Increasing Access to Effective Education Across Oceania

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ABSTRACT

The history of education in many developing nations is a template of ineffectual and expensive instruction. Despite nearly half a century of higher education in the Pacific, up to 50% of the teachers in many countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands still have no more than a high school education. Similar trends are found in Asia and Africa. Past experience in Oceania demonstrates that face-to-face university training has been neither scalable nor sustainable. This paper compares two educational approaches—face-to-face and blended learning. The face-to-face, WorldTeach program in the Marshall Islands employed foreign volunteer teachers living on site to give local teachers a year’s leave for additional training. The blended chemistry course, which combined online and face-to-face learning, was delivered simultaneously to teacher candidates in Fiji, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands. The blended course utilized online instructors and tutors, and face-to-face tutors. This paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both case studies and recommends that nations consider blended learning as an approach to make education more accessible and affordable, especially in emerging nations. As brick-and-mortar campuses and instructor travel become more expensive, blended learning becomes an increasingly attractive educational option.

Keywords: Access, Blended Learning, Chemistry, Culture, Developing Nations, Online Learning, Peace Corps, Professional Development, Teacher Training

INTRODUCTION

The global economy requires workers with improved work skills and college degrees. Baumann and Blythe (2008) and Christensen, Horn, Caldera, and Soares (2011) point out that accessible, affordable, quality education is not an option, but an essential ingredient of national economic and social security. The problem facing developed and emerging nations is educational cost. Increasingly, skilled jobs are unfilled due to a lack of university trained skilled workers.

The Asian Development Bank (2009) predicts the need for higher education will double over the next five years and triple in the coming decade. At the heart of this change is a growing need for multicultural, highly skilled workers who can function successfully in the global marketplace. Orleans (2010) urges information and communication technology training be integrated into the curricula of primary and
secondary schools to begin preparing workers and future teachers. Developed countries in Europe and North America offer university training to a majority of their populations. China is rapidly moving in this direction, recognizing that it needs highly trained workers to achieve its economic goals. In the new world economy, companies relocate to countries that offer the best-trained workers. Globalism, not nationalism is the mantra of world business. Increasingly students in developing countries seek admission to foreign universities to increase their chance of migrating to nations that offer the best employment opportunities.

For example, a majority of Cook Islands citizens now reside in New Zealand and Australia. One reason for the migration is better jobs and income (Walrond, 2012). The Republic of the Marshall Islands 2011 Census Report (RMI, 2011) reports that 30% of the population has moved to the United States. In Micronesia large portions of the population have migrated to the United States looking for a better way of life (Greico, 2003).

Marginson (2004) points out that the challenge for universities is increasing educational access and quality throughout the regions they serve at a cost they can afford. Educational institutions are being asked to educate more students with less funding at a time of rising educational costs (Bruner, 2007). Rapidly improving educational technology now makes blended learning an increasingly attractive alternative to meet the need to educate more people (Christensen et al., 2011). Gulati (2008) and Hughes (2007) agree technology-enhanced learning can be a tool to increase educational access in developing countries.

Definitions

Blended learning is a blend of online and face-to-face learning. (Van Roekel, 2011) notes, “there is no final conclusion or definition of blended learning, and, remarkably, there are no rules in place to prescribe what the ideal blend might be.” In this study, students in the blended course spent approximately 50% of the instructional time online.

Face-to-face learning: is traditional classroom teaching that is face to face.

Moodle is a free course management system (CMS) used by educators to create virtual classrooms, online courses, and websites.

Online learning refers to courses delivered entirely over the Internet.

WorldTeach is an organization that partners with governments in developing countries to provide volunteer teachers who replace local teachers so they can educational leave. The goal is to assist nations to improve educational quality.

Figure 1 demonstrates educational challenges for various developing countries where significant proportions of the population live in poverty. The Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2009) states that progress in reducing poverty has been marginal in the Pacific and it will take another decade to meet their Millennium Development Goals. Today workers need better education to qualify for better paying jobs. A shortage of skilled workers in turn limits the ability of local businesses to compete in national and international markets. (ADB, 2008). The result is that the governments receive less tax revenue, which reduces funding for educational reforms.

Fiscal constraints are not limited to emerging nations. Christensen et al. (2011) note that tuition in the United States is increasing at a rate of 10% per year, but Fain (2010) reports that public colleges are pessimistic about income because educational costs are increasing even faster. Funding shortages are serious for urban universities, and even more so for regional universities with greater travel and maintenance costs.

The financial crisis is worse in developing nations (Figure 1) where cost and distance limit educational access. Even in developed countries, the rising cost of building maintenance threatens university budgets (Carlson, 2012). The educational challenge for the 21st century is how to make university education in both developed and emerging nations affordable and