International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Regional Focus Issue Editorial: A Snapshot of Distance Education in Africa

Rashid Aderinoye, Richard Siaciwena et Clayton R. Wright

Citer ce document

September – 2009

Regional Focus Issue Editorial: A Snapshot of Distance Education in Africa

Rashid Aderinoye, Richard Siaciwena, and **Clayton R. Wright**
IRRODL Regional Focus Editors for Africa

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), established by the United Nations in 2000, emphasized the importance of education to the development and achievement of human rights and to social and economic development. One of the eight goals of the MDGs also made access to basic education imperative by the year 2015. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the 'Education for All' (EFA) targets, to which African Governments have committed themselves, is a daunting task that requires, among other initiatives, the use of open and distance learning (ODL).

African countries face tremendous challenges vis-à-vis other geographies and regions. Rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education coupled with local and regional governments' limited capacity to expand provision of education through traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions leave ODL as a viable option to address and match growing demand for education. It offers one way to increase the capacity of educational systems without incurring the cost of building facilities by allowing learners the flexibility to remain in their communities or in their duty post. Distance education was and is seen as one of the solutions to training education and health services personnel who are working full-time and who are unable to attend and/or afford to register in full-time residential institutions. It is also seen as a solution to the depleting ranks of teachers and healthcare and other professionals, which have been decimated by HIV/AIDS, as distance education can provide effective pre-service and in-service training programs.

Online courses and courses delivered by videoconferencing, Facebook, or immersion in Second Life may be the rage in countries in North America and Europe, but in Africa a full range of delivery options must be considered. Africa lacks high-speed Internet infrastructures, access to computers, and human resources with the expertise to effectively implement and support hi-tech delivery methods. Thus, in Africa, distance education takes on a variety of forms including paper-based courses, radio instruction, and television broadcasts. The latter forms of media have a broad reach and are accessible to learners who lack tools and technical expertise.

In an effort to initiate and expand e-learning and other technology-based ODL opportunities, Africa may need to be more proactive in addressing the issues mentioned previously in this editorial. Some of these issues are more pertinent in some regions of the continent than in others.

However, progress is being made and will continue to be made as long as leaders and educators can envision a better future for their people, educational resources are provided from limited national and international development budgets, and educators are willing to break away from ineffective instructional methods and embrace methods and technology that can address the real needs and aspirations of their learners.

There are many successful ODL programs across the continent and there are efforts underway that aim to address the challenges of development. This edition of IRRODL presents a snapshot of distance education in Africa; it only covers a few of the many initiatives that have been recently completed or are in progress. Through the use of case studies and research reports, this regional focus issue of IRRODL describes and analyzes current practices, trends, and issues in ODL in Africa thereby showing the actual and potential contribution of ODL to educational development in particular and social and economic development in Africa in general. The articles, which focus on policy, teacher education, and use of new technologies, reveal the challenges and obstacles to ODL's optimal effectiveness, efficiency, and quality assurance.

This edition of IRRODL contains nine articles which are introduced below.

Using classroom video analysis and follow-up interviews, Jean-Marie Muhirwa examines the obstacles to quality interaction between distance learners in Mali and Burkina Faso and their French and Canadian instructors.

Anne Sikwibele and Judith Mungoo explore the challenges faced by students and tutors in a distance program designed to upgrade the academic and professional qualifications of primary school teachers in Botswana.

Bopelo Boitshwarelo documents his failed but instructive attempt to introduce a blended learning professional development program to science teachers in Botswana.

In an evaluative study of a distance teacher education program offered in Ghana, Kwasi Addo Sampong compares performance data obtained from students and faculty/administrators to standards prepared from the program's design.

Two articles present the University of Pretoria's Advanced Certifciate in Education (ACE) program: Ruth Aluko focuses on the impact of the distance program on the professional practice of teachers, and Jill Fresen and Johan Hendikz report on the re-design of the program to promote access, quality, and student support.

Jayshree Thakrar, Freda Wolfenden, and Denise Zinn describe models and success factors for the use of open educational resources (OERs) produced by the Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (TESSA) consortium.

Sushita Gokool-Ramdoo extends the application of transactional distance theory (TDT) to evidence-based policy development in Mauritius in order to understand the implications of distance education (DE) policy deficit.

Finally, returning to Botswana, Alison Mead Richardson analyzes the technical, staffing, and cultural barriers to change when developing technology-enhanced, flexible delivery methods for vocational education and technical training programs.

In order to further the effective implementation of distance education in Africa, future research could be conducted to address the items below.

- What collaborative initiatives would benefit Africa and how can these initiatives be nurtured and maintained? How can diverse cultural, social, and economic needs be addressed in collaborative enterprises?
- What affordable and reliable infrastructure can be implemented in Africa? Can wireless networks be implemented successfully or do land lines and satellite connections still need to be implemented?
- How can distance education be used to develop competency in the development and delivery of distance education? What blended approaches could be effective? What programs would be most effective for various groups such as educational leaders, teachers, technical support personnel, and learners?
- What approaches can be used to ensure gender equality with respect to educational participation and decision making? Currently, few top education and technology leaders are women.
- How can one nurture constructivist and problem-solving approaches to pedagogy rather than the teacher-centred approaches often employed in Africa?
- How can open-access learning materials and tools be implemented and maintained in Africa? Can these resources be localized and integrated into national education systems at a lower cost than developing them locally? Expertise is needed to support such initiatives, and resources are needed to sustain them. Often, initial funding is provided by non-government organizations (NGOs), but once the NGOs cease funding, the initiative dies.
- Since mobile telephones have become ubiquitous in all African countries, how can mobile devices be used effectively to provide or support collaboration, social networking, and interactive learning?
- Often online learning can yield "electronic page turners" in which information is presented digitally, but there is minimum interactivity. How can online courses be designed to be more interactive and encourage learners to learn with and from other learners and their community?
- How can programs be monitored and evaluated effectively? The dispersed population in many parts of Africa and the lack of accessible and reliable telecommunications can make it difficult to monitor and assess distance learning activities.

We sincerely hope that this snapshot of distance education initiatives in Africa will be enlightening and thank Terry Anderson, Brigette McConkey, the authors of the articles, and the

IRRODL editorial community for their assistance during the preparation of this edition of the IRRODL Journal.