

Distance and Blended Learning in Asia. 2010.

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Distance and Blended Learning in Asia provides a comprehensive overview of the current practices of open distance learning (ODL) and information and communication technology (ICT) in Asian education and training. The book's analysis includes all the Asian countries ranging from China in the north-east to Saudi Arabia in the middle-east. In this book, the authors draw heavily on theory, research, and practice in Asia to identify the opportunities and challenges of ODL and ICT in all sectors of Asian education and training. According to the authors, the intended audience for Distance and Blended Learning in Asia includes policymakers, planners, managers, practitioners, researchers, and students who are interested in international ODL and ICT programs and initiatives.

In twelve chapters, the authors lead us through the range of ODL and ICT initiatives that are taking place across Asia. The first half of the book is focused on describing these developments while the second half examines ODL and ICT issues that are still problematic (e.g., leadership, quality assurance, staff training, and research). In the following section, a brief overview of each chapter is provided, followed by a critique of the two major sections of the book.

Chapter 1, "Technology, E-readiness and E-learning" provides extensive data on the state of technology access for Asian countries in reference to the number of mobile phones, Internet usage, and networked readiness access. There is an interesting section in this chapter that describes the impact of culture on the use of technology in educational contexts. For example, in some Asian cultures words are less important than context. Meaning is inferred "through tone of voice, use of silence, facial expression, body language, and the status of the speaker" (p.15). Many of these social cues are absent in asynchronous online conferencing, thus presenting communication challenges for some Asian students and teachers.

Chapter 2, "Open Schooling, SchoolNets and ICT Integration in Classrooms" focuses on opportunities and challenges of ICT integration in K to 12 schools in Asian countries. The authors state that the use of ICTs is helping to increase access to formal education opportunities for many students across the region but that overloaded curricula, high stakes exams (e.g., teaching to the test) and technological costs, are still presenting formidable barriers to widespread adoption. In chapter 3, "Higher Education", the authors describe the development and growth of Asia's 33 open universities, as well as selected ODL and ICT innovations that are taking place in dual-mode, blended, and cross-border institutions. There has been tremendous growth of ODL in Asian higher education over the past couple of decades but concerns have also been voiced about the

sustainability, organization, and quality of these initiatives.

Chapter 4, “Lifelong Learning, Workplace Training, Professional Development and Non-Formal Adult and Community Development” demonstrates how ODL and ICT can be harnessed in Asian countries to provide lifelong learning opportunities in both the corporate and public sectors if government policy frameworks are developed and gender issues are fully addressed. Chapter 5, “New Providers and New Markets” extends the conversation about how a country’s economic and social success is closely linked to equitable and ongoing (lifelong) learning opportunities. This chapter describes how virtual/cyber institutions are being developed in countries such as South Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, and China in order to increase access to formal learning and credentialing opportunities. These consortiums are often created through collaborations and partnerships with existing local and international universities.

Chapter 6, “ICT Integration In and Beyond the School” describes how K to 12 schools are integrating ICTs and related pedagogical approaches (e.g., problem-based learning, social-constructivist learning) to support student learning in and outside of the classroom.

The first half of the book definitely provides a detailed description of ODL and ICT initiatives in K to 12, higher education, and workplace contexts. I personally think that it would have been useful to combine chapters 2 and 6 as they both focus on ICT integration for K to 12 students. This would then allow for a clearer progression from K to 12 schooling (chapter 2 and 6) to higher education (chapter 3) and workplace and lifelong learning (chapter 4).

The focus of the second half of *Distance and Blended Learning in Asia* is on ODL and ICT issues that are still problematic in the region. In Chapter 7, “Instructional Design, Learner Support and Assessment in E-Learning”, the authors begin to address the challenges associated with ODL and ICT in Asian countries, which from my perspective are almost universal issues (e.g., instructional design, learner support, and assessment). For example, with regards to assessment the authors stress the need for “frequent opportunities for active and interactive learning, self-assessment, formative assessment and feedback on performance” (p.130).

Chapter 8, “Leadership for Educational Change and Innovation” emphasizes the important role that leadership and policy development play in terms of creating, directing, and sustaining innovation and growth. Schleicher (2006) states that success usually goes to those countries and institutions that are open to change and swift to adapt and that this process is often facilitated through strong leadership and strategic planning. For example, leadership and government policies in South Korea that have focused on knowledge-building through ODL and ICT approaches have played a major role in dramatically increasing the country’s productivity and long-term economic growth (South Korea and Afghanistan had the same GDP in the early 1960’s).

Chapter 9, “Quality Assurance and Accreditation” focuses on the issues of quality assurance and accreditation related to all providers of ODL and ICT in Asia (e.g., K to 12, higher education, corporate, technical and vocational training). Daniel (2007) observes that there is ample evidence to suggest that ODL institutions make a huge contribution to access and equity of education but that there are often concerns about the quality of the learning experience that is being provided. In response to this concern, Chapter 10, “Staff Training and Development” documents the challenges related to training and staff development in Asia for distance and blended learning activities. The authors also provide several models and strategies to systematically address the current problems and deficiencies.

Chapter 11, “Research, Publication and Translating Research into Practice” stresses the need for ODL and ICT research to be conducted by Asian researchers, who have ‘first hand’ experience and understanding of the cultural contexts of the region. Chapter 12, “Conclusions” is very brief (only four pages) but provides a useful summary of what the authors believe to be the key lessons learned from their analysis of distance and blended learning in Asia. This list of insights ranges from the importance of developing a national vision for ODL and ICT integration to admitting and learning from failures and mistakes.

In the second half of the book, the authors have done an excellent job at documenting the key ODL and ICT issues that educators and students are currently encountering in Asia. Unfortunately, it appears that they ran out of steam for their final chapter, which is limited to a brief list of conclusions. Personally, I would have liked a more comprehensive set of conclusions and recommendations that could be used by practitioners and researchers in the fields of ODL and ICT integration.

Overall, one of Distance and Blended Learning in Asia’s major strengths is the detailed description and examination of current ODL and ICT practices in Asia. Each chapter has an extensive bibliography of publications and a separate list of related Web sites, the majority of which are by Asian authors and institutions. This book also provides a balanced coverage of these practices. On the one hand, the authors clearly demonstrate that distance education has become an indispensable part of Asia’s educational systems but on the other hand, they provide a frank assessment of the challenges facing ODL and ICT initiatives in the region (e.g., leadership, quality assurance, staff training, and research).

In terms of limitations, there are times when Distance and Blended Learning in Asia reads like an ongoing list of tables, statistics, and bulleted lists (e.g., chapter One). I appreciate the level of detail that the authors are attempting to convey. That said, I believe that if the authors had interspersed the quantitative data with case studies and personal narratives that the book would have been more compelling and engaging to read. In addition, the over-reliance on statistical data, collected over the past couple of years, raises concerns about how current and relevant this book will be in the near future (almost like a snap shot in time).

I’m also curious about why the term ‘blended learning’ has been included in the title of the book? There is little in Distance and Blended Learning in Asia that contributes to our understanding of blended learning in Asia. The authors do not mention or reference blended learning in the forward to the book “a unique and comprehensive overview of open, distance learning (ODL) and information and communication technology (ICT) in Asian education and training” (p. ix) and there is only a small section in chapter 7 that is actually devoted to blended learning. It would have been useful to me if the authors had defined this concept at the outset of the book and then explained its context in Asian education and training scenarios. There are those such as Picanno (2009) who suggest that “without a clear definition, blended learning is perceived as some nebulous combination of online and face-to-face instruction” (p.8). For example, in Garrison and Vaughan’s (2008) book on Blended Learning in Higher Education they define blended learning as the “organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” (p.6).

Despite these shortcomings, I would recommend Distance and Blended Learning in Asia to graduate students and researchers who are studying international ODL and ICT programs and initiatives. The insights and lessons learned from the authors’ analysis of the Asian context will also be of interest and value to anyone involved in distance education. In his review, Bates (2009) indicates that this book provides some clear pointers for how e-learning and distance education can be applied in both developed and less economically advanced countries. Distance and Blended Learning in Asia is definitely a valuable addition to Routledge’s Open and Flexible

Learning series of books.

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