

Book Review – Open And Distance Learning In The Developing World

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Open And Distance Learning In The Developing World
Hilary Perraton (2000)
London: Routledge
pp. 228
ISBN 0-415-19419-9 (pbk)

Hilary Perraton's review of distance education throughout the developing world is the subject of this book. Founding director of the International Research Foundation for Open Learning, Perraton presents us with a good discussion of the social, technological, political, and economic aspects of distance education in the last 30 years. His well-framed contextual evidence makes this mandatory reading for those interested in open and distance learning in the third world. This book clearly delineates the parameters under which the reader is expected to understand arguments made. For example, Perraton's explanations of efficiency and cost include comparisons and contrasts to enrollments and overall expenditure (parameter a). The concept of efficiency becomes more difficult to articulate when one looks at enrollments and investments in relation to the completion rate of students (parameter b). The work offers practical information for comparing and understanding distance education in specific contexts, thus making solid arguments based on available data. Many parts of this text illustrate this point, such as the concluding suggestion that, where available in the developing world, distance education has positioned itself better at the tertiary level than at the secondary.

In the informative first two chapters Perraton discusses the place of distance education in the overall context of education for different countries and reflects upon the mosaic of projects and institutions. If governments are to fund out-of-school and non-formal education efforts, evidence suggests that distance education can help. The lack of pressure by current students, as well as unconvinced leaders, may explain why governments have not upheld the investment in distance education in a consistent manner. Moreover, despite all of its promises, non-formal education has not responded as a solid alternative to formal education. Perraton points out that it actually has "been under pressure to look and become formal" (p. 18). Distance education has been affected by this trend.

Chapters 3 and 4 help the reader understand the significant differences associated with school policy and teacher training in the third world. An analysis of technology provides us with comparative information, particularly on the use

of radio. Funding difficulties have driven different developments as we begin to see that, with few exceptions, projects have not lasted over time. As for the training of teachers, distance education has proven to be an important contributor, comparing favorably in costs to traditional teacher training. Perraton introduces us here to the flipside, which few would look at when making the argument for distance education for the poor: completion rates.

The fifth chapter introduces the reader to a review of open and distance institutions of higher education in different geographical areas. Although there are concerns about their results, these institutions have enrolled a significant proportion of the higher education student population of the developing world. The birth of the Open University in the United Kingdom offered a reference point, but rightfully, the author provides enough detail to show how different countries promoted the creation of similar institutions based on their own needs, even fostering the operation of regional universities at a distance, a source of much of international practice and multinational policy. An analysis of costs follows in chapter 6. Perraton points out that it is difficult to make the economic savings argument across the board. While in some cases teacher education efforts at a distance have proven to be effective and perhaps similar in their expenses, others have not. The case for higher education may clearly suggest the opportunity to save on resources, so long as it is never compared to actual numbers of students who complete. In doing so, it is easy to see that distance education, like traditional higher education, is costly and, in many cases, inefficient.

Echoing a frequently observed conclusion about the inequitable effects of technology for the poor and women, Perraton leaves chapter 7 suggesting that under present circumstances and given current trends technology will only benefit those who already have access. If interaction is to occur, distance education benefits from technology. Due to the way technology has been deployed around the world, one may be led to believe that the trend will be more hurtful than benign. Complicating the issue is the observation that traditional technology deployments parallel the technology of today. What has changed is the underlying system under which education rests, briefly discussed in chapter 8.

Chapter 9 explores the political economy of distance education. Several reasons are outlined for creating and fostering distance learning systems in the developing world. For some governments internal demand may explain distance education efforts, yet for others perceived cost savings are often cited. As outlined and discussed in this section, public policy suggests that distance education reinforces more than threatens the existing educational structure. Given the arguments presented, one is left to decide whether to regard distance education as a triumphant approach meeting the much-needed demand for education or as a substandard alternative helping maintain the status quo as desired by the ruling class. The final chapter discusses this question by looking at adequacy, efficiency, effort, performance, and process, indicators nicely borrowed from E.G. McAnany, a prominent development thinker in the United States.

Overall, this book offers a much needed review of distance education in the third world. Because this work has implications regarding policy and costs, the reader will likely be forced to take a stand depending on his or her experience. Readers in the developing world may be disappointed that there are not more specific examples. However, discussions of the most prominent cases are cited to illustrate general world trends. One counter argument, based on a national program, by no means reflects the way policy and/or expenditure has been done internationally. The Mexican Telesecundaria clearly illustrates this aspect as it departs from the international norm in this sense. Readers in the industrialized world may find general viewpoints in accordance with their views beyond policy, including technology (i.e., access) and culture (i.e., “second world” countries). Direct foreign experience does not always guarantee accurate characterizations of the developing world, nor does it offer meaningful courses of action in the face of criticism. This is evident at times throughout Perraton’s text (e.g., “the near-abandonment of media” suggesting teaching that “is less varied”; p. 151), in addition to depicting recurrent concerns (neglecting radio’s powerful potential for public education for example) already thrown out to the public by others.

Strong at framing problem areas regarding distance education, Perraton leaves us wondering whether distance education has ever suited the developing world. From *importing content* in the context of the African Virtual University to increasing efficiency in the teaching systems as a source of economic soundness worldwide, one is forced to inquire what may be the alternative. If the education mix for development includes prescribed forms of distance education, gaps would be reduced sooner. With Perraton, many readers will agree to dream about making distance education as effective as conventional education. The challenge is, of course, to go beyond the dream.

This book is an excellent review of distance education’s most important concerns in the developing world. The comprehensiveness of Perraton’s review of relevant developments of the last few years makes the text a fundamental reference for further discussions in the field.

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