

## **International Handbook of E-Learning**

### Foreword

Sir John Daniel

This compendium of 59 papers is presented as an international handbook of e-Learning even though a majority of the authors are from Canada and the USA. Does this matter? When I served as a senior official of UNESCO, which brings together nearly 200 member states, we required a greater diversity and spread of country participation before calling a project ‘international’.

The essential point, however, is not the variety of national flags on the papers, but whether, taken as a whole, the contributions in these volumes give a genuinely international perspective on e-Learning. I give credit to the editors for even attempting to pull together a global picture of such a fast-moving field. The effort is worthwhile because, in their long journey into e-Learning, most institutions have only reached the foothills, so any hints about how to surmount the challenges of the climb ahead are useful. In his annual surveys of e-Learning in North America, for example, Tony Bates judged that it was only in 2013 that most institutions engaging in e-Learning began to do so with an acceptable degree of competence. This means that the enterprise is now ready for lift-off, which makes this book timely.

As is all too common in writing on educational technology, most of the authors implicitly assume that e-Learning began with the Internet and focus on comparing e-Learning with classroom instruction. While classroom teaching will indeed be the more familiar environment for most readers, it is also important to situate e-Learning within the long tradition of distance education that goes back decades, centuries, or even millennia depending on one’s reading of history.

Those who forget the past can be condemned to relive it, which explains why Bates found that institutions were taking so long to get up to speed in e-Learning. In his book *Harmonizing Global Education: From Genghis Khan to Facebook*, Jon Baggeley opines that Asia does e-Learning better than the West. This is because traditional distance education co-exists alongside e-Learning in Asian countries and the lessons from the older body of research on distance learning have not yet been forgotten.

Whether e-Learning has made the techniques of distance learning converge on a common approach is an important question. Thirty years ago, the US interpreted distance education rather differently from most of the rest of the world, including, interestingly, Canada. In the US, simultaneous remote classroom instruction through video links was all the rage, whereas in other countries distance learning usually meant independent study through multi-media with tutorial support. This in turn reflected much older differences

in approaches to teaching: an emphasis on tutorials and seminars in Europe and a focus on classroom teaching in America.

The Internet unquestionably brought these approaches together and, for a time in the 1990s, the virtues of ‘asynchronous’ communication were lauded everywhere. Although the continuing advance of technology now makes it possible to blend synchronous and asynchronous learning in a great variety of ways, it is fascinating to see how differences in approach persist. MOOCs are a striking example, as the chapter by Stephen Downes illustrates. The early Canadian MOOCs, circa 2008, were based on multi-directional discussions and multiple exchanges of open educational resources among learners, whereas the later US MOOCs, circa 2012, used uni-directional video for what was essentially a remote-classroom approach, although it was delivered asynchronously. MOOCs have diversified greatly since those ‘early’ days. Like many other innovations, they began in universities but may find their major application in professional training and at other levels of education.

The main conclusion that I take from the frenzy that greeted MOOCs is the (very old) lesson that purpose and process are more important than technology. As they breathlessly proclaimed MOOCs to be a revolution in higher education, the news media forgot two facts. First, history shows that higher education develops by evolution, not revolution. Second, and more importantly, the most important power that societies give to their universities is the authority to award degrees and credentials.

Open Educational Resources and MOOCs are important contributions to the e-Learning space, but it is vital for the future that e-Learning focuses on the more challenging task of creating courses and programmes that include serious student assessment leading to credible credentials. The criticism that too much assessment in e-Learning uses trivial multiple choice questions is equally valid for much traditional campus instruction, but that is not a sufficient excuse. Fortunately, ground-breaking work is being done in various places, such as the UK Open University’s Knowledge Media Institute, to harness technology to the development of assessments that are both relevant and academically challenging.

This is the dynamic and exciting world that is the focus of this Handbook, an enormous endeavor compiled by Badrul H. Khan and Mohamed Ally, two eminent scholars and practitioners of e-Learning. I am sure that, by dipping into the variety of articles that it contains, all those who are charged with improving the quality and impact of e-Learning in their institutions will find much to inspire and guide them.

2014-08-16