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## ***Book Review – Advancing Online Learning in Asia***

**Editors:** David Murphy, Namin Shin, and Weiyuan Zhang. (2003). *Advancing Online Learning in Asia*. 277 pages, softcover. Open University of Hong Kong Press: ISBN: 9 6277 0731 7

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The Internet, high-speed electronic communications, and computers have transformed the way we teach and learn. With the development of these new information and communication technologies, the idea of online education has been adopted in many developed, and more recently in developing countries, to bring wider opportunities to people in the form of increased access to flexible and interactive, open and distance learning systems. As stated in the Introduction of “Advancing Online Learning in Asia” edited by Murphy, Shin, and Zhang, online education is now everywhere and it “is changing the ways in which educational institutions interact with their students, for both traditional and distance education universities.” By examining recent developments of online education in Asia from multiple perspectives, this book has a potential to be an invaluable resource to educators. Taking cases from the Asian region in which online learning was introduced, implemented, and experienced, this book presents the cases from a number of perspectives, especially from student perspectives, and addresses pedagogical and technical issues faced by online educators. The breadth of the articles in this book provides a wide range of online learning cases and varied perspectives, which should clearly appeal to educators, researchers, administrators, and policy makers in online education.

Chapter contributors are mostly researchers, professors, and educators. Even though their articles vary from the specialized to the general, most are practical rather than theoretical. The articles are arranged in four broad categories: introduction to the context of online education, learner perspectives on online learning, teacher perspectives on implementation of online education, and new experiments with online technology.

The first three chapters address the first category and provide an overview of the development of online learning with specific applications across Asian countries, and discuss implications of online learning for culture, community building, and learners. These chapters are essential reading for the appreciation of the more specific case studies that follow.

This introductory section is followed by six chapters (Chapters 4 – 9) that illustrate online learning cases and perspectives of online learners in different contexts. Online learning experiences of learners from different Asian countries – Hong Kong (China), India, Malaysia, and Philippines – are analyzed using a variety of research methodologies. Throughout these chapters, some of the factors affecting online learners’ perception toward online education are identified, and strategies to maximize effectiveness of online education and provide pedagogically sound learning experiences to online learners are suggested.

Views of teachers on online education are also discussed. Chapter 10 includes teachers’ perceptions on online education. This chapter highlights different viewpoints on online learning environment. For example, whereas students indicate the convenience of online communication

in dealing with assignment as the greatest advantage of online learning environment, teachers see online learning environment as an effective time management tool rather than an interactive communication tool. Understanding these multiple perspectives is emphasized, with the objective of bringing about more advanced online education. The following article in Chapter 11 draws our attention to cyber-cultural issues in online teaching and learning, and addresses the need of “cyber-culture literacy” skills of teachers and learners to develop effective online education in the context of China.

Chapters 12 – 16 introduce innovative pedagogical and technological applications in online education, and discuss issues related to the improvement of current online education systems. Chapter 12 focuses on the use of online education for students with special needs. Teachers who participated in online education for special education in different contexts are interviewed, and their experiences are reported. The authors of this article conclude that online technology can be successfully integrated in special education. Chapters 13, 14 and 15 report effects of introducing online innovations in education. All the innovations – the interactive virtual laboratory system, online activities in an online training course, ISDN-based distance learning system, and the Internet-based distance learning system – reveal some benefits and limitations. Among them, the technological divide between countries is indicated as one limitation in advancing online education. The final chapter in this book discusses a conceptual and technical framework of developing database on and for ODL research with an intention to contribute to the advancement of online education.

The value of this book can best be highlighted when we review the purpose of online education. The purpose of online education in general is to expand access to educational opportunities for individuals scattered all over the world, to remove barriers of time and space, and to develop a cost-effective approach that provides an interactive learning opportunity. In addition, online education can meet the need of adults with more pragmatic concerns. The cases explored in this book prove that online education has contributed to expanding access to education, overcoming time and space limitations, and providing flexible and interactive learning environment.

In closing, I would like to add two points, which I feel might have contributed to the integration of the all chapters in this book. As indicated above, this book is mainly focusing on practical cases from the field. Even so, a theoretical framework or a summary of previous research findings in a conceptual way would have provided an anchor for online learning applications and related issues addressed in each chapter. For example, several factors affecting the advancement of online learning have been identified and categorized as instructional design, social, and students’ personal factors. Those factors could have provided a framework to understand the results of the studies presented in this book. An overall theoretical or conceptual framework could have also been introduced at the beginning of the book. Another point I would like to mention, is that even though each article offer conclusions, the book itself does not have a concluding chapter. In a concluding chapter, a summary of the suggestions made in each article to advance online education in Asia, and future directions or challenges could have been discussed. Online education is still in the process of development. Our future online education will need to adapt to more advanced technological and social challenges. This book greatly contributes to our understanding of the essence of online education from multiple perspectives.

