Online Learning in the European Community: New Learning
(Book review)

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New Learning represents an overview of open and distance learning in Europe from the perspective of the European ODL Liaison Committee, representing a number of national and transnational open and distance learning organizations. The goals of the committee are to facilitate communication within the field at an organizational level, comment on policy at the European Commission, and member state levels. Members include the Association of European Correspondence Schools (AECS), the Coimbra Group, EuroPACE 2000, the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU), the European Distance Education Network (EDEN), the European Federation for Open and Distance Learning (E.F.ODL), the European Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN), the International Council for Open and Distance Education - Europe (ICDE-Europe) and the Network of Academics and Professionals (NAP).

New Learning is an important text for anyone who wants to know what is going on at the inter-organizational level in Europe. The text also provides some insight into how these groups see their work in relation to what is going on in other parts of the globe, their interests and priorities for the present and immediate future, and also what issues and directions they privilege in their sphere of influence. The following list of chapters provides a pretty good sense of what to expect:

- Research into Open and Distance Learning
- ODL and ICT: New Opportunities for the Teaching Professions?
- Fighting Social Exclusion through ODL: the Development of Initiatives with the Children of Traveller Communities
- ‘ODELUCE’ Open and Distance Education & Learning in University Continuing Education
- Open and Distance Learning with the World of Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning
- Face to Face and Open and Distance Continuing Education. Challenges and Proposals. The Universidad Politécnica de Valencia Election
- Quality Guidelines. To improve the Quality of Distance Learning Institutes
- European Virtual Universities in Context
- Why would Universities be in Place to offer Learning on Demand?
- ODL Networking in Europe and the Experience of the East-West Co-operation
- The Challenge of ICT to University Education
- The Distributed Virtual University

New Learning does help us to realize that those who run institutes and work at the inter-institutional level are, at least in Europe, aware of many of the problems faced by academics and online technologies. Issues such as the dearth of blind and longitudinal studies under experimental conditions, the unwillingness of institutes to adopt models not developed locally, and the disempowerment of educators in the face of technological change, and current changes in the social context of learning are all brought forth. That said, there are no real novel solutions promulgated.
The most interesting chapter is "Fighting Social Exclusion through ODL: the Development of Initiatives with the Children of Traveller Communities". This chapter highlights a strength of information technologies to allow for the maintenance of traditional lifestyles that do not easily lend themselves to institutionalized learning environments of the school community. It suggests a mixture of classroom winter schools with distance learning components for other times of year when students are travelling with families. Many of its recommendations could stand as a potential model for twenty-first century learning in general, where the notion of having to attend a class or program of study, or even completing a proscribed course of study, should be seen as an option rather than a necessity.

Another more forward thinking chapter is Open and Distance Learning with the World of Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning. It does look to potentially forward thinking technologies such as MOOs, Collaborative Virtual Environments (CVEs) which are both polysynchronous and user-extensible, and allows for negotiated and alternative forms of governance of the learning environment. It also recognizes the unknowability of what the right path to take may be, and the pitfalls inherent in adopting models based on present knowledge. But it does get bogged down a little bit in the notions of training, and the educator as coach. That said, even at my institution, we are still struggling with the "n-gen" student who is wired and "multimedial" yet who is still at an imaginative loss as to what they are to do with all this information. The imagination to create individually meaningful learning environments and the concomitant creativity to imagine how to translate that information into knowledge and perhaps even wisdom needs to be addressed by these sorts of organizations represented in New Learning. This is the real challenge of ODL.

I do find it somewhat problematic, as someone interested in the multilingual context of learning technologies, that the text is produced in English. And there is no indication that the organization (http://www.odl-liason.org) produces any materials, or conducts its work, in languages other than English. Some chapters such as Open and Distance Learning with the World of Vocational Training and Lifelong Learning do touch on how ODL terms are conceptualized somewhat differently in different languages within its interesting survey of the field. It should be expected that any discussion of online and distance learning would embrace the intersection of multiple languages between and within learners and learning communities. The fact that any learning community can contain speakers of dozens of languages should be addressed in any consideration of conceptualization of learning and delivery of learning materials, development curricula and environments.

Finally, there is a decided lack of criticality in this work. The corporatization of learning is a given in New Learning, and the conceptualization of future issues for ODL based on existing technology paradigms should be challenged. Changes in specific technologies and software is fraught pitfalls of obsolescence in the face of new developments in future technologies. Organizations such as the European ODL Liaison Committee should be working to challenge how learning is conceptualized in the face of existing modes of delivery such that it is structured to embrace both changes in technologies and in social organizations afforded by new technologies for learning. There is not a strong sense that the whole notion of institutional accreditation of learning itself must be challenged, and that alternative mechanisms for evaluating learning, the construction of knowledge, and the acquisition of skills must be brought into the ODL model. Placing these chapters online, perhaps in multiple PDF, flat text, and html formats would have been at least a nod to challenging traditional notions of the commodification and governance of learning and knowledge. Information technologies allow for a complete rethinking of the need to deliver prepackaged courseware and the emulation of classroom practices that were predicated on the requirements of governance and control over the a public learning space. The ideas presented in this collection seem more interested in further codifying the existing paradigms within institutional control than finding new ways to embrace the challenges of learning in the European community. That said, New Learning does provide a useful snapshot of what a significant group of ODL organizations consider to be important issues for teaching and learning environments within their purview.