to make his meanings clear, thus establishing the lucid style found throughout the book.

The four chapters following the introduction address distance education in the contexts of nonformal education, traditional secondary education, teacher education, and tertiary programs. The reasons to use distance learning in these contexts has been and continues to be clear: Developing nations often lack capacity—human, technological, structural, and logistical—to accommodate the overwhelming need and demand for education. Where this need exists in many parts of the world, building expansive institutions simply is not feasible. The likelihood of success increases when initiatives keep costs low, develop human capacity, and maintain official and public approval.

Yet, as Perraton writes, a majority of ODL projects in developing nations have not been sustained because they fail along the three dimensions just listed: cost, personnel, and support. Although projects in places such as Western Africa, Pakistan, and Kenya have succeeded in delivering distance education to its rural or under-educated citizens, the author notes the history “is one of pilots that did not develop, ... groups that never became institutionalised, and a rural way of life that still lacks educational resources” (p. 30). Even among the programs that have made a difference, there is some question as to their continued success and influence given current funding structures that rely heavily on aid from foreign donors (a recurrent theme).

Perraton asserts that ODL has not been fruitful as a means to achieve formal secondary schooling. Any education offered outside the traditional classroom tends to be seen as less desirable. As a result, the enrollment consists largely of students who tend not to have

academic skills, which results in lower grade-level pass rates.

Where pass rates do increase substantially is in distance-based teacher education programs. Using ODL as a means to educate teachers also seems to be achieved at lower costs than traditional alternatives. By far, the greatest need in developing countries is not for more schools (although that need exists), but for more trained teachers. Trying to achieve the goal of attaining universal primary education with qualified teachers in classrooms has proved all but impossible. The desire to move into better paying jobs, the ravages of HIV/AIDS, and the inability of existing institutions to handle a large number of teacher-trainees compounds the shortage. It seems that distance education may be the key to augmenting the teacher corps. Perraton uses examples from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and other parts of Africa to illustrate how different systems approach teacher shortages. The difficulty lies in establishing a relevant curriculum and building an administrative structure that can handle the scale at which such programs must operate to be effective and efficient.

While completion rates tend to be low for students enrolled in other distance-based four-year higher education degree programs, the number of students enrolled in them tends to be at a scale far greater than what can be accommodated on any given campus. Although the rise of open learning institutions and the development of distance learning at traditional universities has given it a new legitimacy, Perraton laments that the promise of greatly expanded college education has not been realized due to the low pass rates. Achieving quality in distance education and among open learning institutions remains a challenge.

Following his discussion and analysis of cases related to the various curricular initiatives, the book addresses the important issues of cost, technology, globalization, political economy, and legitimacy. The relevance of economic considerations is keen in developing nations. Distance education is often seen as a

cost-saving measure: it is surely less expensive to print modules or make cassette recordings than it is to build schools, but the savings of infrastructure do not necessarily translate into an overall economic advantage, as Perraton illustrates. The chapter closes with an interesting statement that although cost-per-student may be lower in general, the cost-per-graduate may meet or exceed what is currently seen in traditional educational institutions.

Any considerations of cost would of course include delivery mechanisms. Although discussed throughout the book, Perraton devotes an entire chapter specifically to technology. Examining broadcasting and teleconferencing tools, Perraton uses cases to exemplify how they have been used. Other projects have implemented mixed media, using a combination of print and radio or television broadcasts. The author also explains how computers and satellites are being used, such as in the case of the African Virtual University, a World Bank initiative. In other chapters, the book describes “old fashioned” technologies such as radio, print, and cassettes that can still, as Perraton claims, achieve knowledge gains. He warns, though, about the sustainability and accessibility of technology-driven projects, pointing out social and cultural risks.

Rather than examining the ideological issues of the globalization debate and its impact on culture, Perraton examines global forces shaping—or trying to shape—ODL in developing nations. These include funding agencies, international agencies, universities in developed countries, and invisible colleges, “an informal nexus of people with shared experience and a common commitment to the perceived advantages of open and distance learning” (p. 168). Sponsor-driven program development seems to be less influential in the shaping of ODL than do national policies and perceptions (p. 176).

In his pursuant discussion of this political economy, Perraton clarifies various reasons for governmental support of ODL. Whereas some governmental officials give distance education a place because of their commitment

to equality, others focus on pragmatic concerns, seeing ODL as a way to train a workforce or simply meet public demand. Sadly, though, the transformative power of distance education is often made submissive by status-conscious power holders. These are people who perpetuate a literal or figurative caste system while giving lip service to resolving social and economic inequalities.

The issue of legitimacy is met head-on in the book’s final chapter. Perraton opens by rightly stating that educational value is difficult to measure in absolute terms. To assess legitimacy, the author looks at measures of effort, performance, adequacy, efficiency, and performance. As for effort, mass media can reach mass audiences but technologies such as radio are underused. With regard to performance, teachers in distance-based teacher education programs tend to do well, but other programs have a poor completion rate. The question of adequacy is measured in terms of meeting social and economic demands. Here, distance education has been successful when it has achieved economies of scale. Perraton measures efficiency in terms of cost. Distance education can be cost effective—and largely so—if one only looks at cost-per-student. However, once one accounts for cost-per-graduate, the advantage diminishes appreciably.

Perraton’s conclusions are not particularly encouraging. As is pointed out many times in *Open and Distance Learning in the Developing World*, the predominant social attitudes toward what constitutes a proper education, the vagaries of funding, the ambiguities of politics, the demands of the populace, and the balance of technology with cost are all factors that must be considered. As of today, it is not possible to say that ODL has made great, measurable strides sustainable over long periods of time in underdeveloped countries. Perhaps such goals are inherently unrealistic. Yet there is hope in the fact that work remains. ODL still represents a valuable, innovative approach to solving educational challenges. And, in developing nations where such challenges are evident even to the untrained observer, there is no

other place that has a greater need for the combined force of policy makers, instructional designers, and other creative, talented people to make *quality* distance education a reality.

The value of Perraton's book outweighs minor criticisms of it. While some parts are difficult to read due to the sheer volume of in-text statistics (enrollments, costs, etc.), the amount of data is impressive. What makes this more outstanding is the obvious difficulty of building cohesive tables from differentiated and incomplete statistics from around the world. Some are sure to be discouraged by the less than stellar reports, but the tone is more realistic and matter-of-fact than it is pessimistic. The number of cases cited is also impressive, though I would personally liked to have read some qualitative reports concerning individuals' experiences with ODL. The quantitative data, at least to me, is not as interesting as would be first-hand accounts of students taking distance-delivered courses in rural portions of any given developing country. Finally, and this is no fault of the author, the book could do with some updating. I am personally aware of three distance education initiatives in Malawi that were started after the book was completed

and I am sure that other countries have developed new programs as well. Perhaps we can look forward to a second edition soon.

Until one has visited a developing country and met its bright but under-resourced educators, it is tempting to devise solutions that are innovative but absolutely incorrect for the context. Reading Perraton's book might discourage some who would otherwise be hopeful about the prospects of distance education in developing nations. The conclusions presented are a sobering reminder of the economic, bureaucratic, and infrastructure challenges that characterize all ODL efforts in the south. But the success or failure of such efforts is less a matter of where they take place—Albania or Malawi or Vanuatu—and more a matter of how leaders deal with the key issues outlined by the author.

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