

# Review Essay: Teacher Education Through Open and Distance Learning, edited by Bernadette Robinson and Colin Latchem

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Robinson, B. & Latchem, C. (Eds.). *Teacher Education Through Open and Distance Learning*. (Book). \$47.00 CAN (\$29.95 US) New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003, 251 pages (paper) ISBN 0-415-36956-8

*Teacher Education Through Open and Distance Learning* offers an international perspective, summarizing the global need for trained teachers with a high degree of expertise to meet the demand for educators for the 21st century. It links this need to the target of education for all<sup>[1]</sup> by 2015 by recognizing that conventional teacher training approaches (face to face pre-service courses) are not adequate.

Robinson and the other seventeen authors in this collected work, explore the question of how distance and open learning can provide more and better teachers. They write of actual and predicted global teacher shortages caused by retirement, burnout, AIDS, and a general decline of interest in teaching as a professional choice.

This book recognizes a range of teacher training needs suggesting distance education (DE) approaches for initial teacher training, continued professional development, administrator training and development, and training for informal educational programs (adult and community options). It also suggests the need for a development of communities of practice to share information and practices within the teaching profession. Issues of policy, management, technology, cost, evaluation, and quality are addressed - all from a refreshingly global rather than strictly North American vantage point.

Teacher training issues from New Zealand, Russia, Paraguay, Egypt, Korea, India, Africa, China, Brazil, United Kingdom, and Sri Lanka form the international perspective of this text. References are made to other international regions, and the authors range from academics to consultants to members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representing India, England, Malaysia, France, Netherlands, Canada, Korea, Australia, Brazil, and Africa.

The Foreword, written by Gajaraj Dhanarajan (President and CEO of the Commonwealth of Learning, an international organization whose mandate is the development and sharing of open/distance learning resources and information), sets the context for this text. Dhanarajan states that while there are approximately 60 million teachers employed around the world, in order to meet the target of educational for all by 2015 an additional 15 million teachers will be required. Essential in understanding the magnitude of this number is the fact that it does not include replacement numbers for those currently employed. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) suggests that conventional approaches to teacher preparation are inadequate, hence the interest in open and distance learning options - especially for high population areas such as South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

The opening chapters by the two editors introduce the field of distance and open learning well. They form a strong introduction by defining both the terms used and the situation within the global education terrain. For example, the authors provide a clear distinction between the needs of beginning teachers and their more experienced colleagues, identifying the importance of an induction phase for the first group and quality continuing professional development for the second.

The authors tackle a core issue facing distance education " ... how to achieve effective integration of theory with practice..." (p. 2), and question the actual model of teaching and learning theories that should form the basis for distance programs and their practices. They offer examples and suggestion of how online teacher preparation can support both as well as meet the needs of a range of teaching professionals. Further, the authors recognize two related aspects that affect the quality of teachers and their teaching: " ... the conditions of teachers in a changing environment and their training and professional development" (p. 3).

The authors recognize that teacher education, in many countries, is caught between competing elements of change. Limited resources, reforms to traditional curriculum, pressure to compete in a global economy, introduction of information technology (IT), and changing measurements to determine the effectiveness of education programs all converge on the ways in which teachers are expected to work and assist learners; few of these issues are actually tied to pedagogical or philosophical theories. Citing Marginson (1993), the authors note "Education is now seen as a branch of economic policy rather than a mix of social, economic and cultural policy" (p. 4). Further, UNICEF states that these demands run " ... in parallel with low status, low pay and poor working conditions ..." (p. 4) making the teachers feel under siege rather than at the heart of the necessary education revolution required at the grass roots teaching and learning levels.

A range of statistics are offered, but one of the most fascinating is that 1% of the world's population work as teachers in formal education programs (in developed countries 3% of the population are teachers), and the numbers are increasing, but not rapidly enough to meet demands. However, it is important to know that there is considerable diversity in terms of initial teacher preparation, formal education systems, programs delivered, and working conditions. The authors wrestle with the disparity between professional and paraprofessional educators as well as the feminization of the profession, especially in primary and elementary programs that continues to keep pay rates and job status low.

The question of formalized teacher training (certification in teaching rather than solely obtaining expertise in a subject area) is raised, suggesting that some countries (e.g. Russia) have a surplus of trained teachers while others continue to use specialists who have no formal teacher training (e.g. 12% in the United States). Another important note is that shortages / surpluses are average figures, suggesting that there may be dire shortages in secondary and/or specialist areas while the country is experiencing a general teacher surplus.

The issue of teacher attrition is addressed. Distance education is suggested as an option for professional support/development (helping to keep teachers in their jobs) and training (increasing the skills and qualifications). The authors make a distinction between teacher training and teacher education, suggesting education goes beyond " ... a behaviourist approach ..." to encompassing the whole process of teacher preparation in academic subjects, pedagogy, and personal development (p. 10).

Chapter Two addresses the potential of open and distance education for teacher education, training, and ongoing professional development. The authors define distance education as " ... an education process in which teachers and learners are separated in space and/or time for some or all of the time of study and in which the learning materials take over some of the traditional role of the teacher" (p. 28-29). They note that many DE programs have a residential or face-to-face component to them, but the balance of time between that and self-study varies greatly. Open learning is " ... based on a set of values in which constraints on study are minimized in terms of access, time, pace and method of study. ... it means providing learners with access to learning resources, advice, support and, in many cases, assessment of learning" (p. 29). A further distinction is made in regard to virtual or e-learning, suggesting that these are similar except they " ... exploit the capabilities of the Internet and Web for providing access to learning materials and supporting two-way communications between individuals and groups" (p. 29). The authors point out that countries with large populations are making heavy use of DE options, noting that Brazil, Nigeria, China, and Indonesia all have teacher education programs through their open universities.

Chapter Three, written by Chai Hon-Chan and Hena Mukherjee, examines the policy and planning required to implement distance education and questions how to integrate DE into existing programs. The authors take the next steps of suggesting how policy can become practice, noting that most countries view their policies toward education in general as being tied to political, social, and economic goals as well as international factors such as globalization, technology, and market competitiveness. "Because education is an important means of transmitting political, social and economic aspirations as well as moral or religious values, the selection, training, performance and management of teachers, the primary transmitters of such beliefs as well as subject knowledge, are also a matter of political concern" (p. 48-49). Therefore, it is argued, what goes into DE materials and training programs is of national concern. The authors offer a checklist of considerations for the implementation of policies into programs, which include the issues of target population, curriculum reform, budget, and technology required for delivery. Further, the authors note that effective implementation is contingent on a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches in terms of program activities and collaborative policy development.

Chapter Four discusses the potential for DE within the initial training of teachers, questioning the role it can play in providing practical work experience and actual school experience. The authors, Bob Moon and Bernadette Robinson, note that DE has been used mainly for the initial preparation of primary teachers, especially where promoted by severe teacher shortages. In many cases, DE options are used to educate practicing teachers who have had no previous training. The authors cite research that finds teachers in general (not specifically DE) " ... who have greater knowledge of teaching and learning are effective with students, especially at tasks requiring higher-order thinking and problem-solving" (p.73).

While two models of teacher preparation are explored (focus on subject matter and focus on pedagogy and practice) the authors note that both build on three inter-related elements - academic subject knowledge, professional studies (pedagogy), and actual practice. The question then becomes how to address these in a DE structure. Research suggests that some DE programs address only subject knowledge while others incorporate pedagogical issues as well. However, criticism of these programs focuses on poor linkages between theory and practice and inadequate time for actual hands on school experience. Further, concern exists about the integration of curriculum/course design, learning materials, and assessment.

Chapter Five explores the role of DE for ongoing professional development questions DE achievements and limitations. The authors (Helen Craig and Hilary Perraton) note that once a country has begun to meet its needs for trained teachers, it begins to question the quality of the programs offered in the schools. Consequently, as revisions are made in the programming/curriculum, there is a need for ongoing teacher development. Hence, an emphasis is placed on professional development options. Often DE is considered due to cost considerations and the importance of keeping teachers in their schools while training takes place.

Chapter Six looks at DE for training of educators in informal settings such as community and adult education programs. In-formal educational options are defined as " ... any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population ... (p. 113). These options include literacy and health training - programs focusing on lifelong learning. The authors (Charles Potter and Mohammad Aslam) cite experiences from continuing education projects in their respective countries of South Africa and India.

Chapter Seven looks at the role of leadership. UNESCO has determined that " ... the most important factor in school efficiency and quality improvement is the openness, competence and efficiency of the head teacher or principal" (p. 128). DE has been used effectively with this group, especially when the programs have been built on quality materials, encourage school-focused assessment strategies, offer support by a supervisor and are accredited. The authors Tony Bush and Richard Charron reflect their home perspectives from the UK and France as well as international projects.

Chapter Eight examines the use of media and technology in terms of teachers' learning and the need for guidelines for their selection and use. The authors, Adrian Kirkwood and Charles Joyner, suggest that media affects people's lives around the world, and the introduction of digital media enables more people " ... to become media producers and not just media consumers" (p.

149). Further, they see media in teacher education as a way to increase knowledge building as well as skills development. They define media as resources ranging from videos to graphs, diagrams, maps, photos, and items in both conventional and digital formats. They suggest that media can promote professional practice and reflection through the sharing of case studies and vignettes of actual practice.

Chapter Nine reviews international experience with the Internet and computer options for teacher training. Tracing the shift from the teaching of programming in the earlier 1970s (LOGO and Basic) to the use of educational software in the mid 1980s, the authors (Betty Collis and Insung Jung) suggest that teachers are now seeing the Internet and web options as the focus of their use. The use of computers as tools to work with has shifted to computers as tools to connect with, thus encouraging teachers to move beyond their individual classroom teaching and network with colleagues globally. This connection with the greater community has impacted the area of professional development through the sharing of techniques, materials, best practices, and theory through video footage, text, or hyper linked documents. The authors suggest teachers are now expected to understand how to use technology for work as well as how to learn with technology.

Chapter Ten focuses on the evaluation of DE programs and offers suggestions as to how one might determine quality programs. The author (Bernadette Robinson) offers guidelines and a framework for program development. The author suggests "Empirical research on the effectiveness of distance education programs for teachers is sparse" (p. 193) due to a lack of funding. While this may be true to some degree, it seems that the lack of research is also due to online / distance education not being seen as mainstream practice (e.g. by teacher certification agencies or teacher qualification services). Many international programs are funded through donors, and the money is earmarked for implementation rather than program evaluation. Of particular importance is the call for both qualitative and quantitative studies, recognizing the need for both in order to evaluate a range of program constraints and emerging technology innovations in DE delivery.

Chapter Eleven looks at how to cost out DE programs and offers guidelines for savings and a method for conducting a cost analysis. The authors, João Oliveira and François Orivel, identify key components in program implementation, suggesting that all contribute to the total cost of projects. In light of this, they suggest that DE requires that the total cost figure be broken into two further categories: production and delivery costs. Percentages are offered by category with the authors stressing the need to consider all costs, especially those that will be ongoing.

Chapter Twelve offers conclusions gained from the preceding chapters and answers the question posed in the introduction of the book - Can DE help to provide more and better teachers? The authors, Bernadette Robinson and Colin Latchem, state "Enough evidence and experience are available to show that open and distance education can be a viable, effective and even cost-effective way of providing initial and continuing professional development for teachers, if well planned, adequately resourced and competently managed" (p. 234). However, the main issue continues to be quality programming and the perception that education delivered via distance may not be as good as that delivered by conventional means. Therefore, the authors of this chapter call for more research to determine the effectiveness and quality of DE programs.

Further, they present a series of considerations for program planners and designers to encourage the development of quality learning options for beginning as well as veteran teachers.

In conclusion, this book is both an excellent introduction to distance learning and a rich resource for those in that field as well as for those in the fields of teacher education and online learning. *Teacher Education Through Open and Distance Learning* offers a comprehensive, international view of teacher training in a global context. For educators familiar with the North American perspective, it is a refreshing glimpse into the worldwide community of teacher education. I highly recommend this book for those involved in pre-service teacher preparation as well as online educators as it includes rich descriptions of major projects in a global context, citing or including the principal writers and researchers in the field. Readers interested in learning more about any of the projects are provided with ample references and links to those works. Therefore, I view this book as a fairly complete guide to current practices.

Notes

[1] Called for by delegates at the Education For All Forum in Dakar, Senegal in 2000 and recorded in the UNESCO (2000) report.

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#### **Author Note**

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