East / West Dialogue about Universal Technology Access

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ABSTRACT:

The East and West have much to share in their experiences to increase universal access to higher education. The demand for education in Asia seems to most Americans to be overwhelming. The cost of emerging digital technologies for the East seems astronomical for most Asians. The differences in teaching and learning styles between the East and West defy adoption of the methods of either culture. Compromises in these issues and in the provision of access are issues highly worthy of discussion and sensitivity to cultural issues. For Asians to meet Americans who deeply understand these issues in both societies is not common. And, for Americans to interact with Asians who are willing to discuss the reasons to defend Asian teaching methods and leadership styles is also uncommon. There is need for East / West dialogue, genuine mutual cultural respect, planning for patient and steady collaboration, and the setting of goals for global access development. Education for all, regardless of human differences, economics, and politics is a laudable and achievable global dream. But, it is essential that East and West share perspectives on the important issues of distance education goals, costs, accreditation and evaluation, language differences among learners, and political consequences of pursuing universal technology access. This paper focuses on the potential of a shared East / West perspective on universal technology access, and educational equity may support further development of a positive vision of an inclusive global society.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In what should people across the world place their hopes for making a better world? How do values about education, family, the law, and information technology fit into this hope for a better world? How should access to participation in the global society be assured? Can emerging distance education eventually become universal—reaching the full-range of people across the world? The writers look hopefully toward information and computer technology (ICT) eventually to become primary tools of education to equalize educational opportunity and to build an inclusive global society. However, the following quotation may cause pause for thought: “Increased dialogue between East and West, particularly through the Asian Association of Open Universities, can surely expand the potential for ICT innovation as a primary force for positive social change.” The writers speculate that ICT applications in distance education, combined with the will of collaborating nations and educators, may serve to bring about a level of knowledge and social justice that may yet forecast a new and better world. The extent to which advancing ICT technology may become useful to expanding correspondence education to less affluent populations depends on political policy regarding how to pay for the new technology and the anticipated benefits to society in terms of human capital development.
2. THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE:

2.1 Differences that separate People:
Economic, human capital, and knowledge differences among the people of the world continue to make wide chasms in the topography of the societies of the world. Yes, it may remain to be seen if ICT innovation will in this century become the great social class mediator, or just another tool of society to further widen the gap between the rich and the poor.

But, instructional technology and distance education has the potential to educate the masses and to build inclusiveness in developing shared visions, productivity, hope, and alleviation of poverty. Distance learning technologies are being further developed in industrialized nations. Interactive instruction can engage learners in going beyond acquisition of factual knowledge to analysis, synthesis, and application of information.

2.2 Increasingly Available and Higher Level Learning Technology:
Higher level learning theory may be applied in ICT distance education to give masses of educationally-hungry people the tools for engaging in social development. As interactive ICT continues to be developed, the traditional correspondence distance education may be expanded with web and e-learning resources, if the masses can gain access. How nations and the global society may provide increased ICT access to the masses of less-advantaged people in the world is a primary political issue of the new millennium.

With increasing availability of digital ICT resources in the industrialized nations, and with their experience in improving higher level learning in distance education, it may be that this technology may be maturing and to hold promise to extend opportunities beyond the limits of the past. The challenge remains, however, to encourage less-advantaged people to invest in the dream. But, how can the emerging global society convince people of honor to invest in the further development of a strong middle class?

2.3 Encouraging People to Believe They Can Make a Difference:
People across the world need to have success in believing that each person can make a difference if they choose and if they are willing to use their education to be included. Robert E. Quinn (2000), an American Distinguished Professor of Organizational Behavior at the University of Michigan has suggested that ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary results and the writers of this paper find value in this perspective. ICTs probably can make life better for the masses, but there is much work yet to be done to use technology as a primary instrument for inclusive social change. There are many people in the East and West who do not put their hope in either ICT innovation or education as keys to their success.

Quinn asks people to transcend self to envision a productive community in which people want to collaborate to make a better world. He challenges others to focus on the importance of people and values of being inclusive, of facing fears and social dangers, and of finding the inner strength and will to engage in making a better world (Quinn, 2000). More than a platitude, Quinn’s challenge could serve as a model for encouraging people to invest in developing a positive global vision.

As education continues to strive to develop leaders for tomorrow, the perennial challenges of societies of the world cause even the most enthusiastic positive philosophers pause for thought. Complex problems with no apparent solutions—conundrums—face the world. Primary issues, such as how to distribute wealth and hope to the masses, have been perennial. How can the middle classes of the world continue to grow in a world of increasing numbers of the very rich and the very poor? How can technologies developed for urban markets be made accessible to the rural and remote populations with meager economic bases? How can individuals and groups have influence on these issues? Can ordinary people really make a difference?

It is difficult for most people to believe that major complex international issues
such as poverty, educational equity, and social justice are within their influence. How can the best values of the cultures of the world be maintained and shared to assure the dignity and sanctity of life? Who can determine good values or bad values? Given the history of social class differences in the world, who can be trusted to define the most promising values? Intercultural dialogue and understanding is essential for people to envision a better global society.

2.4 Who is Left Out in the Cyberworld?:
Statistics on the number of people left out of the cyberworld are staggering. Facing the serious lack of access for many people in the world takes significant study of the complexity of the issue and courage to persist in the effort. Advocates of a brave new cyberworld need an extraordinary level of intensity in their commitments to achieving global universal access. Poverty and disillusionment of many parts of the population of the world continue to confound the best efforts at inclusion. Information technology applications in education are critically important in the battle for social justice, educational equity, and social class distribution.

Yigitcanlar (2003) reported that there were an estimated 429 million people online globally, but even this large number was small when considering that of those 429 million, fully 41% were in North America. Also, 429 million represented only 6% of the world’s entire population. The United States had more computers than the rest of the world combined. This report continued with the following data summary of how internet use is dominated by North Americans when use is assessed by region:
- 41% of the global online population was in the United States & Canada
- 27% of the online population lived in Europe, the Middle East and Africa (25% of European Homes were online)
- 20% of the online population logged on from Asia Pacific (33% of all Asian Homes were online)
- Only 4% of the world’s online population were in South America (p. 1)

Sarah Cattan (2002) wrote in a United Nations report the following summary of the digital divide, regarding world population use of ICTs:
“...The digital revolution has not only brought fundamental changes in the communications and information industry but also created a new type of poverty, the ‘information poverty.’ While more than 80% of the world population has never used the Internet, the digital divide—the information and technology gap between industrialized and developing nations—keeps widening with 91 per cent of Internet users representing 19 per cent of the world population.” (pp. 1-2)

She suggested while in Western countries, ICT has become an integral part of many daily lives; the 100 million computers connected by the Internet throughout the world only represent 2% of the world population. She concluded that with the immense benefits ICT has demonstrated in the North, such a divide is simply unacceptable (Cattan, 2002).

Awareness of the need for educational access is but a beginning of accepting the full brunt of the technology change challenge. Steady and thoughtful action is required to make policies inclusiveness of the largest number of people a reality in a cyberworld of universal computing.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project published in Who’s Not Online that 57% of those not online have no intention of going online. The research firm Ipsos-Reid (2001, p.1) found a similar statistic internationally:
- 33% of those people have chosen to not go online. Among the biggest reasons were lack of need (40%); no computer (33%); no interest (25%); lack of knowledge for use (25%); and general cost involved (16%)

In fall of 2000, the U.S. Department of Commerce reported (Falling Through the Net, 2000, p.1) the following among many findings:
- 51% of all U.S. homes had a computer; 41.5% of all U.S. homes had Internet access
- White (46.1%) and Asian American & Pacific Islander (56.8%) households continued to have Internet access at levels more than double those of Black (23.5%) and Hispanic (23.6%) households.
86.3% of households earning $75,000 and above per year had Internet access compared to 12.7% of households earning less than $15,000 per year.

3. POSSIBILITIES FOR UNIVERSAL TECHNOLOGY ACCESS:

3.1 Education and Information Technology as Change Agents:

Educators frequently have experience with human victims of wide varieties of social injustice and human misery, as well as the joy of seeing evidence of growth and social progress. Following innovation, technology applications in education have not only benefited the traditional face-to-face learning environment, but have also led to the development of the most diverse and flexible learning system - which is distance learning. Applications in distance learning such as telecourses, on-line courses, and virtual reality learning systems can provide more valuable learning resources and significant increases in learner motivation. Traditional learning barriers of distance and time may also be achievements in a good distance learning system.

Rather than being overwhelmed and overburdened by the size of the challenge of bringing about universal access, it is important for educators and their organizations to support networks of change efforts and to focus on the thrilling potential for a productive, inclusive, and peaceful global order to emerge. Change of this magnitude will require redistribution of resources in the world to provide the connections, training, and local resources to make universal access a reality.

Contemporary free enterprise efforts have primarily made urban centers of the world the focus of marketing and sales. The digital divide is widened by this reliance on response to the market place.

4. DISCUSSION:

4.1 Differences in East and West Cultural Traditions in Education:

Studies of teaching and learning styles in Asia and the United States have continued to show that Asian cultural traditions foster teacher-centered education, with strong emphasis on respect for the teacher, accuracy in thought and statement, and passive. In contrast, the Western world, and particularly the US educational system, has continued in the past three decades to have strong advocates for adopting less teacher-centered methods for preference for learner-centered processes. The growth of electronic interactive learning systems in the West has been enabled, in part, because of the Western emphasis on individualism, while the East continues to rely on building group mores and norms and to expect students to listen respectfully to the lectures of the their elders and teachers.

Distance learning in the West strives for uses of closed networks and interaction among teachers and students through active learning, with encouragement for teacher-to-student and student interaction and problem solving. The counterpoint in the East is in the emphasis on passive learning, accurate lecturing and listening, and preparation for testing. It seems obvious that neither dominant approach to teaching and learning will suit both cultural contexts.

The overwhelming demand for distance education in Asia, as exemplified by open university enrollments and student tolerance for taking passive correspondence courses, suggests that major social policy change will have to be made to support an interactive learning environment conducive to support for active student-centered methods and associated learning technologies. While educational and political leaders, as well as ICT engineers, continue to go their individual ways, it is possible for a new global governance structure to be created to support a blending of methods and technologies to bridge the cultures.

The cultures of the world have used education for centuries as a means of transmitting social control and traditions. A world of universal and ubiquitous computing would be a radical departure from traditional goals of education. The prospects of this kind of change provide stimulation worthy of challenging the most conservative societal leaders.
4.2 Considering Political Ramifications of Universal Technology Access:

Castells wrote from a sociological point of view on the emerging global network society. He concluded that the new global informational economy is capitalistic in which sources of productivity and competitiveness for firms, regions, and nations depend, more than ever, on knowledge, information and technology processing. He maintained that this new economy is potentially more exclusionary than the industrial economy if it is not adequately regulated. It reaches out to the world but excludes the majority unevenly through switching on some links and switching off others. Castells has believed that the Third World has become increasingly diversified internally, the First World has generated exclusion, and an emergent Fourth World of exclusion is populated largely by women and children (Castells, 2002).

In a global world of an increasing digital divide, educators need to be very aware of the outcomes of their uses of technologies and methods. Expert change agents are needed to assure that education may be a place from which the hope for an increasing middle class in the world may continue to spring. Macionis (2002, pp. 428-429) wrote the following summary of a liberal point of view regarding help to the world’s poor;

- the modernizing influences of industrialization have yet to reach many nations
- especially in rural areas. Liberals claim that rich nations—those that benefit most from global economic production—have a moral obligation to provide foreign aid, especially in the areas of health care and education, to poor nations....In sum, while liberals accept the broad outlines of the market system, they believe that industrial capitalism on its own will not bring about some needed changes. Therefore, government, and global non-governmental organizations such as the United Nations, must take the lead in reducing poverty

4.3 Long-term Influence Issues:

The Asian Association of Open Universities and groups of East/West universities linked in transnational program development are examples of clusters of leaders striving to find ways to meet current and emerging educational needs and to develop blends of methods and technologies. Respect for cultural traditions and response to real current and expanding educational needs makes this work very valuable. The molding and blending of cultures, let alone the peaceful co-existence of nations in a mosaic concept creates new and recurring questions for distance education.

What kinds of governments will emerge if telecommunication and information technologies continue to fan the fires of markets of the masses demanding access? How should society pay for rapidly changing technologies that entrap the consumer in wanting more and more opportunities on the Web and in distance education? What are alternatives for accommodating positive change in teaching methods and leadership styles in education? This kind of inquiry will continue to make the future of the discussion of universal technology access challenging and purposeful.

REFERENCES:


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