



Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda. 2014. Edited by Olaf Zawacki-Richter & Terry Anderson. Athabasca University (AU) Press, Publisher. 507 pages. ISBN: 978-1-927356-62-3 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1-927356-63-0 (pdf); ISBN: 978-1-927356-64-7 (e-pub)

Reviewed by Dr. Lorraine Carter

INTRODUCTION

Time and again, history bears witness to the importance of knowing where we have been in order to make thoughtful decisions about the present and the future. Given the explosion in e-learning, online and distance education over the last fifteen years and efforts to investigate and make meaning of this phenomenon, it should come as no surprise that it is time to consider past, present, and future directions. These directions pertain not only to the new pedagogies and technologies that support the development and delivery of online distance education but also to the research we have been conducting. As Otto Peters in his Foreword to *Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda* (2014), edited by Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson, suggests, “Research in the emerging field of online distance education has, so far, evolved in a somewhat haphazard fashion, consisting largely of an assemblage of contributions made by researchers working on different topics, often in isolation from one another” (p.ix). Building on Peters’ claim, perhaps it is time to move past haphazardness.

CONTENT ORGANIZATION

In this collection of essays prepared by online distance learning (ODL) scholars from around the world, Zawacki-Richter and Anderson have taken on the labyrinth Peters alludes to and done an impressive job. In particular, they offer a kind of architecture through which the labyrinth becomes understandable. Based on this, scholars can then make informed decisions about a second generation of ODL research.

In their categorization of research done to date, Zawacki-Richter and Anderson use three familiar categories—macro-, meso-, and micro- level research—deriving from a Delphi study conducted by Zawacki-Richter in 2009. The three categories and 15 themes embedded in them, in addition to findings based on a number of bibliographic studies conducted since 2009, act as scaffolding for the collection. The latter studies include a large-scale literature review in which research trends and gaps, methods, and authorship patterns in distance education research published in five major peer reviewed journals were captured and quantified; an examination of gender and collaboration patterns in distance education research; and consideration of the impact of distance education journals in terms of citations, their perceived value, and their role in information exchange.

In the macro-level category, called Distance Education Systems and Theories, themes cluster around issues of access, equity, and ethics; globalization and the cross-cultural components of online distance education; distance teaching systems and institutions; theories and models; and research methods in distance education and knowledge transfer. At the meso level, entitled Management, Organization, and Technology, the dominant themes are management and organization; cost and benefits; educational technology; innovation and change; learner support systems; and quality assurance. Called Teaching and Learning in Distance Education, the micro-level includes issues of instructional or learning design; interaction and communication in learning communities; and learner characteristics.



The papers found in the collection explore the aforementioned themes and represent the thinking of an exceptional roster of international and Canadian scholars. As an example of international perspective, Charlotte Gunawardena, originally from Sri Lanka but now with the University of New Mexico and, addresses the increasing global impact of online distance learning and its responsiveness to cultural change as a macro-level consideration; Margaret Hicks from Australia explores the challenges of translating research findings into relevant faculty development, working from the reality that many teachers in higher education are neither prepared nor skilled to teach effectively in ODL environments. Alan Woodley and Ormond Simpson, both from the United Kingdom and recently retired from the Open University, engage in a conversation about the “elephant in the distance education room”: low rates of successful completion and high drop-out rates in ODL. These three snapshots comprise a glimpse into the diversity of expertise, issues, and authors profiled in the collection.

SUMMARY

What might the reader take from the work of these ODL scholars? While various observations are made in the Foreword and Conclusion that give the reader pause to reflect—for instance, the overabundance of teaching and learning studies and the limited number of bigger picture studies focusing on costs and benefits, change management, and cultural challenges are pointed out—Zawicki-Richter and Anderson leave the final decision making and planning to individual reader-researchers and likeminded researcher-colleagues. Thus, they are true to their promise of moving towards a research agenda rather than generating or prescribing one. This noted, the emerging agenda should be one in which ODL is recognized as a discipline in its own right with distinct issues, gaps, and opportunities. Discovering the particulars of this agenda involves careful reflection on the ideas found in the diverse papers in this collection and the work that Zawicki-Richter and Anderson have done in quantifying research that has been performed to date, reviewing and evaluating this research, and describing new research needs.

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