

BOOK REVIEW

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Cyberspace, Distance Learning, and Higher Education in Developing Countries, edited by N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba

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Cyberspace, Distance Learning, and Higher Education in Developing Countries, edited by N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004, 253 pages, \$69.00).

INTRODUCTION

That developing nations of the world have a tremendous need for scalable education is not a new problem. Factors such as the restrictive intake of students and lack of schools and teachers mean that a great majority of secondary- and tertiary-aged young people have limited opportunity to increase their skills and knowledge; they are thus left out of the local and globalized economy. For decades, distance education has existed in many parts of the world; correspondence courses in India, parts of Africa, and Asia were always much more

highly regarded than similar courses in North America. Only within the last 10 years have distance courses or degree programs earned acceptance in the United States. Ironically, the information and communication technology (ICT) tools that make scalable solutions possible in the United States and other resource-rich countries are lacking in developing nations. This is despite the fact that extending the reach of courses through distance education in those contexts helps meet an even more urgent need.

The state of efforts to educate college-aged students in low-resourced countries is discussed in *Cyberspace, Distance Education, and Higher Education in Developing Countries*, edited by N'Dri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba. Subtitled "Old and Emergent Issues of Access, Pedagogy, and Knowledge Production," the eight-chapter book is part of the International Studies in Sociology and

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Social Anthropology series (volume 94). Eight articles that originally appeared in a special issue of the journal, *African and Asian Studies*, form the book's chapters. Though seven of the eight chapters focus on Africa, the topics are varied enough to provide readers with a range of insights and perspectives. As the subtitle suggests, topics range from examining the systems that impact distance learning in developing contexts, to innovative partnerships, to issues of gender and language. Various chapters include case studies that look in detail at implementation.

Because each chapter is summarized in the editor's introduction and again via the chapters' abstracts, I only include here the title of the chapters, their author(s), and a very brief description of the chapter's topic. This review will also offer some insights on three themes found in the book: contextualization, issues related to cost, and communication methods and tools. Other major threads (not summarized here) include access to technologies, the development of online communities, demand for courses, support facilities, and the influence and role of civil society in education and ICT implementation.

OVERVIEW

The first chapter, "ICT4D: A Frontier for Higher Education in Developing Nations," authored by Royal Colle and Raul Roman, examines the role of institutions and forces that impact the implementation of ICTs (telecenters in particular) in community development programs. Following the chapter dealing with pragmatic means of reaching learners is a critical piece by Jacques Habib Sy of Senegal. Chapter 2, "Partnership in Higher Education in Africa: Communication Implications Beyond the 2000s," raises a number of important considerations concerning the hegemony of Western-influenced technology and content. Sy calls for a new breed of institutions and partnerships in Africa. Only these, he concludes, can be successful in the global economy. Three

professionals associated with the University of South Africa (UNISA) contribute to chapter 3, "Implementing the Online Learning Community in Africa: A UNISA Case Study." This chapter by J. F. Heydenrych, P. Higgs, and L. J. Van Niekerk opens by providing a brief history about UNISA and its efforts over many years to provide distance education courses to country and continent. Along with some general thoughts on the role of ICT mediated distance education, the chapter includes a case study on one Web-based course offered by the university. C. T. Schoole and T. Moja author the fourth chapter, "Pedagogical Issues and Gender in Cyberspace Education: Distance Education in South Africa." Chapter 4 includes an interesting discussion on aspects related to teaching, learning, and gender as it relates to online and computer-based educational opportunities.

The fifth chapter, "Distance Learning and Virtual Education for Higher Education in Africa: Evaluation of Options and Strategies," gives an overview of tertiary distance education, discusses issues of distance learning in sub-Saharan Africa, and focuses its analysis on important challenges that educators and institutions face as they attempt to implement ICTs for teaching and learning. In the final part of the chapter, the author, Stanely Moyo, offers a model that could perhaps increase ICT use in the region. Kouassi Yao's "The Chances for Success of the Francophone Centers for Distance Education of the GDLN Network: The Case of the Centre d'Education à Distance de Côte d'Ivoire," the shorter, sixth chapter, has three sections: a history of the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN), a recounting of the Ivory Coast's experience with a distance education center (CED-CI), and a discussion on the future CED-CI given the country's recent political turmoil. This chapter also includes a number of tables and charts with enrollment, completion, costs, and other data. Chapter 7 is the only one of the eight articles that focuses outside Africa. From Akiko Kamogawa is the contribution "Higher Education Reform: Challenges Toward a Knowledge

Society in Malaysia.” Malaysia, while a developing nation, has a government that seems to recognize its strength as its human capital, and thus desires to invest in higher education. Kamogawa’s article presents research on policy decisions in higher education as it relates to the use of ICTs. The book’s final chapter, the shortest of the book, is “Strategies for Promoting Virtual Higher Education: General Considerations on Africa and Asia.” Written by Kazuo Kuroda and Hossain Md. Shanawez, it discusses general issues related to virtual education, such as access, cost, quality, and flexibility.

THREE MAJOR THEMES

Contextualization

The issue of contextualization, or conforming instruction as much as possible to local needs and culture (however defined) is a topic that gets a good deal of attention throughout the book. Moyo’s article makes clear that “when programs are of foreign origin, questions of relevance and ethno-domination inevitably arise and must be addressed” (p. 173). Colle and Roman note that financial sustainability depends on how well the delivery mode fits local infrastructure. Sy reminds readers that the African context could actually force educated people to leave due to lack of jobs. Education, therefore, often means a weakening, rather than strengthening, of a nation. The UNISA case study describes the “Ubuntu philosophy,” a Zulu word referring to respect, human dignity, and compassion. With regard to distance learning, designers must account for this philosophy by creating courses that take others’ viewpoints into consideration and by emphasizing interactive environments.

Costs of Distance Learning

One of the greatest arguments to be made for Web-based distance education is its superior economy of scale. Rather than having to print billions of A4 pages each year to distrib-

ute by mail (as UNISA does), such materials could be delivered electronically for free. Large hostels and classrooms need not be built, as students could study in their own locale. This is at least the theory. Kuroda and Shanawez write that despite the ever-decreasing costs of ICT hardware, costs do remain, particularly with regard to network access. In countries where teachers make less than \$US100 per month, even a \$US20 per month Internet connection is enormously prohibitive. So while costs may be reduced for universities or ministries, when these costs often find their way to the consumer, they become prohibitive. Yao agrees, stating, “[delay in payment, etc.] is proof that the applicants are not successful in putting together enough resources to finance their education” (p. 205). Authors Sehoole and Moja note that the cost of design, delivery, and access are not the only factors to consider. Additional costs include equipment maintenance and training in their use. Moyo makes a number of recommendations to increase the use of ICTs in education, among which are suggestions for cost sharing by institutions and organizations. Such an arrangement would help mitigate the impact of often higher expenses.

Communication Mechanisms

A decision faced by people involved in the design and development of instruction to be transmitted to learners at a distance is what ICTs to use and how best to implement them. The book’s various articles examine many modes of communication. An important factor to consider, write Colle and Roman, is the community’s perception of the ICT tool and placement. No matter how good the mechanism, acceptance in a community is key to its success. The telecenters they describe must fit a locale both in the sense of infrastructure and culture. In the UNISA case study by Heydenrych, Higgs, and Van Niekerk, the demographic of a mobile, diverse, and globally scattered learner-base meant that instruction had to be delivered asynchronously. The tenu-

ous nature of reliance on computers is highlighted in Yao's report that some 80% of hard drives on computers used in their learning centers had to be replaced, even though video conference equipment worked well overall. The case studies in Malaysia presented by Kamogawa show a reliance on video conferencing equipment and internet access. Strong governmental support and a clear connection of ICTs to a student's economic prospects facilitates their acceptance, use, and integration.

CRITIQUE

Those who have access to a university library that has a subscription to *African and Asian Studies*, can freely download all of the book's chapters, as all appear in the 2003 printing of Volume 2, Issue 4 of that journal. In fact, the abstracts of selected chapters still retain the words "this paper" when referring to what follows. The advantage of the book format is the availability of an index, but seemingly not much else. As another reviewer noted (Rothfork, 2005), parts of the book could have been developed into something a bit more user-friendly, like having a comprehensive, categorized set of links that are currently found scattered throughout the chapters. Rothfork's compilation of a number of the links are found at the end of his own heavily editorialized review. As indicated in the book's title, the articles primarily concern ICT in higher education—there is not much mention, however, of programs used to upgrade bachelor degree holders (such as a postgraduate diploma) or provide training to teachers, most of whom hold three-year certificates. Distance education used to deliver courses for secondary students is not examined. For those looking for a view of distance education in Africa, this is an excellent resource; if one's interest lies in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South America or Southeast Asia, this book has some good generalized information, but (except for the

chapter on Malaysia), no specific case studies in those regions.

An inclusion that would have helped make the book more than a compilation of articles is some kind of transition piece that brings together "lessons learned" from each of the chapters. Though the introduction gives some unity, a critical piece that compares the efforts described by the authors, as set against mistakes or practices made by developed nations, would be valuable. Sadly, the book does not include short biographies of the chapter's authors, though the editor's many accomplishments are documented in the preface. It would be nice to read a bit more about the contributors' accomplishments and find areas of common interest, perhaps to increase networks and research opportunities.

CONCLUSION

All honest assessments of ICT in areas of low economic development necessarily describe regions where Internet and computer access is extremely limited, government and institutional commitment to technology mediated education is lacking, human capacity to maintain ICT is short, and technology literacy levels are low, even among academics. After seeing these facts repeated multiple times in articles, chapters, or books—including the book here reviewed—one might conclude that forging ahead with Internet-based distance education is a futile endeavor. Having worked on a project that attempted to produce a distance program in a developing country, I can vouch for the fact that a number of seen and unforeseen factors can have a deleterious impact on project success. However, despite the hardships, one cannot measure success only in terms of large enrollments and degrees or diplomas issued. Where I think the efforts matter, and where the authors of the majority of the chapters in *Cyberspace, Distance Learning, and Higher Education in Developing Countries* agree, is in the effort to try different techniques and methods based on the

context. What one cannot argue against is the need to close a very real digital divide. Sy speaks to the changes, writing, "Africa is yearning for new and bold partnerships that would reconcile her with her past, present, and future destiny with ICTs as major tools for social change, knowledge brokerage, and equalization" (p. 87). As we watch the arduous day-to-day process for change, our job continues to be providing support and encouragement to the community of academics and

entrepreneurs who could join forces to make progress. The alternative is to travel a road with bridges to nowhere.

REFERENCE

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