

BOOK REVIEW

Open and Distance Non-formal Education in Developing Countries

COLIN LATCHEM

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Book Review Editor's Note:

Colin Latchem contacted me last year, before he passed away, to review his book on *Open and Distance Non-formal Education in Developing Countries*. That was his 15th book and he mentioned that this was a book “very close to his heart”. Colin Latchem had been involved in many projects at the COL in developing guidelines and publications in the areas of higher education, open schooling, technology enabled learning and others. His expertise was well-known in the world of educational development. He had been advocating the use of informal learning for years and his article on “Informal Learning and Non-Formal Education for Development” in the first edition of the *Journal of Learning for Development* (JLAD, 1, 2014) resonates with the views expressed in his latest book. This book is a good guide for the policy-makers and practitioners in the field in the developing world. He will be deeply missed by us all.

Professor Romeela Mohee, Education Specialist, Higher Education, COL.

In compiling over 180 cases of successful open and distance non-formal education (ODL NFE) interventions from across the developing world, the late Colin Latchem, author of *Open and distance non-formal education in developing countries*, has broken new ground. Although a few authors have taken a comparable approach (e.g., Hanemann, & Scarpino, 2016; Siaciwena, 2000), none has come close to providing such a comprehensive overview, detailing not only with the scope and quality of work being done but also the variety of providers who work in disparate cultures and societies under the banner of ODL NFE.

Readers will be impressed with the wide-ranging examples of rich and often innovative ways in which ODL NFE is being used. The cases span areas such as adult literacy, gender equity, sanitation, agriculture and entrepreneurship; they address the needs of out-of-school children, the community of persons with disabilities, illiterate farmers, persons in crisis affected contexts, and prisoners; and they describe solutions which use ‘no tech’, ‘low tech’ and ‘high tech’ tools. It is in this respect that the book serves as both an inspiration and practical guide for those working in the non-formal education sector, especially in developing countries, be they practitioners or policy makers.

The book is arranged in four major parts divided into 16 chapters. Part 1 describes the current state of play. To help orient the reader, Latchem distinguishes between the terms informal, non-formal and



formal education and reviews earlier research in the field. He also introduces his premise: in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the global recognition that formal education on its own cannot address the challenges of modern society, ODL NFE is key to attaining inclusivity, equitable quality education and lifelong learning.

Part 2 identifies a range of digital technologies currently being used in ODL NFE, including radio, television, telecentres, mobile learning, OERS and MOOCs as well as more traditional modes of delivery, such as puppetry and the performing arts. Each chapter in this section focuses on a specific mode of delivery, the principles behind its use and examples of application. While Latchem is clear about the benefits and potential power of these modes of delivery, he is equally clear that there exist challenges and issues surrounding their use. In particular, he argues for careful attention to the selection of resources, technologies and materials to ensure they are culturally appropriate and tailored to the learners' needs.

Part 3 comprises the eight chapters that detail the cases and description of how ODL is applied within the NFE sector. While the interventions share a common purpose — that of reducing inequality and poverty through access to lifelong learning — they differ in their focus and learning design. From interactive radio instruction for out-of-school youth in Somalia, to blended learning programmes in literacy, ICT and entrepreneurship for Colombian women; and to mobile technology and apps for farmers in the African, Asia-Pacific and Caribbean regions, these chapters offer a rich array of informative, real-world examples of how some of the poorest, most marginalized communities across the world are engaged in meaningful learning opportunities through ODL NFE. The central argument throughout this section is that ODL NFE is having an impact; the cases are the evidence that social equality, employment and individual and community development are increasing.

It comes as no surprise that the final chapter is forward looking. Following his discussion of achievements and promising areas of development, Latchem identifies several challenges, which if left unattended, will hamper social and economic advancement and ultimately the attainment of the SDGs. The most pertinent ones among the challenges are issues of sustainability and continuity, specifically:

- Failure to integrate non-formal education at a national or system level. While governments have committed to the SDGs and policy documents may advocate for the integration of non-formal education into the formal system, this has not translated into implementation. If the non-formal sector is to truly complement the formal sector then there need to be clear structures and well-defined learning pathways supported by qualifications frameworks that encourage lifelong learning and facilitate learners moving seamlessly from non-formal to formal learning.
- Inadequate and inconsistent funding combined with an overreliance on NGOs and other donor bodies. This has led to a preponderance of small-scale, pilot-like, *ad hoc* interventions. One of the best examples of how the absence of funding (beyond initial seed funding) can lead to failure is outlined in Chapter 6 in the discussion of telecentres.
- A dearth of studies and evaluation data that provide evidence of the impact of non-formal education and training. Latchem's call for more research and empirical data that support the role of ODL NFE was central to his earlier work (Latchem, 2014). That almost five years later, he describes ODL NFE as, "a fledgling field in need of better documentation, more empirical

evidence and a stronger theoretical basis” (p. 176) and repeats the call for a more robust body of research, is an indictment of the community of ODL NFE providers and researchers. This disconnect is possibly the result of stakeholders’ reluctance to collaborate around mutual priorities such as action research, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation.

- Technical issues. Unreliable connectivity and/or associated costs continue to be a challenge. Ironically, this challenge surfaces precisely in those locations where ODL NFE is most needed.
- Lack of specialised training for trainers and unavailability of content and course materials in local languages. Professional development and culturally relevant curricula are key ingredients to improving the quality of teaching and learning in the ODL NFE sector.

Taken together, the challenges that Latchem discusses in this final chapter suggest that ODL NFE will remain a non-priority — a marginal sector serving the marginalised — unless each is deliberately and systematically addressed. To this end, he concludes the chapter by recommending nine action steps which he believes will assign status and prominence to the ODL NFE sector.

Among the many strengths of this book are three that stand out. Firstly, the author should be applauded for his selection of a wide cross-section of cases drawn from several sectors and representing a diversity of communities and focus areas. Indeed, the value of this book lies not only in the provision of cases, examples and illustrations of real world ODL NFE in action but also in the mix of traditional and new media that frame the interventions. Whether one is reading about the use of puppetry in rural Kenya to sensitize citizens to issues around corruption, or the use of mobile learning to improve literacy among female police officers in Afghanistan, one is prompted to consider cultural appropriateness and assess their application to these and other contexts. Another strength of this book is the impressive array of statistics used to highlight the important role that non-formal learning plays in developing countries. Several of the figures are alarming in their magnitude — for example, 758 million adults aged 15 years and older remain illiterate, and, of these, two-thirds are women. Others, such as the fact that only seven percent of schools in South Africa have functioning libraries, are curious, but all highlight the urgent need to fill the gap and the ways non-formal education can do this. One unique feature of this book is the author’s inclusion of video links that demonstrate the application of ODL NFE. These resources complement the more traditional references, and together they ground the cases in both research and practice.

At the heart of this book is a well-reasoned appeal to raise the status and profile of ODL NFE through attention to research and evaluation. Latchem puts it thus: “For ODL NFE to be highly regarded, widely adopted and well resourced, there is a need for comprehensive quantitative and qualitative data on the quality of the outputs and outcomes and their impact on individuals, communities and economies” (p. 173). In writing this book and sharing his experience and wisdom, Colin Latchem has taken another significant step towards increasing the visibility of ODL NFE and improving general awareness and understanding of the issues that compromise systemic integration of non-formal education. Once again, the ODL NFE community owes him a debt of gratitude.

Reviewed by:

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