

MSTU 4022

Telecommunications, Distance Learning and Collaborative Interchange

(Fall 2005)

Assignment 3

**Reflections on Allison A. Carr-Chellman's Global Perspectives on E-Learning
- Rhetoric or Reality**

This paper offers a comparative analysis of some sections of Carr-Chellman's book with the view of identifying how the prospects of distance learning in different parts of the world can potentially influence the prospects of distance learning becoming a global reality.

Introduction

E-learning broadly refers to learning initiatives which incorporate technologies that support communication and interactivity beyond that which would be provided by a single computer. Whilst electronic devices such as Radios, Personal Computers, CD-ROMs, Digital Television, PDAs etc. have traditionally been employed in some learning situations, it is the dramatic expansion of computer-mediated communication systems over the last few years that has fundamentally altered the practice of distance learning. E-mail, computer-conferencing, digital libraries, electronic databases, learning and content management systems are playing such a tremendous role in distance learning that the terms online learning, e-learning and distance learning are now used interchangeably.

Through the application of these emergent technologies, learning has become not only more flexible, but also more accessible as courses can be tailored to specific needs and learners can interact with instructors both synchronously and asynchronously over time and space. This open access and flexibility offers a great opportunity to mostly adult learners (who by virtue of geographical location, social status, employment obligations, family responsibilities or physical disability, are incapable of attending traditional residential schools), to pursue their higher educational goals and ambitions. Little wonder that online learning which is now the fastest growing market segment in adult education, has been "heralded [by advocates and politicians] as the next democratizing force in education, particularly higher education" (Daniel, 1996; Jones, 1997, cited in Carr-Chellman, 2005, p.1).

Critics of this belief (and they are quite few) however point to the fact that the reality on the ground probably does not reflect the rhetoric, and that such an overemphasis on online learning could in fact result in what some health care writers refer to as "the inverse care law". Hence those who need online learning the most may be the ones who will least benefit from it. Alison A. Carr-Chellman's edited book - *Global Perspectives on E-Learning - Rhetoric or Reality*, examines this rhetoric-reality dichotomy from several perspectives globally. This article presents a brief comparative analysis of the state of e-learning in two different geographical regions as presented in different sections in Carr-Chellman's book. These two regions are North America (covered in Section III - *Online Education in North America: An analysis of the US and Canadian Contributions*), and Sub-Saharan Africa (covered in Section V - *Online Education in Africa: An analysis of Namibia and Sub-Saharan Africa*). The purpose of this comparison is to determine whether these rhetoric versus

reality issues as they pertain to online learning in these regions, can potentially influence the prospects of distance learning becoming a global reality.

Thus in this article, I will first present an analysis of section III of Charr-Chellman's book, follow this with an analysis of section V, and then conclude with a comparative summary. I chose section V because as a native of Sub-Saharan Africa, I am naturally interested in the region's prospects for online distance learning and whether this compares favorably or otherwise with cases in some other parts of the world.

Section III: Online Education in North America

The Rhetoric

Bridge the Digital Divide

With the emergence of the Internet and World Wide Web during the early 1990s and the subsequent globalization of world issues, came the much debated and oftentimes hyped issue called the "digital divide" - the widening gap between who have access to ICT and are using it effectively, and those who do not. As this issue "threatened to undermine social solidarity" (p.131), it is only natural that politicians and other human rights advocates will seek to draw attention to, as well as seek interventions that will help bridge this divide.

Identifying e-learning as one critical factor that can promote public access to technology, several interventions were advocated. Whilst in Canada the idea was to "make Canada the most connected nation on earth" (p.131) by establishing government-private sector partnership online learning projects, the rhetoric in the United States was more of democracy and openness, the belief being that, implementing an open higher educational system with the aid of technology will afford access to everyone including those in the most isolated inner cities, and will also enhance individual choice.

Technological Determinism

Terms such as "Digital Economy," "Information Society," "Networked World" etc. all portray the fact that we are living in a technological era. The unquestioned rhetoric therefore is that, for persons to be able to make a meaningful impact in this information economy, they must be exposed to technology during their training. "Our children must have technology experiences in order to ensure that Canada can become a competitive country ..." (p.128). Online distance learning was heralded as

offering a unique opportunity to train the skilled and technologically savvy workforce required in this digital age. Online learning can be very efficient and can also promote independent learning, and in fact, is considered by the US Federal government as being of the same level as the traditional programs and therefore treated as such. The Connecting Canadians website also proclaims that "Canada is breeding a new generation of IT workers by focusing on skills development in students from Kindergarten to Grade 12" (p. 136)

The Reality:

Technical Difficulties

Canada's SchoolNet program was established in 1994, the stakeholders being the Federal Government, Industry, school communities, teachers and students. Among other things, this program sought to provide computers and internet connectivity to all schools, set up a "Network to Savings" database that will offer great deals on equipment, software and services, launch a website that will link educators to educational resources, offer postsecondary graduates a one-stop shopping site for jobs and career related information, promote internet connectivity within libraries etc.

Though this program recorded some successes in quantitative terms [e.g. by March 1999, Canada became the first country in the world to connect its public schools and libraries to the Information Highway (p. 134)], researchers continually point out the lack of evidence linking technology to improved learning (p.136). Moreover, technical problems and an "ecology of games" between the various stakeholders led to demise in connectivity such that a 2000 KPMG study indicated that "barely 60% of the schools were still connected to the internet" (p. 133).

Economic Issues

On the part of United States, government initiatives coupled with market forces and corporate training needs led to the explosion of web-based distance learning programs that provide content across a wide range of disciplines. For instance, the US Department of Education in 1999, set aside \$10 million in grants for companies, universities etc to develop products that will help adults gain access to distance learning opportunities (p.257). However, current data clearly point to the fact that the implementation of open online learning is hardly addressing the issue of access as it is rather erecting "new barriers that are primarily financial." Thus despite all the rhetoric, the digital divide still persists, as there is evidence that "not all students have equal access to computers and the internet. In fact students with the greatest need [for online learning], get the least access" (p. 156).

Also, online education offerings have become skewed towards vocational subjects, offering so-called "hot" topics that are geared towards the high-tech industry. Interestingly, despite their abundance, it has been discovered that most undergraduates are least interested in pursuing these programs because of a perception that, apart from the fact that starting salaries are low, there is no real way of getting ahead within this industry (p.152). Thus as the Harvard Extension School's correspondence-oriented program is going online, dropout rate of the degree programs has become as high as 98.5% (p.258).

Carr-Chellman argues that web-based offerings have proliferated in the American continent because the enterprise "appeals to some of our most basic, stereotypically American values" (p. 146). It is now emerging that most of the efforts made in the provision of access to ICTs, bridging the digital divide and training a highly skilled workforce, were not solely aimed at addressing educational needs, "but rather out of the perceived need to privatize and commercialize one of the last and largest unexploited markets in the world" (p. 141). Thus internet connectivity arrived in schools even before teachers were consulted about its pedagogical usefulness, whilst business-education partnerships proliferated. In fact Industry Canada was estimated to be worth Can \$41 billion in 2000 (p.142).

Prospects of Online Education in North America

Despite the fact that the realities encountered in efforts to implement online distance learning programs are a far cry from the rhetoric, one thing that is certain is that individuals in almost every locality are accessing the Internet, researching ideas, disseminating perspectives and obtaining diplomas. By the year 2000, more than 3 million learners were logging in for distance education opportunities in the United States (p.145). Online learning in the North American continent, fueled by capitalist ventures as well as corporate and individual needs, is thus growing at an alarming rate, and will continue to do so in the next few or many years to come.

Section V: Online Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

The Rhetoric

Development

Unlike in the case of the developed world where online learning initiatives seek to address issues of access, equity and oftentimes private sector economic interests, online education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is expected to be involved in the broader issue of socio-economic development. UN

Secretary General Kofi Annan stated that "communication and information technology have enormous potential, especially for developing countries and in furthering sustainable development" (p.208). Training and capacity building are regarded as the main pillars of a successful sustainable development. With the logistical and financial difficulties involved in mobilizing the workforce for face-to-face teaching and learning, technology mediated distance delivery has become quite appealing.

Education

As with the case in other parts of the world, the rhetoric that ICTs will enhance the ability of traditional institutions to carry education to the doorsteps of even the most remotely located person, has not escaped the African continent. In the case of SSA however, the caution is that the existing structures of universities are "too inflexible to accommodate emerging modes of knowledge production or the demands that a greater variety of 'students' will make" (p.228). It is therefore very likely that the traditional African university system will not survive the global knowledge society, and as demonstrated by Peter Drucker, "thirty years from now [1997], the big university campuses will be relics, Universities won't survive" (p.226).

The Reality

Economic Issues

Africa has always lagged behind the rest of the world in almost all socio-economic and developmental indicators, and will probably continue to do so for an appreciable length of time. The near sorry state of affairs undoubtedly affects the state of education and in fact has put higher education in SSA in a state of crisis. Whilst not mentioning the staggering statistics, UNESCO in 2001 simply declared that the magnitude of the education crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa is disturbing (p.225). Inadequate infrastructure (only 1.4% of the population has access to the telephone), obsolete equipment, ill-trained and ill-motivated manpower and above all poverty, are the stark realities that pose significant threats to the provision of online education. Little wonder that when it comes to the issue of e-learning, two schools of thought have emerged: the first pointing to the fact that due to lack of widespread access to ICTs, distance learning should focus on more accessible technologies - print for that matter, whilst the second school of thought argues that Africa is currently facing a crisis in higher education which will only exacerbate if the opportunities offered by digital technologies are not rapidly harnessed.

As this debate rages on, the continent continues to be inundated with "off-shore" e-learning programs which can only be afforded by a few privileged citizens, and thus possibly creating an elitist higher education system which then becomes inaccessible to poor majority. The ability of online learning to contribute meaningfully to the region's socio-economic development is thus getting out of the question.

Prospects of Online Education Africa

Whilst the rhetoric goes on that traditional universities in SSA will not survive because of their shortcomings and the deep seated crises in which they find themselves, the reality is that, it is this same crises that are serving as catalysts of innovation. African universities, with the support of their respective governments, are adapting and applying technology enabled content delivery (though at a much slower rate), to a wide range of prospective learners whilst successfully maintaining their core values. With the current advances in wireless technologies, the issue of established infrastructure is gradually being overcome whilst the ability to distribute digital content over CD and DVD-ROMS further enhances the capacities of institutions to bring high quality learning resources to remote regions. E-learning in SSA is therefore equally witnessing a boom, and will undoubtedly

Conclusion

Even though the debate as to whether computers and the internet actually contribute effectively to learning still rages on, it is clear that whatever the outcome of this debate will be, e-learning is here to stay. While e-learning will not (and should not) entirely replace the traditional face-to-face delivery of training content by education institutions, the argument that it enhances the learning process, and increases reach (where reach would be both costly and logistically difficult) has been clearly made, albeit rhetorically. With rapid advances in computing technology, dropping costs, convergence of telecommunications, computing and cognitive sciences, and the contributions of various governments, corporate bodies and individuals, e-learning is witnessing a tremendous growth in the developed world, whilst also offering an opportunity for countries in the developing world to contribute by producing their own training content and making it available world-wide. All these factors serve to make distance learning a global reality.

Reference

Carr-Chellman, A. A.(Ed) (2005). *Global Perspectives on E-learning: Rhetoric and Reality*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage.