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EDITORIAL

Distance Education Technologies: An Asian perspective

A popular phrase in social science journals is "at the crossroads." It is a risky one, for so often it means "don't know where we're going." Not that this phrase applies to distance education (DE). Or does it? How clear is the road ahead for those of us who teach and learn at a distance? If we have been distance-teaching for some years, we probably feel comfortably settled in by now to a routine of online tasks, ambling down well-trodden paths as we communicate more or less efficiently with our remote students. We use email, the web, and online conferencing, and the students develop techniques for handling the media we have selected for them, for coping with their daily email spam, with lengthy text conferences by scanning just a few postings at a time, and for avoiding courses that use complex software which their domestic computer facilities do not accommodate. When we're not teaching, we conduct research to optimize current DE techniques via policy and "best practices," and we explore the possibilities of new media. We could carry on running DE like this forever as long as the student fees keep coming in, and the institutions that employ us remain content to let us.

But what if an increasing number of students were to announce that their Internet connections have become too slow and they no longer have time or funds to use them in their studies? Or that our web-based delivery methods are making the course materials impossibly slow to load and difficult to navigate? Or that email viruses are constantly crashing their computers and they can no longer cope with them? At that point we might begin to feel that DE is under threat, with course enrolments slipping and an uncertain future ahead. We would have reached one of those crossroads.

This is the decision point at which DE currently stands in Asia, where information and communication technologies (ICTs) abound and have been harnessed in countless community development projects, and where educators have become eager to apply these tools in delivering formal tuition to millions of disadvantaged learners. All of the above problems are rife in Asia, and its educators are at a crossroads as to the ICT-based methods they should use from now on. They can look westward and south, testing the web-based delivery methods on which DE is based in North America, Europe, and Australia; or they can look to their own streets and create new delivery methods, using—for example—the ubiquitous cell phone. In Asia's open universities, colleges, and training agencies, studies are taking place with respect to

numerous innovative delivery options. From 2003 to 2008, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada has initiated a major series of Asian distance learning technology projects, funded by its Pan Asia Networking (PAN) division in Singapore. These projects involve distance educators and researchers in Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Laos, Mongolia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Viet Nam, and are placing a particular emphasis on collaboration between these countries. This special issue of *Distance Education* collates, for the first time, the early conclusions of these projects, and gives a precise picture of the crossroads choice-points that DE could face elsewhere in an uncertain future.

Contents of the Special Issue

The first article, by Colin Latchem, stresses the importance of research and evaluation in the development of DE technologies. Without them, he indicates, we are constrained to imperfect uses of the media, and to repeating old mistakes with each new technology that comes along. An earlier version of the article was presented at the *International Symposium on ICT for Social Development* in Jakarta (IDRC/ASEAN Foundation, May 2006) as an agenda for Pan Asia projects to observe in pursuing research and evaluation goals. The second article discusses the results of survey and evaluation studies in the creation of a fully fledged, Western-style of DE in Bhutan. It has been natural for Bhutanese educators to embrace Western educational methods. Their modern education system was deeply influenced by Jesuit fathers from Montreal in the 1960s, and the 2003–2007 study conducted at Bhutan's Samtse College of Education gives a frank appraisal of the Institute's mixed experience with Western DE approaches: notably, the resistances it has generated, the need for training, and "numerous technical problems including difficulty of access, bandwidth, and lack of adequate technical support." The third article presents a cross-cultural study of policy and attitudes to DE in Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam. It reports that teachers and students in all three countries feel that DE can be useful in bringing formal training to women's groups and disadvantaged remote communities, but that it is seen as a second-rate substitute for face-to-face methods. Distance educators must not cease to take this powerful, universal reflex seriously. The fourth article, from Malaysia, provides a rich look at deep social and cultural factors affecting ICT-based access to knowledge in the impoverished sectors of society. Although the article is written more from an ICT and cultural perspective than from a conventional DE standpoint, it represents a crucial field of enquiry that DE must embrace if its goal to help the world's poor and needy is to be realized.

Having outlined some of the blockages at the crossroads of Asian DE, the special issue's content takes a more optimistic turn. The fifth article discusses the successful implementation of a wide array of DE methods for medical education in rural Mongolia. This project has taken some of the problems noted in the earlier Bhutan study—notably that of poor Internet connectivity—and has resolved them by means of careful web programming techniques designed locally to permit online education

in some of the world's most remote places. This editor has visited this project twice since 2003. Having sat at an online medical diagnostic terminal in the middle of the Gobi Desert, he holds those visits among the most inspiring experiences of his career. The sixth article describes a similar implementation of technology-mediated DE in the Philippines' Mindanao region. Particularly noteworthy in this project is a sensitive adherence to community development principles, and to the ideal that DE should spring from the community's own motives. If DE were routinely based on these principles, its deep and lasting social impact would be assured. The seventh article maintains this community development theme in describing how new DE methods in the Philippines are being based on the most prevalent of all modern technologies, the cell phone. Important lessons are offered for distance educators in those parts of the world where these avant-garde methods are not being applied. Finally, the current impact of ICT and DE efforts in Asia is examined in the issue's book review, and in a "reflections" interview with the leaders of the IDRC's current DE research network.

Most of the studies reported in this issue were completed by 2006. The current phase of the IDRC's commitment to DE involves a series of nine new projects running from 2005 to 2008. Known as the "PANdora" initiative (*see* http://www.pandora-asia.org), these studies are examining the obstacles confronting Asian DE as unpredictably as the demons that leapt from Pandora's Box in the Greek legend. As the articles in the current issue indicate, the road to successful innovation is fraught with such hurdles, and crossroads present themselves continually. Some of the articles illustrate what happens when one takes a "developed world" route and is forced to turn back, disillusioned by its irrelevance to local conditions. Others describe distinctive Asian trails currently under development. Underlying each of these Asian studies is compassion for the learner, and that little recalled germ found at the bottom of Pandora's Box, Hope. Distance educators in other parts of the world can learn from these Asian approaches, considering how they might breathe new life and substance into their own methods. Despite all the hurdles, persistence overcomes them, and the studies reported in this special issue demonstrate this well.

Academic Cross-currents

There are distinct practical problems in collating an international special issue of this type. Not surprisingly, language and translation difficulties are a central hurdle, all too often preventing the publication of studies outside the countries in which they were conducted. This editor has been deeply impressed by the determination with which the authors—for most of whom English is a foreign language—have met the challenge of translating their work for communication in this issue. But the work has also caught this guest editor in some interesting academic cultural cross-currents. It has been an eye-opening experience, revealing international attitudes that we should examine, in the interests of DE's continuing relevance.

Cross-cultural differences between Western and Asian scholarship have frequently been discussed (Kember, Ma, & McKaught, 2006; Moller, 2003), and

the questionable relevance of imported Western ideas in Asia-Pacific. In Ballow's words (2006), the contemporary study of Western and Asian cross-cultural differences has involved "significant discussion all around the periphery but little in-depth analysis." Biases against and a lack of interest in Asian approaches certainly persist in the DE field. Describing one of this issue's articles to a "developed world" academic, this editor was saddened to hear his opinion that it would be of little interest to the journal's readers, being restricted to "three small Asian countries." Yet those three countries (Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam) have a total population of over 100 million, twice that of Australia and Canada combined, and rural populations estimated at over 80%. Their people share a pressing need for new educational and training systems, and in all humanity their early attempts to implement DE strategies should not be dismissed as of little interest in the DE field. Maybe the problem is that "developed world" distance educators regard that field as stopping at their own borders, and have no interest in seeing it expand to more needy parts of the world. Perhaps they feel that beyond their own borders DE methods are blunt and ineffectual. Or do they fear that the conclusions of Asian DE studies might actually contradict the timeworn advice of "developed world" advisors, revealing it as outdated? The suspicious reactions of the Asian survey samples to Western DE methods, reported in this issue, certainly support the latter hypothesis.

I recently ventured an opinion along these lines at a meeting of Asian distance educators. I asked them if they felt that DE in Asia has suffered from too much Western advice. The group looked puzzled, as though I were puncturing some kind of taboo. I persisted: why do you invite Western experts, me included, to talk about web-based education at your conferences when your own evidence shows plainly that your students cannot access the web? At that point, heads nodded vigorously around the room, indicating that, from the detail in my question, they could tell it was sincere. In example after example, from China to Sri Lanka, they told me indignantly about lofty and dismissive Western academics who had visited them with nothing to say that was either new or relevant to them; who did not check if their Asian hosts were already informed on their subject matter; and who peppered their presentations with unexplained jargon terms—"behaviorism," "objectivism," "constructivism," etc.—that few in the Asian audience were likely to understand. So why do you continue to invite these Westerners to your meetings? One frank response was that Western "experts" tend to hold the key to all-important international publication, either as editors or reviewers, and are often invited as guest speakers at Asian conferences for that reason. True expertise, however, lies not merely in dispensing answers, but in identifying the right questions; and visiting the Asian context without exploring its own sophistication displays no expertise. Asian courtesy, being exquisite, is unlikely to chastise the lack of curiosity and respect shown by unquestioning academic tourists, many of whom return home without having allowed their travels to enrich them.

So what of all the theoretical approaches—the -isms and -ologies—that Western academics propound in their writings and conference presentations? None of the

writers in this issue has defended their work in terms of Western theoretical backgrounds—behaviorist strategies, constructivist philosophy. Are we to chastise and reject their work for this? I suggest not, when the work has evolved in a perfectly valid fashion without any inspiration from such official Western notions. The massive technology-based universities of India, Indonesia, and Thailand, at which some of these authors work, have developed intuitively in response to social needs rather than theoretical positions. To be honest, how many original educational practices ever truly evolved from theory anywhere? In November 2006, two young entrepreneurs, Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, sold an online service (Youtube.com), featuring a million multimedia productions created by its users, to Google.com for $1.65 billion. Translated into academic jargon, YouTube is a phenomenally successful "digital object repository" containing material that might be useful as "learning objects." Its developers made no reference to these concepts, nor to "constructivism" or "blended" media, in reporting their sale. Should we demand that the YouTube approach be described in such terms from now on? Who would listen to us?

Similarly, how genuinely crucial is it for the active involvement of Asian students in their learning to be labeled as "constructivist," as though the age-old process of student involvement somehow significantly changed with the invention of the term? Did the use of multiple educational media ever need to be described as "blended" before the Internet caused them to be marginalized? Do we really need to speak of "flexible learning" cultures as though the alternatives offer only inflexibility? With such vibrant new models as Youtube.com offering educational innovators far greater inspiration and significance, should we really demand that they be slavishly discussed in terms of standard -isms and -ologies? These can be useful shorthand for teaching about processes that a student is discovering for the first time. In the highly informed Asian educational context, however, many of our Western constructs are artificial and unremarkable, grafted on to instinctive good practice as part of an obedient academic ritual. We lay claim to these notions in our academic "models," and we dine off them all too frequently in our writings and conference presentations, without ever asking ourselves if they truly add anything to understanding.

What an opportunity a special issue about Asian DE offers, therefore, to take a positive, inclusive approach that promotes non-Western studies in their own right. Working full time in Asia during an extended leave of absence from my Canadian university has taught me that encouragement means more than providing Asian colleagues with appropriate advice. It also means being open-minded in accepting deviations from Western reporting conventions. The authors of these articles, though prominent figures in their own educational and political cultures, are not all trained in the analytical techniques of the West, nor do they share the same reporting styles and uses of English. As editor of this theme issue, I might have reworded some of the diffident forms of expression that are traditional in Bhutan, and I could have expurgated some of the natural eloquence of the Mongolian and Filipino authors. I could also have rejected articles that do not exhaustively follow the English academic culture's empirical rules, and which tend to leave the statistical

basis of their conclusions to the imagination. Instead I have chosen to allow occa-sional departures from conventional style, and to let the articles speak for themselves despite them. I believe this approach has provided a forum allowing the enthusiasm of the reports to speak from one culture to another.

The natural response of Western academics to such an approach is that we cannot allow our own academic culture's standards to be compromised. In educational publishing, they will argue, we need to preserve conventional frameworks and meth-ods in order to protect the field's integrity. But whose field is DE anyway? Is it exclu-sively the terrain of Western thinkers, or is it sufficiently mature to accept "incursions" from elsewhere? In these days of insurgency and counterinsurgency, it is sometimes difficult to tell who the real intruders are anyway! To Western educa-tors, the writers who do not parrot the usual Western terms and concepts may seem to be invaders posing external threats to the field. Others may feel that it is the West-ern scholars who are the real nuisance, for seeking to impose their ideas, models, and language on cultures that have been functioning perfectly well without them. Indeed, I now understand in depth why an angry academic in the Dominican Republic described Western ideas to me many years ago as "academic imperialism." In seeking to resolve this conundrum for the current issue of *Distance Education*, I have reduced it to this question—which is preferable: to take the opportunity to look at a new set of international collaborative reports that do not in every case emulate Western approaches, or to suppress them until their authors have fully complied with Western academic expectations? I have chosen the former route. It is not as if the different academic disciplines of the West share the same reporting rules and style anyway!

East Meets West

Now for the good news! Despite the regrettable lack of interest in "small Asian countries" exhibited by one Western academic, mentioned earlier, and despite certain expectations that Asian writers should couch their work in Western jargon, other distance educators appear intrigued by the work of their Asian counterparts, and give it their wholehearted encouragement. I can think of no better way of expressing this support to the authors of this theme issue than by departing from convention and quoting from some of the anonymous international reviews of their *Distance Education* articles. The article from Cambodia, Laos, and Viet Nam has been described as:

> timely and important—DE is new in these countries and so the survey data provide an important baseline of information … For general readers, it serves as a reminder that in many parts of the world high-speed access is still a dream, and with it, the more cutting edge applications of DE.

The article about Malaysian homeworkers is described as a similar "reality check … It is extremely interesting and valuable to have such a detailed analysis of the kinds of people ICT-based projects are designed to address." The Bhutan article is well received as providing similar important reminders about Internet access in Asia, and

is described as "a solid case study, which represents research-led exemplary good practice." The article from Mongolia "make(s) a valuable contribution to the field, telling us something about work in a part of the world that is largely unknown in the West." The Filipino article about educational cell phone uses is described as the first of its kind "in which mobile phones are used for course content, not just admin. So a real contribution …" and so on.

The current interest of international educators in Asian DE methods is also evident from a parallel theme issue on the same topic, currently being published in the *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (http://www.irrodl.org). In fine collegial spirit, the IRRODL team has given me a sneak preview of the upcoming issue (Vol. 8, No. 1, 2007), edited by Professor Insung Jung of the International Christian University, Tokyo. The current *Distance Education* and *IRRODL* issues share many themes and concerns: the emergence of mobile educational methods at the University of the Philippines' Open University; the early e-learning approaches of educational institutions, including the International Institute of Cambodia; and the solutions being developed to compensate for poor Internet connectivity at Samtse College of Education, Bhutan. Each of these organizations is a partner in the IDRC's PANdora collaborations reported in this issue; and I thank the authors for providing the DE field with this wide range of insightful new material.

I also thank the executive editor of *Distance Education*, Associate Professor Som Naidu, whose enlightened support has provided these Asian studies with an important international outlet. Thanks also go to deputy editor Dr Alistair Inglis; to the Editorial Board and others—notably the ever-thorough Antonina Petrolito—for advising on and reviewing the issue; and to the International Development Research Centre and its Pan Asia Networking division for supporting the studies with funding, mentoring, dedication, and altruism over an extended period. Finally, we thank the IDRC and the ASEAN Foundation for sponsoring the *International Symposium on ICT for Social Development* in Jakarta (May 2006), which provided a forum for many of these articles to be tabled and discussed as the first stage in this publication process.

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