TRENDS AND ISSUES IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES, 2ND EDITION

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Good books on broad topics are hard to find. The second edition of *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* does a great job of meeting this challenge by offering chapters on far-reaching international trends that can have practical influence on the decisions that readers must make at the local level. From e-learning in manufacturing companies in Malaysia to various models for supporting learners who are at a distance, the book is a valuable resource for when performance issues lead you beyond the boundaries of the traditional training classroom. *Trends and Issues in Distance Education: International Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (2012; ISBN: 978–1–61735–828–9) is published by Information Age Publishing (paperback).

FROM E-LEARNING to m-learning and from Brazil to Mozambique, distance education comes in many shapes and sizes today. This diversity has advanced the field in many directions over the last decade, yet it has presented an important challenge for those who are considering distance education to improve performance. Namely, how do you keep up with the global trends and issues that are defining the next generation of distance education options?

The four editors of *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* recognized this challenge, and in response created a book that presents international distance education in a truly broad spectrum. This breadth is balanced with a writing style that illuminates practical applications that designers, developers, and other professionals can apply in a variety of contexts—including situations that do not cross international borders. The result is a very readable book that explores the theories, technologies, models, and approaches to distance education in its many forms, with a consistent focus on improving practice.

With more than 30 international authors from five continents, the 21 chapters of the book are as diverse as they are interesting. The authors as well as the editors are experts in a great variety of distance education settings, ranging from university teaching to corporate training to distance education, as a means to help prisoners and refugees find focus on a career in the future. Although all of the chapters are in English, 11 different native languages are represented. All this diversity comes together to create a unique book in a publishing landscape that typically offers a very limited, and often U.S.-centric, perspective on distance education.

DISTANCE EDUCATION

Distance education, from e-learning to m-learning to virtual schools to massive open online courses,[1] is

[1]Massive open online courses are one of the latest trends in distance education.

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often characterized by the unique qualities of its distinctive applications. For example, e-learning may be characterized in the United States by the all-too-common low-interaction animated slideshow types of e-learning that are now found in many organizations, whereas in other parts of the world e-learning can be characterized by instructor-led modules that promote learner-to-learner interactions. In both cases, these are just samples of the variety and diversity of e-learning approaches that can be found around the globe.

One result of this tendency in characterizing distance education is that those who are familiar with how, for example, e-learning or virtual schools are typically done in one country, may not be aware of how other distance education technologies and models are used effectively in other countries. For professionals working to improve learner performance, this frequently means that we have limited knowledge of the options that are available.

International trends can, however, play an important role in informing and shaping our perspectives on what is possible when considering distance education in its many forms and as solutions to local performance challenges. Lessons learned about how to engage learners in China can, for instance, improve the design of e-learning modules in Chicago.

The diversity of distance education models and applications can nevertheless make any legitimate discussion of trends and issues seem stretched far too thin. Conversely, narrow explorations of specific e-learning technologies, such as learning management systems, frequently do not offer broad enough perspectives to apply across a variety of contexts. Fortunately, the second edition of *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* does a wonderful job of striking a useful balance. While truly international in its authors and topics, the editors have worked hard to maintain a practical focus that allows readers to identify important lessons that they can apply, even if they are not working on an international scale.

The book provides numerous perspectives on distance education that highlight key trends and issues that can guide practice. The book often puts these trends in wonderful juxtaposition to illustrate the variety of forms that distance education can take and the numerous options that should be considered when trying to create effective performance solutions. Take, for example, chapter 7 on virtual schools, coauthored by Tom Clark and Zane Berge. This chapter is contrasted by chapter 8 on interactive radio instruction, coauthored by Jennifer Ho and Hetal Thukaral. Virtual schools are, for example, frequently at the forefront of distance education in terms of using Internet-delivery technologies for both student learning and instructor preparation. This is then contrasted by an insightful look at interactive radio instruction as a time-tested media for effectively delivering learning on a large scale in developing countries. And from each chapter, readers are able to find ideas that can improve practice well beyond these two specific applications of distance education.

Throughout the book, there are many trends that will interest readers. In chapter 3, "Trends and Issues Facing Distance Education," by Brent Wilson, the majority of these trends are aggregated into five broad categories.

Trend 1: Advancing Forms of Knowledge

"The information revolution is changing how we represent, share, and formalize new knowledge" (p. 41). Knowledge now exists in many forms outside of the textbook and instructor. From the wisdom of crowds that can come from Web 2.0 technologies to open access journals, where you can find "knowledge" is expanding quickly.

Trend 2: Assessing Learning Achievement

While growth in distance education has not always been justified by evaluation findings, the assessment of learning and its application is becoming a major focus of the field. In K-12 education, the assessment of distance education including virtual schools, online courses, and so on, now resembles that of traditional classroom environments with a large focus on standardized tests, especially in the United States. For corporate distance education, e-learning, m-learning, and more, the assessment of learning is also frequently supplemented with concerns of application in the workplace and return on investment.

Trend 3: Making Learning Convenient and Accessible

"Accessibility, convenience, and availability are the hallmark of distance education, often cited as the very *raison d'etre* for its adoption" (p. 43). And yet, these characteristics also challenge the field in terms of the commodification of learning, with both the advantages and disadvantages

that come along with a marketplace approach to learning. It is hard to deny, however, that the trends are all pointing toward learning that is on demand and accessible to people regardless of their current location.

Trend 4: Reaching All Learners

Equity in access and quality of education is an essential issue for the growth of distance education in its many forms. "Distance education can be consciously appropriated at reducing the difference in access and achievement" (p. 45). This is as true for its application in national education systems as it is for e-learning in corporations. Whereas equity of access to learning is often at the forefront in conversations of K-12 and higher education, the issues of providing access to employees regardless of their location is an emerging issue for organizations.

For example, when employees telecommute or work in satellite offices, are they at a disadvantage in terms of access to learning and associated promotion opportunities compared to those working in central offices? The technologies, models, and experiences described throughout *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* can offer practical resources for reaching and supporting all of your learners.

Trend 5: Engaging Learners Through Media and Designed Experience

Last, and potentially most relevant to many performance technologists, a primary trend discussed throughout the book is the application of new media to create designed experiences that engage learners. Social media, wikis, 3D technologies, and many more applications of media-driven tools are expertly integrated into the chapters. At the same time, important topics for applying these tools such as new media literacy and learner support are inter-

woven throughout the book to provide a rich context for how distance education can be successful.

As with any book, for all its strengths, *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* does have some weaknesses. For example, section 1, which includes chapters 1 through 6, offers a collection of thoughtful perspectives on the past, current, and future of distance education, but it does not adequately apply these to the fast-growing subfields of corporate e-learning and m-learning. Likewise, essential literature on the instructional design of distance education materials, including instructional media, is not included in several chapters where it would seem to logically fit.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the book makes a significant contribution that will broaden your perspectives on what distance education is, what it can achieve, what trends are defining its future, and how valuable lessons from around the globe can be applied within your context.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to lose touch with the many options for supporting learning outside of the traditional classroom when we get too focused on one technology or delivery model. While books on specific tools such as Captivate, HTML5, e-learning, or m-learning are valuable resources, it is important to also stay informed of the global trends that are shaping the field of distance education and providing insights into the solutions to local performance challenges. The second edition of *Trends and Issues in Distance Education* is a valuable guide to understanding these trends and finding lessons that can guide your practice.

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