Innovatıons In Open And Dıstance Learnınıg

Fred Lockwood and Anne Gooley (Eds)
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New innovations in distance and open learning are ever taking place. However, the pace has been intensified in this direction by the advances in information and communication technology. The innovators and early adopters have been there in all the ages who make these innovations take place and new ideas flourish. The book under review is an effort in the direction of documenting the innovations and experiences in the area of distance and open learning. Spread over 19 chapters in all by different masters of their fields, the book gives a snap shot of the new work being done for furtherance of open and distance learning in different parts of the world.

Chapter-1, from one of the Editors Fred Lockwood, entitles "Innovation in Distributed Learning: Creating the Environment" which gives an orientation to the rest of the contributions in the book.

In Chapter-2, Robinson reviews the experience of a large number of colleagues involved in innovation from a variety of contexts & cultures and flags key features that influence the success. She particularly deals with resource availability, organizational issues, human resource capacity and use of technology.

Errington in Chapter-3, notes the problems encountered by innovators when faced with procedures and practices designed for a conventional teaching system but which are inappropriate for one involving distance learning methods. The author also provides an exploration of the nature of university teachers' beliefs and their likely impact on innovation within more traditional institutions perhaps contemplating flexible forms of learning delivery for the first time.

In Chapter-4, McLachlan-Smit and Gunn present two case studies from within a traditional university that professes to be changing its methods of teaching and becoming a more flexible learning institution. In Chapter-5, King describes how University of South Australia instituted a low-cost communication platform - UnivSAnet that focused on teaching and learning, and provided support to academic staff to concentrate on the content part of the programme. Chapter-6 focuses on the evaluation of Lotus LearningSpace within a large multinational corporation and reveals that the transfer from conventional to online teaching was not so easy.

In Chapter-7, Hewson and Hughes talk about web-based environment that builds upon conventional teaching methods and tries to bridge the gap between the traditional face-to-face and emerging online teaching. Inglis, in Chapter-8, lays emphasis on selecting the appropriate type of integrated electronic learning environment since 'the price of making an inappropriate decision can be high'. Oliver et al in Chaper-9, throw light on ANTA Multimedia Toolbox Initiative and describe its implementation as a national project.

While other chapters more or less concentrate on online learning, describing the efforts of the Queensland Open Learning Network, Chapter-10 examines the role of learning technologies as a whole in supporting learners in rural and remote locations, and reports on some current initiatives that foster a lifelong learning capacity. In Chapter 11, Brown stresses that the De Montfort University innovation is not designed to create a distance learning institution but one committed to mixed mode delivery and one that encourages peer interaction as well as interaction between staff and students regardless of geographical location. It is not exactly distance learning initiative rather an attempt to exploit the properties of online technology to enhance the availability and quality of traditional provision through mixed mode delivery.

Chapter-12 focuses on the key aspects of the revenue strategies adopted by the Open University of Hong Kong which was mandated to operate on a self-financing basis from fourth year of its operation. The student recruitment and retention strategies adopted by the University led to impressive results. In Chapter-13, Oliver and McLughlin address the question of how to achieve effective forms of support in online learning environments through the use of technology as a cognitive tool. They hold that opportunities for learning must be created within a framework that recognizes the social, collaborative and interactive nature of learning so that technology based tools for learning are situated within a sound pedagogical framework.

Chapter-14 focuses on the mentoring in open and distance learning and briefly examines two applied case studies. Chapter 15 elaborates on the use of open and distance learning for practicing doctors in rural and remote areas in India. Morgan and O'Reilly in Chapter-16, present effective innovations in online assessment with the help of six case studies from Australia, USA and Netherlands. The main focus remains on interactive assessment which seeks to develop a broad range of abilities in distance learners and engage them in collaborative and negotiated learning experiences. Chaper-17 discusses and reviews the use of VESOL, a set of online video-editing systems which enables cost-effective video production to support distance learners. It maximizes academic autonomy in the production of video-based learning resources and offers fresh approaches to addressing some of the distinctive challenges of remote learning. Chapter-18 deals with the approaches for helping learners to 'read' sophisticated visual displays that are normally difficult for the un-initiated to interpret. The context of the innovation described in this Chapter is 'a multimedia-based training package for chemical process industries. Chatper-19 presents the data and experiences comparing three virtual seminars in distance education.

The Chapters in the book are loosely woven to each other and some of them even do not do full justice to the title of the book. The central theme of the book is supposed to be the 'innovations' made in online learning environment, but contrary to this, the book presents a few of examples of typical distance education which do not fit in the main frame of the book. However a few of the Chapters in the book present wonderful experiences encompassing different aspects of online learning environment.

There has always been place for innovative literature in distance and open learning, more so in the area of web-based learning. I hope the book will be useful to the institutions who are going to step into the new enchanting online teaching/learning business.

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