

ONLINE DISTANCE EDUCATION: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

Edited by Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda is edited by Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson. The first edition of the book was published in 2014 in Edmonton by AU Press, Athabasca University. The online edition of the book has a total of 507+xii pages. The ISBN of the book for different versions are 978-1-927356-62-3 for print, 978-1-927356-64-7, for epub and 978-1-927356-63-0 for PDF. Doi number of the book is 10.15215/aupress/9781927356623.01

One of the editors of *Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda*, Olaf Zawacki-Richter is a Professor of Educational Technology at the University of Oldenburg, Germany where he teaches in the School of Education and Social Sciences as well as the Center for Lifelong Learning. Zawacki-Richter held a fixed term professorship in Educational Technology at the Fern University in Hagen, Germany's Open University between 2008 and 2010. The other editor, Terry Anderson is a Professor of Distance Education (DE) and researcher in the Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Centre at the Athabasca University, Canada. He is a widely known researcher in DE with significant contributions to the field.

Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda is actually part of a series of studies. In the first study, Zawacki-Richter (2009) developed a classification of research areas employing Delphi Technique (Table 1). In the second study, Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker and Vogt (2009) identified gaps and priority areas according to this classification of research areas and analyzed 695 articles published in five prominent DE journals between 2000 and 2008.

Zawacki-Richter and von Prümmer additionally (2010) investigated gender and collaboration patterns in distance education research. As a follow up study, Bozkurt et al. (2015) presented trends in the field of DE research during the period of 2009-2013. The trends were identified by an extensive review of seven peer reviewed scholarly journals by using classification of research areas developed by Zawacki-Richter (2009).

In contrast to previous studies intended to present research trends in DE, in this book Zawacki-Richter and Anderson (2014) provide a comprehensive survey on the state of online distance education as an independent field of inquiry, while also offering a clear

orientation for future research. In this book, these research areas were discussed by leading DE researchers to draw on their expert knowledge and professional experience to give an overview of the state of the art in each research area and derive research needs based on that.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

In *Foreword* of the book, Otto Peters stresses that DE is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. He further states that DE had a great success in very short time span and became a part of mainstream education. He finally sums up the research history of DE up till now.

In the introduction, *Research Areas in Online Distance Education*, Olaf Zawacki-Richter and Terry Anderson explain the structure of research areas to readers and briefly present related research. They also provide an executive summary of the chapters for all research areas.

Table 1.
Research areas of DE (Zawacki-Richter, 2009).

Macro level: Distance education systems and theories.
1. Access, equity, and ethics
2. Globalization of education and cross-cultural aspects
3. Distance teaching systems and institutions
4. Theories and models
5. Research methods in distance education and knowledge transfer
Meso level: Management, organization, and technology.
6. Management and organization
7. Costs and benefits
8. Educational technology
9. Innovation and change
10. Professional development and faculty support
11. Learner support services
12. Quality assurance
Micro level: Teaching and learning in distance education.
13. Instructional design
14. Interaction and communication in learning communities
15. Learner characteristics

Part I: Macro-level: Distance Education Systems and Theories

- Chapter 1, *Internationalization and Concepts of Social Justice: What Is to Be Done?* by Alan Tait and Jennifer O'Rourke, is about access, equity, and ethics. Social justice policy and practice are explained briefly, and their relationship with online education, the possible detrimental effects of the use of complex technological systems in online education in maintaining social justice are discussed. The authors emphasize that DE has a long and proud tradition of working towards maintaining and building social justice, yet they also call for means to achieve this in a technologically dominated world.
- Chapter 2, *Globalization, Culture, and Online Distance Learning* by Charlotte N. Gunawardena, deals with globalization and cross-cultural aspects. In this chapter,

increasing global impact of and response to cultural change is explained within online distance education perspective drawing attention to global diversity, especially in instructional design.

- Chapter 3, *Distance Education Systems and Institutions in the Online Era: An Identity Crisis* by Sarah Guri-Rosenblit, evaluates the confusing terminology that pervades DE systems and institutions. Rapid and disruptive changes of technological development and delivery platforms that define online education are discussed in terms of DE institutions. The open scholarship and open education movements are further discussed in this chapter.
- Chapter 4, *Online Distance Education Models and Research Implications* by Terry D. Evans and Margaret Haughey, focuses on the factors that contributed to the birth and development of DE and the contributions of these factors to DE theories and models. The evaluation of online distance education in parallel with technological developments and consequences regarding DE theories and models were presented.
- Chapter 5, *Methods of Study in Distance Education: A Critical Review of Selected Recent Literature* by Farhad Saba, examines research methods in DE. A critical examination of issues regarding methods of research in some articles in prominent DE journals is presented through the chapter from different perspectives.

Part II: Meso-level: Management, Organization, and Technology

- Chapter 6, *Organization and Management of Online and Distance Learning* by Ross Paul, deals with management and organization of the DE initiatives. This chapter addresses issues of research into management and organization, strategic planning and leadership, educational policy, and intellectual property and copyright. The importance of research-based leadership, the critical importance of institutional culture, and the need to break down the two research solitudes are stressed in the conclusion of the chapter.
- Chapter 7, *The Costs and Economics of Online Distance Education* by Greville Rumble, discusses costs and funding of DE. This chapter explains why the economics of education became an important field of inquiry and emphasizes the need for research on which socio-technological designs of DE would bring the highest rate of return of investment.
- Chapter 8, *The Use of Technology in Distance Education* by Gráinne Conole, focuses on Educational Technology. It explores the enormous potential of educational technologies and media and the opportunities they afford for innovative teaching and learning in formal, informal, and non-formal contexts. The author emphasizes the use of Web 2.0 tools and social media and the potential for open practice and a paradigm shift from expository teaching and receptive, passive learning to participatory, active, and social learner engagement.
- Chapter 9, *Innovation and Change: Changing How We Change* by Jon Dron, elaborates on DE technologies, their uses, production, dispersion, acceptance, and emphasizes innovation and change management. This chapter presents recursive, and rapidly evolving relationship between DE and technology.
- Chapter 10, *Professional Development and Faculty Support* by Margaret Hicks, reviews the issues regarding faculty development and proposes research topics about new methods in professional development training, its relevance to quality and the need for the expansion of such trainings in a world with increasing demand for online distance education.

- Chapter 11, *Learner Support in Online Distance Education: Essential and Evolving* by Jane E. Brindley, explains learner support services. By highlighting student support in all forms of education, including online distance education, this chapter covers the three major sources that guide the development and design of learner support services: Theoretical models of learning theory, the ideas from customer management and support literature, and predictive models developed by testing support interventions and, largely, student persistence as outcomes or dependent variables. The chapter then proposes a research agenda for the improvement of student support services.
- Chapter 12, *Quality Assurance in Online Distance Education* by Colin Latchem, draws attention to increasing demand for accountability and quality assurance for online and campus education systems and then puts forward a research agenda considering diverse facets of quality assurance for new models of online distance education particularly for Open Educational Resources (OER) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

Part III: Micro-level: Teaching and Learning in Distance Education

- Chapter 13 *Major Movements in Instructional Design* by Katy Campbell and Richard A. Schwier, portends that the online educational experiences are usually shaped by a western approach. This chapter presents an overall picture of both historical, sociological and pedagogical underpinnings of instructional design and emerging networked based approaches such as connectivism by revealing connections between psychological theories, social epistemologies, and the cultural contexts. It also enlists the significant research into instructional design.
- Chapter 14, *Interaction and Communication in Online Learning Communities: Toward an Engaged and Flexible Future* by Dianne Conrad deals with interaction and communication in learning communities. This chapter stresses the importance of social learning, and analyzes the interactions in particularly new types of online learning settings like OER, MOOCs, social media and mobile learning.
- Chapter 15, *Quantitative Analysis of Interaction Patterns in Online Distance Education* by Allan Jeong explores various quantitative methods such as content analysis (computer-scripted discussions, machine-based learning systems), social network analysis, Markov Chain Analysis, sequential analysis, structural equation modelling and path analysis to analyze online discourse. The author draws attention to the importance of mixed-methods approach to investigate interaction and communication patterns in online learning communities, and provides implications for future research. This chapter poses an important role as it presents new approaches and guides researchers in the field to explain and explore online distance education.
- Chapter 16, *From the Back Door into the Mainstream: The Characteristics of Lifelong Learners* by Joachim Stöter, Mark Bullen, Olaf Zawacki-Richter, and Christine von Prümmer, examines the theoretical foundations of lifelong learning and the current practices of it. The chapter also provides a comprehensive review of changing learner characteristics, illustrates how distance learners became mainstream while they were minority once upon a time and the implications of these for instructional design.
- Chapter 17, *Student Dropout: The Elephant in the Room* by Alan Woodley and Ormond Simpson, discusses several reasons for student dropout and the low rates of successful completion in open universities. The chapter calls for action by

focusing on things we can change, measure, and improve student success in online distance education.

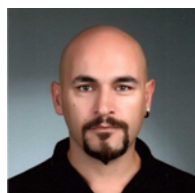
The conclusion chapter, *Towards a Research Agenda* by Terry Anderson and Olaf Zawacki-Richter, highlights the importance of structuring a research agenda which is defined as a collective effort designed by and for researchers so as to provide guidance, coherence, and support for the collective products of that research.

CONCLUSION

In sum, this book serves like a compass for online distance education researchers. It provides summary, synthesis and future directions of online distance education by defining research areas of DE and filling these areas with the scholarly experience and research based evidence. As it is stated in this book and other related articles mentioned before, it is clear that online distance education is a dynamic, interdisciplinary field that reacts to the changes swiftly. So, it is vital to keep the knowledge up to date through research on global, local or glocal dimensions.

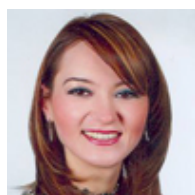
The book also indicates a shift in terminology. It is important to note that the term *online distance education* is introduced as a natural extension of *distance education* into another medium. It was concluded that *online distance education* is both a revolution and an evolution. In other words, the earlier models of teaching and learning that have been smoothly adopted and applied create an evolutionary path, while the ones that have innovatively emerged and applied create a revolutionary path.

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